

# Summary

## Syrians in the Netherlands

A study of the first years of their lives in the Netherlands

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## Summary and conclusions

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### S.1 Survey of Syrian asylum status-holders

This report describes the situation of Syrians who were granted a temporary asylum residence permit in the Netherlands between 1 January 2014 and 1 July 2016. The study population also included their children and partners.<sup>1</sup> In total, just under 70,000 people were granted asylum status in the Netherlands between 1 January 2014 and 1 July 2016; Two-thirds of them (44,000) were Syrians. We carried out a survey among Syrian asylum status-holders aged 15 years and older in which they were asked in detail about their lives in the Netherlands, the reasons for coming to the Netherlands and their flight from Syria. In households with children aged between 4 and 17 years, parents were asked whether supplementary questions could be asked about their child (see Box S.1 for detailed information on the survey *New Asylum Status-holders in the Netherlands*).

This survey is part of a larger project to investigate the integration of asylum status-holders who have recently moved to the Netherlands, what developments can be identified within that integration process and how differences in integration can be explained. The project is a joint initiative of four Dutch ministries (Social Affairs and Employment; Justice and Security; Education, Culture and Science; and Health, Welfare and Sport). The other partners in the study in addition to the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) were the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC), the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) and Statistics Netherlands (CBS).

This study of Syrians in the Netherlands is the first in a series, and is to be conducted every two years. It can therefore be regarded as a baseline measurement. The main goal of this report is to describe the survey findings. More in-depth and explanatory studies using data from a linked database of survey and register data will follow at a later date.

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#### Box S.1 New Status-holders in the Netherlands (NSN) survey

Here we briefly describe the design and implementation of the survey *Nieuwe Statushouders in Nederland* (New Status-holders in the Netherlands – NSN) 2017. For a detailed explanation of the design and implementation of the fieldwork, see Kappelhof (2018). A questionnaire was developed with contributions from SCP, WODC and RIVM. Development of the draft questionnaire took over four months (autumn/winter 2016). The draft questionnaire has been subject to extensive (cognitive) testing; it was subsequently translated into Arabic and tested again. The testing, translation and adaptation of the questionnaire took place between January and May 2017. The fieldwork, including testing and translation of the questionnaire, was carried out by the research consultancy Labyrinth Onderzoek & Advies. CBS drew the sample from the Syrian target population. Sampled individuals were sent a letter asking them to complete the questionnaire online. The let-

ter – written in Arabic and Dutch – was sent out at the end of June and followed up two weeks later with a reminder letter. After approximately four weeks, interviewers began contacting sample persons who had not responded online. This phase was completed at the end of October 2017, after which CBS weighted the data. The database was available for analysis at the end of 2017. The main questionnaire was sent to persons aged 15 years and older. In households with children aged between 4 and 17 years, parents were asked whether they would be willing to complete a supplementary questionnaire about their child (randomly selected if there were several children in this age group). In total, information was collected on 3,209 Syrians, a response rate of 81%. Of parents with children aged between 4 and 17 years living in their household, 86% were willing to answer additional questions about a child. In total, we report on 1,049 children aged between 4 and 17 years.

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## S.2 Influencing factors, integration dimensions and the host society

The findings of this study are grouped into three categories: factors which influence integration, position on integration dimensions, and the host society. The purpose of this descriptive study is to obtain a picture of the situation of Syrians in the Netherlands. Our intention is thus not to analyse the interrelationships between the influencing factors, integration dimensions and the host society; that will be the subject of subsequent studies as part of this project.

### Influencing factors

We divide influencing factors into factors relating to the individual's migration history, the period spent in reception facilities and the prospect of remaining in the Netherlands. A long and difficult flight to the Netherlands, for example, influences a person's mental and physical health, which can in turn influence their ability to learn the language or enter the labour market. The period spent in reception facilities also influences the course of the integration process; the literature generally ascribes negative effects to living in reception centres, suggesting that long-term residence leads to passiveness and mental health problems. The prospect of remaining in the Netherlands refers to the expectations of Syrian asylum status-holders to remain in the Netherlands. Migrants who expect to stay, are more inclined to invest in learning the Dutch language and in networks, for example, than migrants who want or expect to leave the Netherlands within a short period. Other factors which influence integration can be ranked under the banner of resources. In this study, they include education level, command of the Dutch language and health status. As stated, our aim in this report is to describe these factors, not to analyse their influence.

### Integration dimensions

It is usual in integration research to distinguish between a structural and a sociocultural dimension. Structural integration is concerned with a person's position in various domains of social stratification, such as work and income. A person's sociocultural position can be subdivided into an emotional-affective, a social and a cultural component. The emotional-affective dimension refers to the relationship between migrants and the host society, and

can be measured among other things by the degree to which migrants identify with the origin group and with the host country. The social component refers to the size and composition of people’s social networks. The cultural component relates to opinions and values, usually measured by reference to themes which are important within the dominant culture, such as gender equality.

### Host society

Research on integration not only looks at migrant groups, but also focuses explicitly on processes of inclusion and exclusion in the host society. The survey devoted attention to this in various ways. Information was collected on experiences with discrimination and on how Syrian asylum status-holders rate the Netherlands and their lives here. The interaction with the host society is also expressed in experiences with different components of Dutch policy. Information was collected among other things on experiences with reception facilities, social support services and language courses. Table S.1 shows how the findings of this study are summarised.

#### Summary table S.1

Overview of topics in the summary

influencing factors	integration dimensions	host society
migration history	structural position	perceived discrimination
period in reception centres	work	perceived acceptance
prospect of remaining	unemployment	satisfaction with life in the Netherlands
education	social assistance benefit	experiences with policy
Dutch language		
health	sociocultural position	
	identification	
	social contacts	
	values	

## S.3 Influencing factors

### Migration history

#### Flight to the Netherlands: a perilous undertaking

All the Syrians surveyed in this study had come to the Netherlands recently. A fifth of these asylum status-holders came to the Netherlands by aeroplane; the remainder travelled (partly) overland, with the time spent travelling ranging from less than a month to several years; in many cases, they had spent a long period in another country. Those who had fled overland spent an average of one year travelling to the Netherlands; 80% took less than two years. It would appear that those who left Syria earlier spent longer on the journey than those who fled in 2015, for example.

A quarter of those who fled (partly) overland report that they mostly slept outdoors during the journey, and generally had too little to eat and too little clean drinking water. In addition, three-quarters fell victim during the journey to abuse, extortion, shipwreck, etc. Three-quarters of the asylum status-holders accordingly never felt safe at any time during their flight to the Netherlands. Men travelled under poor conditions more often than women, report more negative experiences and felt more unsafe. Although men and women who travelled (partly) overland took roughly the same amount of time en route, it may be that women more often travelled in groups and were therefore less vulnerable; however, it is also possible that women are less inclined to report negative experiences. Many Syrians (83%) who travelled overland made use of people smugglers. The majority of them (82%) were forced to get into debt to pay for the journey. A majority (75%) of those who travelled to the Netherlands without the services of a people smuggler also got into debt. This means that most Syrians begin their lives in the Netherlands with substantial debts.

More than half the asylum status-holders spent more than a month in another country during the journey (the 'transit country'). This was most often (47% of cases) Turkey. Transit countries were almost never regarded as settlement countries. This was due partly to the future prospects and to a perceived lack of safety, though around a third did initially intend to stay in the transit country to await their return to Syria.

#### Chance of obtaining permit important factor in choosing the Netherlands

Many factors played a role in choosing the Netherlands as a final destination. The most important were the way the Netherlands treats refugees, the chance of obtaining a residence permit and the positive image that people have of the Netherlands. For young people aged up to 25 years, the opportunity to work or study is also very important, while for those aged over 35 years the ability to bring family over is cited as the most important reason for choosing the Netherlands. Although the vast majority of status-holders who travelled to the Netherlands overland used the services of a people smuggler, only for a very small group this was a factor in the choice of final destination.

#### Highly dynamic household composition due to family reunification

Migration of Syrians to the Netherlands is increasingly the result of family reunification, with wives and children being brought to the Netherlands. This is leading to rapid changes in the composition of Syrian households in the Netherlands: compared with 2014, the share of children had risen by 10 percentage points in the first half of 2016 (from 30% to 40%). Family reunification is more common among Syrians than asylum status-holders from other groups. Almost four out of ten who were granted status in 2014 had brought over one or more family members to the Netherlands a year later.

## Period spent in reception facilities

### Shorter period in reception facilities than other refugee groups, but more often relocated between reception centres

Almost all the Syrians in this study had spent a period in a reception facility. When asked how long they had spent there, it transpired that they had spent an average of nine months living in reception centres. That is a substantially shorter period than refugee groups who came to the Netherlands earlier; research in 2009 showed that Afghans, Iraqis and Somalis spent an average of 18 months or more in reception facilities, and Iranians two and a half years (Dourleijn 2011). On the other hand, Syrians tend to have lived in more reception facilities (four different reception centres on average) than the refugee groups stated above (an average of two different reception centres, Dourleijn 2011).

The research literature suggests that reception centres have a bad reputation and bad impact on the lives of status-holders. Long asylum procedures, with uncertainty about the outcome, but also apathy and boredom have a negative effect on asylum status-holders, including on their mental health, and slow down the integration process. Future research will be needed to show whether this also applies for Syrians. One positive factor, at least, is that Syrian asylum status-holders spend less time in reception centres than earlier refugee groups, though an average of nine months is still a considerable period. Whilst living in reception facilities, many Syrians were actively engaged in following Dutch language lessons (58%), learning Dutch themselves (55%) or doing voluntary work (40%). Performing paid work or following training/being enrolled in education during the period in reception is much less common (6% and 18%, respectively). Policy in recent years has focused mainly on expanding the opportunities for learning Dutch and volunteering during the time spent in reception facilities, and the participation figures cited above could be partly the result of this. However, this requires further research. Lack of comparable data means it is also not possible to draw comparisons with the activities of refugee groups who came to the Netherlands earlier.

### Prospect of remaining

To gain a picture of the (future) integration of newcomers, it is important to have information on their prospect of remaining in the Netherlands. How long people expect to (be allowed to) remain in the Netherlands, and whether they intend to return to their country of origin or to move on to another country influences the way in which status-holders approach their integration and which strategies they employ. The vast majority of Syrians (93%) expect to be still living in the Netherlands in five years' time if they are not able to return to Syria. Reasons put forward for this include the fact that people will then have built a life in the Netherlands and that the Netherlands is a safe country. Moving on to another country in the near future thus appears not to be a realistic option for most Syrians. If return to Syria should prove to be possible, a fifth of Syrians would choose to go back. More than half the Syrians do not wish to return, while a quarter do not yet know.

The reasons cited for wishing to live in Syria again are mainly emotional in nature; it is their mother country and people feel at home there, it is where their friends and family live. The fact that many Syrians have brought their families over also implies that many of them see their future in the Netherlands, or else bringing their family to the Netherlands de facto leads to them staying here.

## Education level

### Mixed education level of Syrian group

Over 90% of the Syrians in this study were educated in Syria. The education levels of this group vary: around a third have followed a higher education programme, a third have followed vocational or upper secondary education, and a third have followed primary and lower secondary education.

To ascertain which qualifications Syrians bring to the Netherlands, the study looked at the highest qualification attained in Syria or in a country other than the Netherlands or Syria. Half the Syrians in the study have at most a qualification at lower secondary education level or below (13% no qualification, 18% no more than primary education and 19% lower secondary education, a total of 50%). 31% have a vocational or upper secondary education level qualification, and 20% a higher education qualification. The notion that the Syrian group consists predominantly of people with a higher education background is thus inaccurate. On the other hand, it is worth stressing that the share who have followed a higher education programme is substantially higher than the percentage who have obtained a higher education degree, as the war and their flight from Syria might have prevented them from completing their education.

If we draw a cautious comparison with other migrant groups, we find that the education level of Syrian asylum status-holders most closely resembles that of the Afghan and Iraqi groups: a sizeable proportion with a lower education level, but also a large group with a higher education background. The share of the Syrian group with a higher education level is larger than in the group with a Turkish or Moroccan background, though it should be noted that the latter two groups far more often have Dutch educational qualifications.

### Low participation in Dutch education; almost no one has a Dutch qualification

According to our research, 15% of Syrian asylum status-holders participate in the Dutch education system. Almost no one yet holds a Dutch qualification (3%), and the majority of those who do are people who have completed transition classes aimed mainly at learning the Dutch language.

It is important to continue monitoring the educational careers of Syrians in the years ahead, because their education level could change considerably. An important question in this regard is to what extent young adult Syrians who are no longer of compulsory school age actually start a Dutch educational career and pursue it through to obtaining a qualification. Earlier research has shown that relatively few members of refugee groups ultimately attain a Dutch qualification, despite its importance for their integration.

## Command of Dutch language

### Syrian status-holders feel their command of Dutch is inadequate

Respondents were asked to rate their command of the Dutch language with a score of between 1 and 10. The average score was 4.6, showing that Syrians rate their command of Dutch as inadequate – an unsurprising outcome given the short length of time they have been in the Netherlands. There is no difference on this point between men and women (figure S.1). Young people, Syrians who came to the Netherlands in 2014 or earlier and those who have followed and completed a Dutch language course have the best command of Dutch.

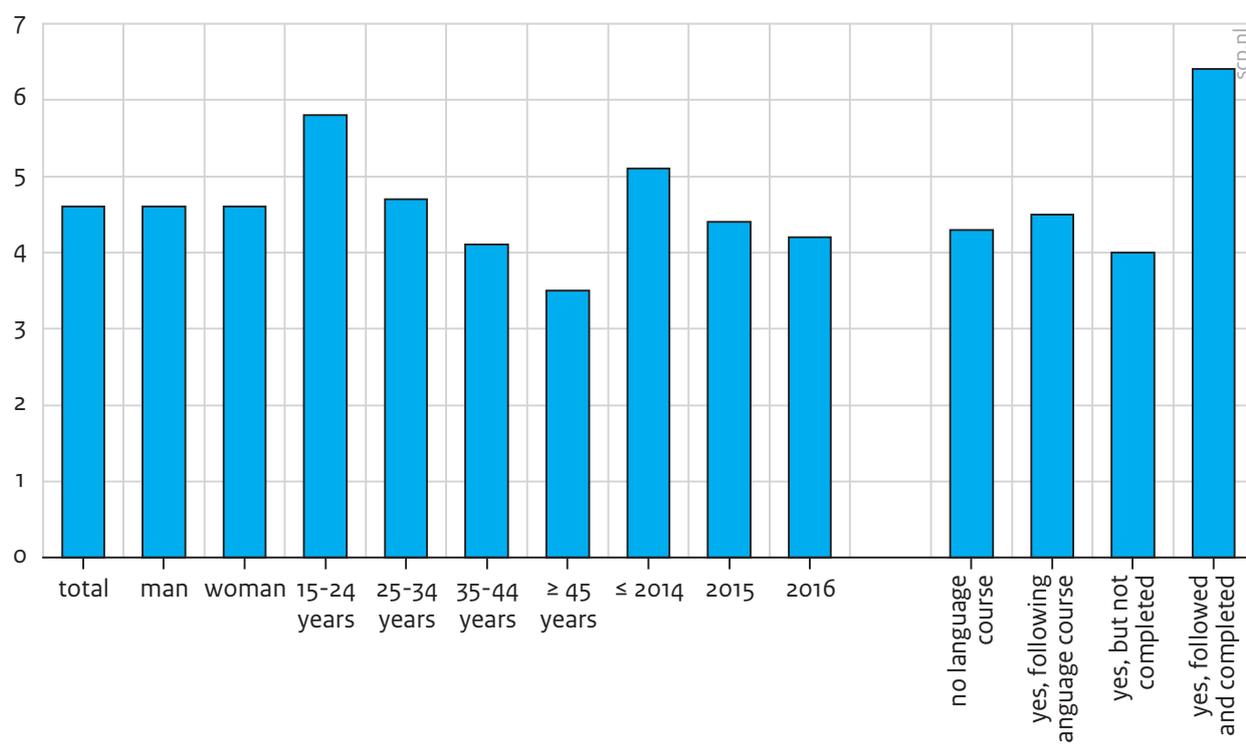
### Few Syrians have yet completed the civic integration programme; widespread participation in language courses

A key aim of the civic integration policy is to improve Dutch language proficiency. Most status-holders are required to undergo a civic integration programme, and must successfully pass all examinations within three years of being granted asylum status. In this study, a tenth of respondents reported that they have now passed all civic integration examinations. Others have not passed all the examinations, or in some cases have not passed any of them. Roughly a third of respondents reported that the civic integration examinations did not apply for them. Based on this study, we are unable to determine precisely why they believe this to be the case. They may be correct (for example for medical reasons or because they are following a course of study which leads to a basic qualification), but the possibility cannot be ruled out that some Syrians erroneously believe they do not need to go through a civic integration programme. This requires further research.

A command of spoken and written Dutch forms the basis of the civic integration examination. No fewer than 80% of Syrian status-holders in this study report that they are currently following a language course. Only 7% say they are not doing so, while the others have followed a language course in the past. This indicates a broadly felt need to invest in learning the Dutch language.

Figure S.1

Self-assessment of command of the Dutch language,<sup>a</sup> by sex, age, year of arrival and following a language course, 2017 (in average scores)



a Respondents were asked how well they themselves felt they speak Dutch, and to assign a score of between 1 and 10, where 10 represents a good command of the Dutch language.

Source: SCP/CBS (NSN 2017); weighted data

## Health

### Many Syrian status-holders have mental health problems

We know from research among refugee groups who came to the Netherlands in previous years that mental health issues are common. That is also the case among Syrians. Their mental health was measured using five questions about their emotional state over the last four weeks. This indicator, which is also used in other research, shows that 41% of Syrians in this study can be regarded as having mental health issues, for example frequently feeling anxious, down and depressed. Research among the general population in the Netherlands shows a percentage of less than 15%. The degree of mental ill-health among Syrian status-holders does not vary significantly between age groups (see figure S.2).

### Poorer physical health mainly among older Syrians

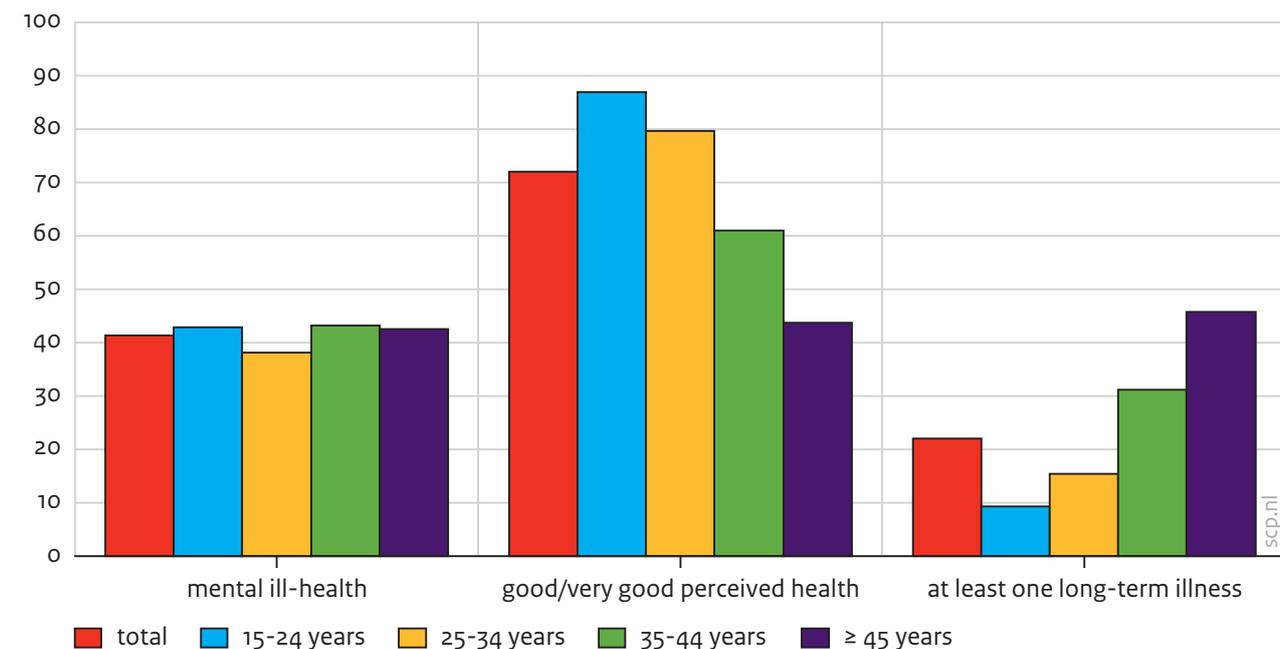
The percentages of young Syrians with long-term illnesses, with disabilities and with good or very good perceived health are roughly the same as among young people in the general Dutch population. People develop more long-term illnesses and disabilities with advancing age, and their perceived health deteriorates. This decline in health is much more marked

among Syrian status-holders than in the general population, and middle age Syrians are significantly less healthy than their peers in the general population.

Lifestyle is an important determinant of health. The percentage of Syrian status-holders who are overweight is worryingly high (rising from 26% in the younger age groups to 75% of those aged over 45), as is the percentage of smokers, especially among Syrian men (63%).

Figure S.2

Mental and physical health, by age (in percentages)



Source: SCP/CBS (NSN 2017); weighted data

The vast majority of status-holders (94%) are registered with a GP practice. Compared with the general population of the Netherlands, Syrians make slightly more use of general and specialist care, reflecting their poorer health. However, they make less use of mental health care services. Young people, in particular, visit the dentist less often than their peers in the general population. Most Syrians feel that their general practitioner listens to them and gives good advice, but 40% (older persons more than young persons) experience problems with the Dutch language in contact with their GP. More than half the Syrians who feel they need antibiotics report that they are not always prescribed to them by their GP.

## S.4 Integration dimensions

### Structural position

The structural dimension of integration is concerned among other things with a person's position on the labour market, benefit dependency and financial situation.

### Almost no employment career in the Netherlands

The main conclusion concerning the structural position is that the majority of status-holders (78%) have not (yet) joined the Dutch labour market. They are not members of the labour force, which means they are not in paid employment, are not looking for it and are not available for it. It is worth noting that status-holders are entitled to participate in the labour market.

### Workers: small, flexible, low-status jobs

Few Syrians in the Netherlands (12%) are in paid work. Young people and school students are overrepresented among those in work. They are mostly in flexible (92%) or part-time jobs (only 29% have a full-time job [35 hours or more per week]). 12% of working status-holders are self-employed. Four out of five are employed in the lowest two occupational levels, with 26% at the lowest level. 18% of working status-holders are employed in the two highest occupational levels together; that is a very low percentage compared with Dutch natives or other migrant groups. Almost half (47%) of status-holders report that they are working below their qualification level.

### High proportion on social assistance benefit

The low labour participation rate of Syrian status-holders goes hand in hand with very high social assistance benefit dependency (90%). Almost none of the status-holders report they have money left over, and a sizeable proportion (42%) have too little money to make ends meet. Roughly a third are satisfied or very satisfied with their financial situation; a third take a neutral view and a third are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

### Great contrast between position in the Netherlands and in Syria

There is a considerable contrast between the socio-economic position of status-holders in the Netherlands and the position they had in Syria. Almost none of them reported that they were unemployed in Syria. Just over half (55%) of Syrian status-holders were employed in Syria, while just under a third (30%) report that they were enrolled in education. Approximately a quarter (27%) of Syrian women were employed in Syria, while 42% reported that their primary activity consisted of looking after the household. The occupations performed in Syria were divided into four occupational levels in this study. Over half of those who worked in Syria had an occupation at level 2 (59%); around a quarter (24%) were employed at the highest occupational level. In addition, 16% were employed at level 3. Those working at the lowest occupational level in Syria (2%) do not appear to have been successful in travelling to the Netherlands. It is striking that over half (51%) of working women in Syria were in occupations at the highest level. Most Syrian women were not in paid employment in Syria, but those who were often held positions at a higher level.

### Sociocultural position

Factors which contribute to sociocultural position in this study are the degree to which Syrians in the Netherlands identify with the Syrian origin group and with Dutch natives, the nature and make-up of their social networks and their values.

### A third of Syrians feel Dutch

A third of the Syrians report that they feel Dutch. That is a strikingly high figure given their short length of time in the Netherlands. A possible contributory factor may be that they feel safe in the Netherlands and appreciate being able to live there. Syrians are surprisingly positive about several aspects of their lives in the Netherlands.

### Lots of contact with Dutch natives, but also with Syrians inside and outside the Netherlands

The majority (61%) of Syrian status-holders report that they have contact with native Dutch friends or acquaintances at least weekly; the same applies for contact with Dutch native neighbours (59%). A small group (14%) report that they never have contact with Dutch natives. A majority (59%) of the Syrian group also report that they have at least weekly contact with Syrian friends or acquaintances in the Netherlands, and three-quarters have contact with family and friends outside the Netherlands (over a third (36%) have daily contact).

### Contact with both Dutch natives and Syrians

Many Syrian status-holders (41%) have at least weekly contact both with other Syrians and with Dutch natives. This applies particularly for young people and men. A fifth (21%) have little contact with either Dutch natives or with members of their own origin group. Almost three-quarters (73%) of status-holders report that their social contacts have increased over the last six months.

As regards the main focus of their social contacts, the proportion of Syrian status-holders reporting that they have more contact with their origin group (42%) is around the same as the proportion who have equal contact with members of the Syrian group and with Dutch natives. The share who report that they have more contact with Dutch natives is much smaller (18%).

There is less contact with members of other migrant groups than with members of their own origin group or with Dutch natives; roughly a quarter (26%) have such contact at least weekly.

### Egalitarian views on male/female roles; homosexuality a sensitive topic

Syrian status-holders consider education for boys and girls to be equally important. Their views are rather less egalitarian as regards financial affairs and work, but around two-thirds still say they disagree or disagree completely with the statement that it is more important for boys to earn their own money, or that decisions about major purchases are best taken by men. Just under half do not think that a woman should stop working after

having a child, and over a third (36%) explicitly disagree with the statement that men should be responsible for the household finances. The group who have been in the Netherlands the longest have the most progressive views on the role division between men and women.

Acceptance of homosexuality appears to be a sensitive point among Syrian status-holders: less than a fifth (18%) say they agree or agree completely with the statement that it is a good thing that homosexuals are able to marry; around half agree or agree completely with the statement that homosexuality in a child is problematic. A considerable proportion of the group were in fact unwilling to answer this question.

### Majority of Syrians are religious; infrequent attendance at religious gatherings

A large majority of Syrians (85%) report that they are religious (76% are Muslim, 8% are Christian). Relatively few religious Syrians attend religious gatherings: around two-thirds (65%) do so at most a few times per year; approximately a quarter (27%) do so weekly. The low attendance at religious gatherings may be connected to the lack of suitable mosques or churches in the Netherlands. The majority of religious Syrians pray daily, and over three-quarters of female Syrian Muslims wear a headscarf. Religion is a very important part of daily life for over three-quarters of the group; half the Syrian status-holders agree with the statement that religious people should live in accordance with the rules of their religion. Religion is important for a high proportion of religious Syrian status-holders and they find it hurtful if someone says something negative about their religion (78%).

## 5.5 Interaction with host society

Integration research also looks at processes of inclusion and exclusion by the host society. These processes may be related to discrimination, potentially hindering opportunities on the labour market and impeding access to social networks. The substance and implementation of policy can also lead to exclusion. The significance of the host society is of course a very broad theme, which was touched on to only a limited extent in our survey. Information was collected on perceived discrimination, and respondents were also asked whether or not they feel that migrants are accepted in the Netherlands, and what they think of life in the Netherlands in general. We also collected information on the experiences of status-holders with a number of different types of policy in the Netherlands.

### Syrians take a positive view of their lives in the Netherlands

Despite their low labour participation rate and weak financial circumstances, the Syrian respondents in this study take a positive view of life in the Netherlands. More than three-quarters feel at home here and respondents assign an average score of 8.5 (out of 10) to their lives in the Netherlands. Syrian status-holders also take a positive view of the social climate for migrants: the vast majority feel that the Netherlands is a hospitable country for migrants, is open to other cultures and is a place where migrants' rights are respected. There is also substantial support for the statement that migrants in the Netherlands are

given every opportunity. Many Syrian status-holders report that discrimination is not very frequent: around three-quarters think discrimination against migrants never or almost never occurs, and almost none of them feel it occurs frequently or very frequently. Nearly two-thirds say that they personally have never been confronted with discrimination, while a quarter say they have almost never encountered discrimination. Discrimination by Syrians or other migrants occurs is even less common. Syrian status-holders are more positive on all these topics – feeling at home, social climate, discrimination – than the four largest migrant groups in the Netherlands (research from 2015 among persons with a Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and Antillean background: Huijnk & Andriessen 2016) and refugee groups (research from 2009 among persons with an Afghan, Somali, Iraqi and Iranian background: Dourleijn & Dagevos 2011). This positive view of the Netherlands by Syrians is probably related to their feeling of being safe here. They will no doubt also be comparing the Netherlands with the current situation in Syria, with the flight, and with periods they spent in other countries en route. The possibility can also not be ruled out that social desirability and a certain politeness vis-à-vis the Netherlands and its inhabitants play a role in the responses. However, we do not believe that that is the only explanation. Optimism and satisfaction are characteristic of many migrant groups who have been in the Netherlands for only a short time. Research among migrant groups shows that this fades somewhat the longer they have been in the Netherlands. The frame of reference changes, their own aspirations increase, but securing a position and acceptance in Dutch society prove to be more problematic than originally thought.

#### Experiences with policy: reception, social support and language

Almost all the Syrians in this study had spent a period living in a reception facility. A total of 60% of the group studied were satisfied or very satisfied with their stay in a reception centre. A fifth were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, and a fifth were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. All in all, therefore, there is a substantial group who were dissatisfied or only moderately satisfied. Over 80% were satisfied or very satisfied with the staff and safety at the reception centres. There is less enthusiasm regarding privacy and the food, with around half being satisfied or very satisfied. Once status-holders have gone to live in a municipality, they are eligible for social support. Local authorities are responsible for organising this support, which focuses among other things on offering practical help with filling in forms and managing financial affairs. The intention is also that help should also be offered at the start of the civic integration process and that social participation is encouraged. Almost all status-holders in this study are currently receiving social support or have done so in the past. There is a high level of satisfaction with the service: only 7% of Syrian status-holders are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Syrian status-holders are more often dissatisfied with the language courses followed; two-thirds are satisfied or very satisfied, while the remainder are dissatisfied or only moderately satisfied.

## S.6 Men and women

In the foregoing we have described the main findings for the group as a whole. In this section we summarise the extent to which there are notable differences and similarities between Syrian men and women. To do this we use the same classification of influencing factors/resources, integration dimensions and host society. The main findings are presented in table S.1.

Men were overrepresented in the survey (68% of respondents were men). This reflects the migration history of the Syrian group; the men were the first to arrive in the Netherlands, followed later by relatively more Syrian women, often travelling as dependants. The distribution between men and women was skewed mainly in the group who arrived in the Netherlands in or before 2014 (75% men, 25% women); women are overrepresented in the group who arrived in the Netherlands in 2016 (56% versus 44%).

If we look at the *influencing factors/resources*, it is clear that Syrian women are in a less favourable starting position than men in several respects. Men were employed in Syria before travelling to the Netherlands considerably more often than women, who were often active as housewives. The men also have a better command of English. The share of Syrian women in the Netherlands with mental health issues is actually slightly higher than among Syrian men. These differences mean that Syrian women begin their lives in the Netherlands at a greater disadvantage than Syrian men. However, there are also areas where women do just as well as men. For example, men and women have attained about the same education level – in both groups, around a fifth have a high education level. There are no significant differences between men and women as regards command of the Dutch language. Finally, women who were active on the labour market in Syria (27% of all women) worked at higher occupational levels than working men: 51% were employed at the highest occupational level, compared with 19% of men. Women thus score better than men on this point. The findings also suggest that women suffered fewer hardships during the flight from Syria. Of those who fled to the Netherlands (partly) over land, men report less favourable circumstances than women. Women also more often journeyed by aircraft.

The *structural position* of Syrian women in the Netherlands continues to lag behind that of men. For example, 4% of the women are employed, compared with 15% of the men. Another key difference lies in participation in the labour force – i.e. people who are in paid work or are actively looking for and available for it. A very high proportion of Syrian women are not members of the labour force (91%) compared with 72% of men. This is because women are less often in paid work and are also less often looking for it. It should be noted in this context that women have on average been in the Netherlands for a shorter time than men.

The study looked at different aspects of the *sociocultural position* of status-holders. We findings suggest that the sociocultural distance from Dutch society is on average greater among Syrian women than men. Women identify less strongly with the Netherlands, have a greater desire to return to Syria one day, and have fewer social contacts with Dutch natives. In addition, women show greater religious involvement and religious identifica-

tion. Syrian women are more progressive than men in their views on the roles of men and women. By contrast, they are less accepting of homosexuality than men.

There is virtually no difference between men and women in their image of the *host society*.

The vast majority feel at home in the Netherlands, give a high score for their lives here, feel safe and take a positive view of the social climate for migrants in the Netherlands.

Table S.1

Men and women compared on a number of key indicators, 2017 (in percentages and average scores)

	men	women
share in survey (total)	68	32
year of arrival		
≤ 2014	75	25
2015	66	34
2016	44	56
influencing factors/resources		
higher education qualification	21	22
was employed before leaving Syria	68	27
was employed at highest occupational level (4) in Syria (working labour force)	19	51
command of Dutch (scale 1-3)	1.8	1.8
speaks no English	32	40
mental ill-health	40	45
structural and sociocultural position		
net participation in the Netherlands	15	4
not part of the labour force	72	91
at least weekly contact with Dutch natives	64	55
feels (very) Dutch	36	28
host society		
feels at home in the Netherlands	79	78
satisfaction with life in the Netherlands (scale 1-10)	8.6	8.4

Source: SCP/CBS (NSN 2017); weighted data

What these findings mean for the further progress in the integration of women in the different areas of Dutch society is hard to predict at this time. Many women have been in the Netherlands for only a very short period, and how they will find their way in the Netherlands has yet to become clear. It is also likely that individual women will differ considerably, given their substantial differences in background characteristics. A sizeable proportion are highly educated and have worked in senior occupations, and may be expected to enter the Dutch labour market in due course. However, we know from earlier research that even highly educated women from migrant groups have difficulty integrating in the Dutch

labour market. As well as these highly educated women, the group also includes a large number group of women with a lower education level who were not in paid work in Syria. Their distance from the Dutch labour market is probably considerable, and it is questionable whether they will ever find their way into employment. The fact that they have access to less robust resources will also act as an impediment here. The data from our study do not offer a very clear picture of the processes that take place within households. We have seen that many Syrians have been reunited with their families in recent years; this is normally a process that takes considerable time and energy. Family members who in some cases have lived apart for many years have to get used to each other once again, and this can lead to tensions. On top of that, parents and children have gone through a great deal, and this is reflected in the high proportion of people – young and old – with mental health problems. There is a risk of tensions arising within families. Those tensions can also be fuelled by the fact that Syrian women who arrive in the Netherlands want to take on a different role from what they were used to in Syria. It is interesting in this context that this study shows that women have more progressive views than men about male and female roles in society. Further research will be needed to make clear what processes take place within Syrian households and what consequences they have for the position attained by women in Dutch society.

## 5.7 Summary of survey of Syrian children

Integration processes often progress differently, and more quickly, for refugee children than for their parents. Their interaction with Dutch native children and going to a Dutch school means they often rapidly gain a mastery of the Dutch language, for example. To gain an insight into children's situation and experiences, respondents with children aged between 4 and 17 years were asked if they were willing to answer supplementary questions about a child.

### Parents very optimistic about their children's lives

Parents are very optimistic about the lives of their children in the Netherlands, assigning a high score of 8.6 out of 10 and reporting that almost all children (96%) feel at home in the Netherlands. Although 30% of parents say their children are homesick, the share reporting that their child would like to return to live in Syria is very small (11%). According to parents, their emotional and parental relationship with their child is good; over three-quarters report that they (almost) never worry about their child. Virtually all parents are very satisfied with their parenting and think they are well able to look after their child. Very few parents (a tenth) feel that parenting is beyond their capability; that is less than in the Dutch population as a whole.

According to their parents, Syrian children are in good health; they do not take time off school due to illness more than Dutch children, and the percentage of parents who rate their child's health as good or very good (93%) is roughly the same as the self-report by young people in the population as a whole. The share of children who have been to the

dentist during the past year (80%) is lower than in the total population (95%). Two-thirds of respondents report that their child has visited the GP in the last year; that is in line with the GP visits by Syrian adults and is higher than among children in the general population. Nearly all parents (95%) report that their child usually or always sleeps well.

### Refugee children play a full part in many areas, but there is also disadvantage

A small proportion of parents (13%) say they never speak Dutch with their child; a fifth say they always or often do so. Over half of parents report that their child never has difficulties with the Dutch language, though the proportion of Syrian children aged 12-17 years who never have difficulty with the Dutch language is relatively low (53%). Almost all children (95%) often or always enjoy going to school. 87% of parents report that their child is never bullied at school (a figure which matches that for the population as a whole). Just under a quarter of Syrian parents (22%) report that their child sometimes, often or always feels the subject of discrimination. Over four-fifths (82%) of children have lots of friends at school; only a very small proportion (2%) have no school friends at all. More than half (54%) have lots of friends outside school. Few parents (8%) report that their child has mainly Syrian friends; the proportion of children with mainly Dutch friends is considerably larger (44%). Roughly half the Syrian parents report that their children's friends are of mixed origin.

A high proportion (82%) of refugee children take part in school days out. The share who take part in out-of-school activities is lower (23%). Around a third of the children (34%) are members of a sports club or association; that is a substantially lower proportion than in the general population. Syrian children have limited swimming proficiency – just over a third (37%) can swim – and lag behind both the native population and other migrant groups in this regard. While this share is likely to increase quickly (almost a quarter (23%) of Syrian children are currently taking swimming lessons), it is still the case that a considerable proportion (40%) are unable to swim and are also not currently learning to do so. Older children are more often able to swim than young children, but the share of Syrian children aged between 12 and 17 years who can swim (59%) still lags a long way behind the share in the young Dutch population in general, where the ability to swim is almost universal.

### Strikingly rosy picture of the lives of refugee children

Our study produces a predominantly positive picture of the lives of Syrian children in the Netherlands. Parents are very satisfied with the lives of their children, with their relationship with their children and with their parenting. The majority of Syrian children feel at home in the Netherlands and, despite the fact that some of them are homesick, only a small proportion would like to return to Syria. According to parents, their children are in good health, often already have a good command of the Dutch language and have lots of (Dutch native) friendships, both within and outside school. Syrian children appear to be increasingly finding their feet in Dutch society. The children who have been in the Netherlands the longest speak better Dutch, have more (Dutch) friends and take part in more activities outside school hours. All of this is positive news. On the one hand, it is in line with

the notion that integration processes can progress relatively quickly for (young) children (Beck et al. 2012; Maliepaard et al. 2017). On the other hand it is striking, given the generally difficult circumstances with which refugee families have been and are confronted – for example the traumatic experiences surrounding their flight and in their country of origin, their often limited financial resources, the uncertainty surrounding the future and family members left behind, and their as yet limited knowledge of Dutch society (Van Schie & Van den Muijsenbergh 2017; Tuk 2012). Professionals and experts often warn of a heightened risk of mental health issues in refugee children.

### Caveats to the optimistic picture: lack of children's perspective and points for attention

A number of important caveats need to be applied to the predominantly positive picture presented above. First, this study was based on responses by parents. Parents do not always know precisely what is going on in their children's lives, may have difficulty in accurately gauging some aspects – such as command of the Dutch language – and may have a tendency to present some aspects in a better light than the reality (Vogels et al. 2017). We do not know, for example, how children themselves perceive the relationship with their parents and their parenting. Refugee children constantly have to switch between different social environments: school, clubs/associations, contact with native Dutch peers and their home environment. The appropriate forms of interaction and expectations in all these different spheres are not always clear and may differ markedly from each other. Research has shown that parents and children who have fled their homeland relatively often grow apart from each other; where children come into frequent contact with Dutch society and the associated customs, this can clash with the often smaller social circle of their parents, who are often at a further remove from Dutch society. A possible next step would be to ask Syrian refugee children themselves about their experiences in the Netherlands. Another factor that may have influenced the findings is the average young age (9 years) of the children in this study; in many cases, problem behaviour only manifests itself at a later age, in (early) adolescence.

For migrants, active participation in society often has a flipside. Almost a quarter of Syrian parents, for example, report that their child sometimes, often or always feels subject to discrimination. The limited financial resources and unfamiliarity with Dutch society also influence social participation. These factors help explain the below-average sports club membership of Syrian children. Other points for attention are their relatively frequent visits to the doctor (despite their good reported health), their relatively infrequent visits to the dentist, and especially the limited swimming proficiency of many Syrian children.

## 5.8 Conclusions

This study presents a picture of the group of Syrians who have come to live in the Netherlands over the last few years. It is rather unique to carry out research on the background and current position of a group that has been in the Netherlands for such a short time. In this section we take stock of the situation by formulating a number of conclusions.

### Syrians just beginning their integration in the Netherlands

For many Syrians, participation in the Dutch labour market is currently a bridge too far. Their lives are dominated by family reunification, learning the Dutch language, becoming accustomed to a new setting, as well as recovering from their flight from Syria and their time spent in reception facilities. Family reunification generally takes time, energy and money. For many of them, successful reunification will come as a relief, but it will also usher in a period of getting used to their new household, which has had a different composition sometimes for many years. Syrians are almost without exception actively learning the Dutch language, as a means of preparing themselves for the civic integration examinations. Most Syrians have not yet complied with the civic integration requirement.

### Structural position still weak; socially already well established

The focus on the labour market, as expressed in active job-seeking behaviour and availability for work, is still very limited. The number of Syrians in paid work is also still low, and in case they are at work, they are generally in small, flexible jobs at a low occupational level. Almost everyone is dependent on social assistance benefits. The picture is brighter when it comes to their sociocultural position. Measured by social contacts with Dutch natives, Syrians appear to be already fairly well embedded in Dutch society; a strikingly high proportion feel Dutch and many feel at home and satisfied with their lives in the Netherlands. The relatively high level of satisfaction with the functioning of Dutch institutions also fits in with this positive picture. It may be that these findings are coloured to some extent by social desirability; Syrian status-holders may consider it inappropriate to be critical about the country that has admitted them. At the same time, optimism and confidence are logical feelings for migrants who have only recently come to the Netherlands; this is something we have also seen with other migrant groups. In expressing their opinions about the Netherlands and their lives here, they will also be continually making a comparison with the situation in Syria and their flight to the Netherlands. It remains to be seen how resilient this positive image of the Netherlands proves to be; research among other migrant groups has shown that feelings of dissatisfaction and perceived inequality increase the longer they have been in the country.

### Syrians resemble other refugee groups in many respects

In several respects, there are wide similarities between Syrians and refugee groups who came to the Netherlands earlier, such as those from Iraq and Afghanistan. Examples are the frequent incidence of mental health problems and – especially in the early phase – problems with the Dutch language. Another similarity lies in the negative contrast between their socio-economic position in their country of origin and in the Netherlands. This fall in status often has negative consequences for the individual themselves and his or her family. Syrians and the other refugee groups also resemble each other in that they are barely active on the labour market in the early years after their arrival, and in combining a weak structural position with a mixed network and a relatively high level of satisfaction with their lives in the Netherlands.

The similarities between Syrians and other refugee groups gives little cause for optimism concerning their prospects for integration, a process that has generally proved to be fraught with difficulty for the other refugee groups. The obstacles appear to be comparable to some extent. Foreign qualifications, including from higher education, prove to have relatively little value on the Dutch labour market. Mental health problems, a lack of functional networks for the labour market and problems with the language are other important factors which impede the integration of refugee groups. Based on the progress in the integration of the first generation of refugees who came to the Netherlands earlier, together with their continuing position of disadvantage, the outlook for Syrians is unfavourable. Of course, comparisons such as these always run aground at some point, because times and policies are different. One difference compared with earlier refugee groups is that the processing of Syrian status-holders has taken considerably less time. A majority of them are also satisfied with the period they spent in reception facilities, and many of them used that time to learn Dutch. We have already referred to the strikingly positive sentiment about their lives in the Netherlands, which appears to be a manifestation of a desire to make a new start here. Moreover, almost all Syrians in the Netherlands appear to be investing actively in learning the language. The current positive economic climate could also be providing a boost for Syrians in the Netherlands, while the intensified policy efforts at central and local government level could have a positive impact on their participation in society. Nonetheless, the fact remains that it will require a major effort to ensure that this group do better than earlier refugee groups. With regard to the labour market, Syrians are right at the start of their journey, and the resources which are known to pay dividends on the Dutch labour market, such as a Dutch qualification and a good command of the Dutch language, take time to acquire. Although the favourable economic climate tempers the degree of discrimination on the labour market, status-holders will nonetheless be confronted with it.

### Targeted and effective policy efforts needed to encourage participation

The integration of Syrians in the Netherlands still has a long way to go. The influx of large numbers of asylum migrants has led to a number of measures being taken at national and local level to promote the participation of asylum status-holders. This is a key difference compared with a few years ago, when offering Dutch language lessons in reception centres was for example almost a no-go area and pursuing specific policy was no longer regarded as necessary or desirable. All that has changed. The desire to improve the integration of status-holders compared with the past has prompted an energetic response. On the other hand, the measures and projects are mainly temporary, and it is unclear which of them are effective. The coming period could be used to gain a better understanding of which measures are effective and warrant broad application.

The civic integration policy is intended to enable newcomers to take a step towards gaining mastery of the Dutch language and becoming familiar with Dutch society. Relatively few of the status-holders in this study have successfully completed the mandatory civic integration programme, though for most of them the three-year civic integration period has not

yet expired. The relative lack of progress in civic integration is also reflected in the findings of research by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) (2018) and the Netherlands Court of Audit (2017). A general but important point is the need to improve the functioning of the civic integration policy. A good civic integration policy will help the great swathe of asylum status-holders who have come to the Netherlands in recent years in taking their first steps in learning the Dutch language and becoming familiar with Dutch society. Our research population take a strikingly positive view of many aspects of life in the Netherlands. It is significant in this regard that roughly a third of them are dissatisfied or only moderately satisfied with the language courses they have followed. This would seem to be an area where improvements are needed to ensure a smoother civic integration process. This study also shows that a sizeable group believe that they do not have to undergo a civic integration programme. We are not able to determine with certainty whether they are correct in this view, but it does beg the question of whether newcomers are sufficiently aware of the fact that they must go through such a programme. This requires further research.

As with other refugee groups, there is a high incidence of mental health problems among Syrians. Earlier research has shown that this acts as an impediment to activities such as learning Dutch and participating in the labour market, and it seems reasonable to assume that this also applies for the Syrian group. Partly in the light of this, it is concerning that Syrians make less use of mental health services, so that problems remain untreated and may last longer than if treatment were sought. A point of concern for policy is how the reach of mental health care can be broadened among this group.

Few of the Syrians in this study (aged 15 and older) currently hold a Dutch education qualification. That is not surprising, given the short time our study group have spent in the Netherlands; their educational careers have still to take shape. It is important for policy to encourage the educational participation of young adult Syrians. Research on asylum status-holders who came to the Netherlands between 1995 and 1999 shows that ultimately only a small proportion attained a Dutch education qualification, whereas this is a very important factor in determining a person's labour market position and social integration (Bakker & Dagevos 2017a,b). From a policy perspective, there is great pressure to guide status-holders to the labour market as quickly as possible, and the improving economy will further increase that pressure. However, there are good reasons to guide status-holders into the Dutch education system to a greater extent than in the past, since this offers a greater chance of finding work at higher occupational levels and of establishing a more varied social network.

### Finally: Syrians want to be heard

Over 80% of the persons approached took part in the survey on which this report is based. Such a high response rate is unprecedented today. It is tempting to ascribe this to the quality of our survey design and fieldwork strategy, but in reality the true reason lies in the willingness of this group to take part. The survey group wanted to be heard, in order to share their experiences in the Netherlands, and to offer a glimpse into their lives before coming here. Policy makers can make use of these insights to design and refine their policy.

## Note

- 1 More precisely, this report is about asylum status-holders, dependants and family reunifiers. *Asylum status-holders* are persons who have been issued with a temporary asylum residence permit by the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND). Dependants of asylum status-holders receive a (dependent) asylum residence permit and in this study are also treated as asylum status-holders. *Dependants* are family members of asylum status-holders to whom a temporary residence permit (mvv) is granted under specific conditions. When an mvv is granted, these family members receive a dependent asylum residence permit on entering the Netherlands. This study also includes family members who come to the Netherlands through the *regular family reunification* procedure. These family members are included among the asylum status-holders in the study, although in reality they do not hold an asylum residence permit.

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