

KEY ASPECTS OF SOCIAL SERVICES FOR REFUGEE FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN IN LITHUANIA

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Abstract

The article examines the specific challenges and needs that arise when providing social services to refugee families with children in Lithuania. These services are essential for ensuring that refugee families can integrate into society and create a safe, supportive environment for their children. The article also offers recommendations for improving the social service system in Lithuania.

Keywords: *refugee, family, social services, migrant center*

INTRODUCTION

Migration can be defined as the process whereby people leave one place of residence (country or region) and settle in another. The duration of migration can vary: some people choose to migrate for a short period of time for work, study or other life circumstances, while others move temporarily or permanently to another country, planning for a long-term future there. Depending on the reasons for migration, migration can occur either en masse or sporadically. Individual migration is most often in pursuit of better economic or educational opportunities, while mass migration is more often linked to political reasons, where people are forced to leave their homeland. In Lithuania, the provision of social services to refugee families with children faces a variety of specific challenges and needs. These services are essential to ensure that refugee families can integrate into society and provide a safe and supportive environment for their children.

Here are some of the most important features:

Scope	Activities	Description
Legal and administrative support	Document management	Refugee families often need help with legal documents, residence permits, work permits and social services.
	Information on rights and obligations	It is essential to inform refugees about their rights and obligations in Lithuania so that they can benefit from all the opportunities available to them.
Overcoming language barriers	Lithuanian language courses:	Lithuanian language courses are organized for refugees and their children to help them integrate more quickly into the local community.
	Translation services:	Some social services are provided with the help of translators to ensure effective communication between refugees and social workers.

Social and psychological support	Psychological support:	Refugee families, especially children, often need psychological support because of trauma or adaptation difficulties.
	Social workers:	Social workers provide one-to-one support to help families tackle everyday challenges and integrate into society.
Education and training services	Educating children:	Refugee children have access to local schools and kindergartens, where they receive the education and socialization they need.
	Additional curricula:	In some cases, extra lessons or tutors are arranged to help children catch up with their peers
Health care	Medical care:	Refugees and their children receive essential medical care, including health checks and vaccinations.
	Specialized health services:	In some cases, specialized help is needed, such as psychiatric services or trauma rehabilitation.
Housing and material support	Providing housing:	Refugee families are often provided with temporary or long-term accommodation where they can live in safety.
	Financial support:	Financial assistance is provided to help families meet their basic needs, such as food, clothing and other essential equipment.
Cultural and social integration	Cultural events:	Organizes cultural events to help refugees learn about local traditions and customs.
	Mentoring programs	Mentoring programs are set up where local people help refugees to adapt and integrate into the local community.
Cooperation with non-governmental organizations	Support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs):	Many NGOs provide specialized services for refugees, including legal advice, training programs and social support.
	Involving volunteers:	Volunteers are often involved in providing a range of services to help refugee families integrate and feel accepted.

The provision of social services to refugee families in Lithuania requires a lot of resources and cooperation between various institutions and organizations. It is important to ensure that refugee families feel supported and have opportunities to integrate successfully into society.

The statistics are available on the Lithuanian Migration website.

1.2. Užsieniečių, gyvenančių Lietuvos Respublikoje, skaičius 2024 m. pradžioje (tūkst.)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Gyventojų skaičius, tarp jų:	2 794,0	2 794,3	2 795,2	2 806,0	2 860,0	2 886,5
- užsieniečiai	58,0	73,8	87,3	100,2	189,4	221,8
Užsieniečių sudaroma bendra gyventojų skaičiaus dalis, proc.	2,08	2,64	3,12	3,57	6,62	7,69

Šaltiniai:

1. Valstybės duomenų agentūros duomenys apie Lietuvos Respublikos gyventojų skaičių.
2. Gyventojų registro bei Užsieniečių registro duomenys apie užsieniečių skaičių Lietuvos Respublikoje.

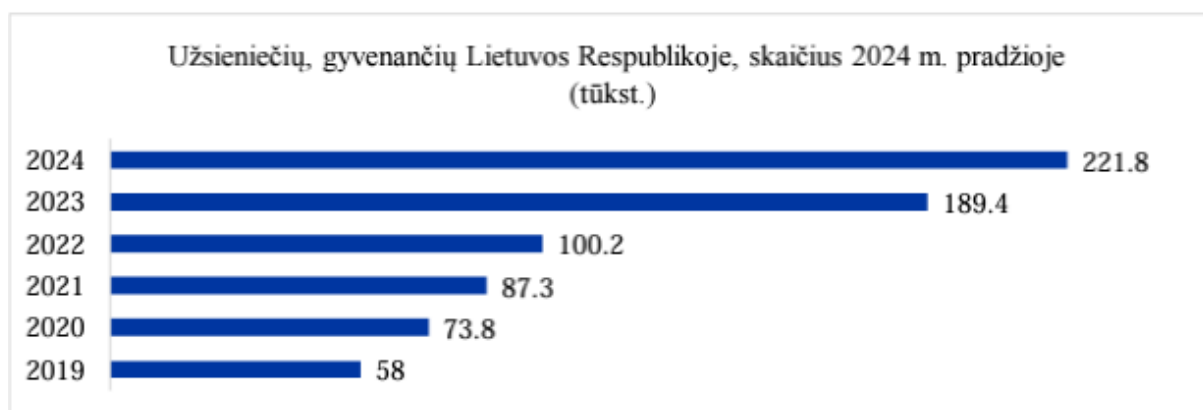


Table 1. Foreigners living in Lithuania at the beginning of 2024

Source: <https://migracija.lrv.lt/media/viesa/saugykla/2024/5/xtUeX75YEX8.pdf>

Refugees face a number of challenges as a result of forced migration, including impaired physical and psychological health, as well as limited access to information and communication with the host country, which leads to significant post-arrival difficulties (OECD, 2016[12]). The OECD notes that refugees often arrive in the host country without documentation proving their education and professional skills, and therefore face difficulties in finding programs or jobs that match their competences (OECD, 2019[1]). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) highlights that children with a refugee background are five times more likely to be excluded from school than non-refugee children, making their access to education and integration much more challenging (UNHCR, 2016).

Gray and Franck (2019) argue that refugees are particularly vulnerable and in need of support, with women and unaccompanied children often among the most vulnerable groups. Research by Walther, Kröger, Tibuba, Ta, Scheve, Hahn and Bajbouj (2017; 2020) highlights the need for social service professionals, psychologists and policy makers to increase the supply of psychological services to refugees in light of the increase in the concentration of single males, elderly Afghan refugees and females in resettlement sites, and the risk of deportation. The authors also stress that the need for psychological services should be closely linked to the integration process. Since 2011, with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the increase in refugee flows to Europe, many studies have confirmed that negative attitudes towards refugees have become a common feature in many Western countries. Refugees are often demonized and become the main targets of discrimination. Studies show that their identity remains highly differentiated and contradictory, which is linked to labelling policies. Currently, refugees are not only in the media spotlight, but are also key actors, and their identity is closely linked to various forms of representation (Sutkutė, 2019).

Timshel, Montgomery and Dalgaard (2017) point out that refugees forced to leave their home country due to war, torture, persecution or violence face stressors that are exacerbated upon arrival in the host country. These stressors include bureaucratic challenges, cultural differences, difficulties in integrating into the labor market and family loss and separation. The authors of the study describe these stressors as a damaging, traumatic cycle of social exclusion that increases the risk of psychological disorders and ill health. Sutkutė (2019) also points out that these minority groups often face systemic discrimination

and are seen as a threat to national security and the economy. Host societies often use the metaphor of 'burden' to negatively describe Syrian refugees, highlighting the negative impact they have on the economy, the environment and society. Violent acts against refugees have sparked debates on right-wing extremist violence, and recent xenophobic attacks against refugees in Germany have stimulated political and academic debates on the causes and consequences of right-wing violence, as well as on the integration of refugees into Western societies.

In summary, refugees forced to flee their countries because of war, armed conflict or persecution are looking for a safe environment and humanitarian assistance. Forced resettlement in a country of asylum can cause refugees great stress and fear, which greatly complicates the further integration process. Women, children and the elderly are the most vulnerable groups of refugees, and unaccompanied children are particularly at risk. Inaccurate data make it difficult to determine the exact number of individual refugees at risk. Sutkutė (2019) notes that refugees are perceived as a burden that can lead to social exclusion, which makes the provision of psychological services particularly important.

METHODS

Theoretical analysis of the literature. Qualitative research - semi-structured interviews, content analysis of the data.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The aim of the study is to reveal the benefits of social services for the integration of refugee families into society. Methods of data collection and analysis of the study - qualitative research was chosen to reveal the peculiarities of the selected object in the social environment. According to Bitinas (2013), in qualitative research, the researcher interacts directly with the subjects, taking into account the individuality of each person and the recounting of situations. One tries to describe the situations in a detailed, generic language and to remain neutral in relation to the results obtained.

This research focuses on the experiences and opinions of the subjects, which is the object of this research, the essence of which it seeks to reveal. This study uses a semi-structured interview method, with open-ended questions, as well as additional questions inserted during the interview, to help reveal the views and experiences of the participants as fully as possible. The semi-structured interview and content analysis were used to describe the benefits of social services for the integration of refugee families into society, as perceived by refugees.

Selection criteria and sample - The empirical study involved 8 families, 3 from Syria, 2 from Iran and 3 from Ukraine. The participants are of different ages. All the participants in the study participated in the integration process, signed documents and received social services.

Refugees facing violence and conflict in their home country need to be forcibly resettled in another host country, where they must have security and access to all the services available in the country. The social worker plays a crucial role from the first day of arrival as he or she has to provide basic needs and information to the new arrivals. Refugees can face a lot of stress and uncertainty on arrival, so it is essential to provide as safe an environment and communication as possible to ensure a positive integration process. After leaving the camp, refugees preparing to stay in Lithuania and receive social services sign integration contracts with organizations that provide assistance to integrate into society, so the support of social workers is essential to the process.

Problems faced by refugee families: <...> A person goes, say, to have an operation, to be escorted, **not to be left alone**, a person feels that he is alone. <...>"(1):<...> Mum (says those people who live in Rukla, unlike all the other schools, yes (dad) we lived there in Rukla for nine months, we **didn't learn anything**. <...>"(6):<...> Say there was trouble, they didn't have much because they **weren't good to all the people equally**. <...>"(8);<...> *It's for example about the taxes, we've been trying to sort this thing out for six months, I still don't understand what the problem is, but **it doesn't work***. <...>"(4) <...> **He answered as if he didn't want to talk, as if we were dismissing him**, but it is his job to help us. <...>"(2). Lack of

help: '<...> They've finished their work and I say to them, whatever, what's possible, it's a child here, okay, we'll come and get something, and they **never come**. <...>'(3); '<...> They used to call, they used to answer, today they answer, and sometimes a week later, they either answer or call back. <...>'(4); '<...> And the person was at **risk**, the person didn't know where to go, the doctors explained, they looked at the person, okay, go and take a picture and do a blood test, start searching, well, let's say they called the translator, the translator is busy, **doesn't pick up, the person is alone, doesn't understand what the doctor says**. <...>'(7); '<...> (mother says) I give you an example, at eleven o'clock, he says I said I'll be there at eleven o'clock, fifteen minutes, I'll be at the doctor's office, when you go to the doctor's office, when you're there fifteen minutes before, you go there at twelve o'clock, fourteen, you're there at twelve o'clock, and **he doesn't answer the phone at all**. <...>'(8).

Employment and language: '<...> You know, when a person, they want to say something and they don't know how to say it, **you don't feel good about that thing**. <...>'(1); '<...> Because most of the employers' jobs, they want Russian or Ukrainian, it's **hard to find that job**. <...>'(4); '<...> the second job, you don't speak, you have very, very little chance to find a job. <...>'(6); '<...> The job its because it's very difficult to find a job, say you're an employer or not, and I say I come and **how do I talk?** And how do we get along, why do I need him. <...>'(7); '<...> when I came to Lithuania **it was difficult to find a job**. <...>'(8).

Uncertainty: '<...> You don't know if you will **make it here, or if you will die on the way, you don't know anything**, you are just travelling in an unknown direction. <...>'(5); '<...> very difficult, well he said, **we don't know how to go to register with the doctors**, well as I mentioned, he doesn't know anything. <...>'(7); '<...> Owww, I think everything **was a challenge, the unknown**, one year, very difficult, when I first came here, how to accept this reality, I was in shock, omg, what's here, what am I going to do, <...>'(4).

Housing: '<...> The challenge is housing, finding housing, that is, if **landlords don't agree to rent out their flat to other people, foreigners**. <...>'(2); '<...> and hello, hello, a family of five, they want to rent a flat, you know I don't want to, rented, or you know how, okay, I agree, **but the rent is going to be more expensive**, or do you agree, or do you know I'm not going to pay the taxes, five hundred euros rent, so you're going to pay the taxes or I'm not going to register at the registration centre. <...>'(7).

Public perception: '<...> Well, it's foreigners here, people think we get a lot of money. <...>'(1); '<...> but people think that refugees get a lot of money, rich, well, but actually it's not, that's why the landlords are always asking for more, I can make a friendly phone call, and I can ask, I can find, this one, there would be a rental offer, right away the landlord would be asked for more than what is listed in the advert. <...>'(3); '<...> not really people are friendly, but there are some people who don't like other people, but you can tell by the look of it, I can tell right away who will communicate. <...>'(4); '<...> In the beginning No, because the others don't socialise, they don't socialise with my children, because they are afraid of what's going on, what they hear at home, the children, well, let's say what they hear at home, the parents' language in front of the children. <...>'(5); '<...> I ask to go to the toilet because I don't want to tell them that my mother is on the phone, some people start laughing when I say that my mother is on the phone, or the doctor has called, or the brother has done the research has done the calling, they are ringing me, because they have my number,. <...>'(6); '<...> Lithuanian people, then, would not have such bad thoughts about us, that we are somehow from another planet, So that they could, how to say, have good thoughts, that, oh, the children, go to our schools. <...>'(7); '<...> They tried to show people that aghh we're the enemy, they were scared of us other people, and they thought it was normal to think that we're in jail, you know. <...>'(8); '<...> Yeah, I can't eat during that, just towards the night, the whole class comes, whether girls or boys all sit, when I go all at once niam niam niam, maybe you want to have a Bahmedai Paragaut. <...>'(2).

Social services facilitate the integration process. The consequences of armed civil conflicts in the Arab world are significant. Damage to infrastructure, health systems, civilians. Protracted war and armed conflicts have led to displacement of populations and have had long-lasting consequences for the health sector and the surrounding area. The Law on Integration of Foreigners (2014) states that the integration of asylum-seekers requires preparation not only by the asylum-seekers themselves, but also by the host state and its members in order to achieve full inclusion and access to participate in society. It is therefore

crucial that social service providers ensure access to all basic human services and that education is provided regardless of the refugees' background and social environment. In Lithuania, the law stipulates that refugees, like all citizens, are entitled to social services, benefits, support and access to education, and that the most basic health care needs must be provided. The law distinguishes that full integration requires mutual willingness and support, and that refugees involved in the integration process tend to show more progress.

Support. Stronger links between refugees and the host community help to foster shared understanding, empathy and cultural diversity. Refugees who are supported in the integration process can make better progress in integrating into society and feel safer to use their skills and experience in the labor market (UNHCR, 2018). The psychosocial environment and the establishment of social ties are particularly important for refugees who settle in the host country. Viola (2018) The results of the study show that social workers act as a mediator in the formation of relationships, they have the opportunity to look into the needs of refugee families, to understand and guide them, as integration is a process that particularly requires empathy and support from social workers. UNHCR, (2018) highlights that refugees who are well supported during the integration period tend to show greater progress in integrating into society and in using skills in the labor market, and that social services and support are an integral part of integration.

What benefits have refugee families received from social services: A sense of security; Access to better quality medical treatment and other services; Information about the support they are entitled to from the Republic of Lithuania; Finding a job; Improved psychological well-being; Feeling like a full member of society; Empowering to solve problems.

The participants of the study gave suggestions on how to improve the services: <...> **I think the first thing to do is to treat everyone equally, as equal human beings**, and not just to put the refugees into groups that are more important and will receive assistance, like the Ukrainians. <...>"(2); <...> I would say maybe better management, they had a lot of things to do and they could **have organized the aid better**, because if you don't organize what you are doing, you will get confused and you will forget, it should be more professional too. <...>"(5); <...> more hours, four or five hours, would be better, because there are times when there is work to be done. **It would be better to adapt the Lithuanian lessons to the work.** <...>"(7); TD3 <...> something happened, **it's to go, to be present, to be there, to accompany, to support someone, at least at the beginning.** <...>"(8).

CONCLUSIONS

Social services must be tailored to support more positive integration, as each individual has unique needs that require collaboration based on their specific circumstances.

Language plays a key role in reducing social exclusion, and according to the study participants, Lithuanian language courses should be adapted to accommodate the everyday lives of those who are working or studying. It is crucial to note that older individuals benefit from the assistance of a translator to help them identify learning gaps and improve efficiency, while children, as noted by participants, tend to adapt and learn the language more easily.

Providing personal escorts when necessary helps ensure that individuals do not feel isolated or helpless; such support promotes smoother cooperation, a sense of security, and better service from authorities. Additionally, there is a clear need for improved organization of services and resources to prevent chaos and disruption, ensuring that resources are allocated evenly and effectively according to need.

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