Research and Data Centre

# Ten years later

## Developments in the societal position of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands

Summary of the findings and key policy considerations

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# Summary of the findings and key policy considerations

**In the study 'Ten years later' we examine how the social position and living situation of Syrian Dutch people have developed over the ten years following their arrival in the Netherlands, and which factors play a role in this. Below we summarize the key findings, draw conclusions, and formulate a number of policy considerations. More in-depth information on the theoretical backgrounds, methodological approach, and detailed results can be found in the separate chapters of the report.**

## Introduction

After settling in the Netherlands, refugees have to rebuild their lives. More often than other migrants, they do not yet have knowledge of the language or the labor market, and they lack networks at their destination. They also frequently struggle with mental health problems as a result of experiences in countries of origin and during flight. How people rebuild their lives after receiving a residence permit and acquire a position in Dutch society is the subject of this study. We look, among other things, at learning the Dutch language, participation in the labor market, and (new) social contacts. Whereas a lot of research on refugees focuses on the first phase after arrival, this study covers a longer period, namely ten years. We know that numerous developments occur in the initial phase of the stay in a new country. In this study we map the extent to which the dynamics of the first years continue as people spend more time in the Netherlands, and which factors play a (changing) role over the years.

A large share of the refugees who have received a residence permit in the Netherlands in recent years come from Syria. Since 2014 they have constituted the largest group of those granted asylum permits (Statistics Netherlands, 2025). Based on unique longitudinal register and survey data collected among this group, we can make statements about their societal status attainment during the first ten years of their stay in the Netherlands. Although the study focuses on a single origin group, the insights arising from the research can be used more broadly for policy and research in the field of asylum seekers and status holders.

### Longitudinal & multidimensional perspective on participation

In this study we examine social position and living situation from a longitudinal perspective, meaning that the emphasis is on developments over time. Because our data follows people during their first ten years in the Netherlands, we can map in detail how developments unfold and in which phase changes occur. This also allows us to investigate whether developments proceed differently for various groups of Syrian Dutch people (for example men and women, younger and older people), and which other factors influence the course of developments.

In addition, we take a multidimensional approach—we focus on developments across different domains or dimensions of status attainment and living situation. Labor market participation, language proficiency, social networks, mental health, and feelings of belonging (feeling at home) are dimensions that run as a common thread through the report. These dimensions emerge in the migration literature as central themes that also influence each other (e.g., Ager & Strang, 2008; Harder et al., 2018). They are also topics that Syrian Dutch themselves consider important (see box 2) and that are relevant to policy targeted at status holders. Including different dimensions enables us to sketch a broad picture of the societal status attainment and living situation of refugees.

**Box 1. Syrian Dutch people**

This study concerns persons with a Syrian background who obtained a residence status in the Netherlands between 2014 and mid-2016. This group has now been in the Netherlands for roughly ten years. Because over ninety percent of them have since acquired a Dutch passport (CBS, 2025), we generally refer to them as Syrian Dutch people people in this report. We use the term (Syrian) status holders when discussing matters that specifically applied to the period before naturalization. This may, for example, concern the civic integration period. Status holder is a direct translation of the Dutch term 'statushouder', which refers to refugees who have been granted a temporary asylum residency permit or those who joined them through family reunification.

## Structure of the report

In addition to this chapter, this report consists of one broad descriptive chapter (H1) and four in-depth chapters (H2–H5), each of which delves further into specific processes. In Chapter 1 we describe developments across various dimensions, such as language, work, social networks, and health. Here we examine developments for the group as a whole, but we also look at differences between men and women, age groups, and by level of education. Chapter 2 zooms in on developments in labor market participation by mapping career paths. In Chapter 3 we distinguish between different participation groups, which show the extent to which status attainment in one domain coincides with status attainment in another domain and how this changes over time. Chapter 4 focuses on the role of the region in which people are placed after they receive a residence status. That is, the impact of the region on the social position of refugees and how that impact develops over time. Finally, Chapter 5 examines in depth the reciprocal relationship between social position and mental health.

## The LOCS program

This study is part of the Longitudinal Research Cohort Status Holders (Dutch: 'Longitudinaal Onderzoek Cohort Statushouders', LOCS). The LOCS program aims to describe and explain the social position and living situation of (former) status holders.

To answer the research questions, we use two data sources in this report. For Chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5, we use the four waves of the NSN-survey (Dutch: 'surveyonderzoek Nieuwe Statushouders in Nederland'), conducted in 2017, 2019, 2022, and 2024 among the same Syrian Dutch people. Based on these data, we can make statements about the group that received an asylum residence permit between 1 January 2014 and 1 July 2016. Everyone who participated in the study was 15 years or older in 2017. More information about this longitudinal survey can be found in Appendix B1.1 and in the individual chapters. In addition to survey data, we use a dataset of linked register data compiled by Statistics Netherlands (CBS), which allows us to follow the position of all Syrians who obtained a status between 2014 and mid-2016 through the end of 2023. The register data form the basis for Chapter 2. The chapters apply a range of analytical strategies, depending on the research question. These analyses are further explained in the respective chapters.

The LOCS program has been running since 2017 and is carried out at the request of the ministries of Social Affairs and Employment and Justice and Security. The Research and Data Center (WODC), Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR), and Statistics Netherlands contributed to the LOCS program and this report. Previous publications within the program can be found on the WODC website.

**Box 2. The role of experts by experience**

In preparation for this study, a group of Syrian-Dutch experts by experience (Dutch: 'ervaringsdeskundigen') was assembled in collaboration with Pharos. They were asked which topics they considered most important at this time for Syrian Dutch who have lived in the Netherlands for about ten years. The aim of the meetings was to arrive at research themes that are not only relevant from a scientific or policy perspective, but also for people from the group itself.

Across two interactive sessions, it emerged that the theme of livelihood security in a broad sense is seen as the most relevant at this stage. This concerns, on the one hand, financial situation and work, but also feeling at home, being accepted, and wellbeing (including mental health as an important theme).

The approach was to use the information from the experts by experience as much as possible in the further research within the broader LOCS research program. These themes form the basis for a qualitative study among Syrian Dutch that is currently being carried out by the Verwey-Jonker Institute on behalf of WODC. In addition, where possible, we have also incorporated the themes into the current study. The possibilities for this were somewhat more limited because the data had already been collected. For example, the topic of return intentions also emerged among the experts by experience as a relevant theme to investigate, particularly the impact of the fall of the Assad regime. Because virtually all data for this study were collected before the fall of the Assad regime, this topic could unfortunately not be included here.

# Findings Ch. 1- Ten years later. Social status attainment of Syrian Dutch people in numbers

*Mieke Maliepaard (WODC), Wybren Nooitgedagt (WODC/EUR), Jaco Dagevos (SCP/EUR)*

In this chapter we chart developments in social status attainment and living situation during the first ten years after arrival in the Netherlands. The developments differ markedly across the dimensions studied, with a clear distinction between language and work on the one hand, and the other dimensions on the other.

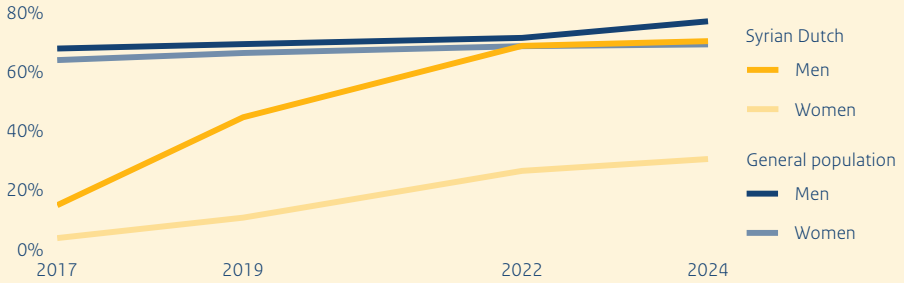
The findings point to a dynamic initial phase with substantial growth in the areas of language and work. In the first three years, when most people are engaged in the civic integration trajectory, we see a strong increase in Dutch language proficiency. This increase then levels off, both among people who speak Dutch well and among those who still struggle with Dutch. After completing civic integration, many people take the step into employment, find jobs at a higher level, and increasingly have permanent contracts. The strongest growth occurs in the first years after civic integration.

In other areas, we see less favorable developments. Over the years, an increasing number of Syrian Dutch people feel lonely, mental health remains poor, and social contacts decrease over time. These findings show that many Syrian Dutch people don't have functional social networks to fall back on, which, combined with often poor mental health, puts them in a vulnerable social position.

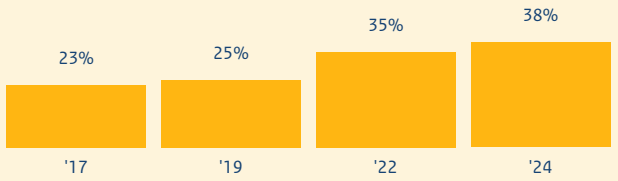
There are large differences in status attainment between groups. People who were younger at arrival in the Netherlands acquire the language much more easily and often make the step into work. They are also less often lonely and have larger social networks than older people. The level of education before coming to the Netherlands makes a difference in the areas of language and work. In particular, people with at most primary education differ from the other groups: they have much more difficulty speaking Dutch and finding a job. Despite these differences between groups, developments over time are largely similar.

Between men and women we see differences especially in the area of work. Syrian-Dutch men in particular have succeeded over the past ten years in taking up employment in large numbers, but this is less true for women. One third of Syrian-Dutch women have a job. Although their participation is still increasing slightly, it is not expected that they will approach the level of women in the general population.

**Women's labor force participation is lower, but continues to grow**
Percentage with paid employment, by gender




**Syrian Dutch people have contact with friends less and less often**
Percentage that has social contact with friends and acquaintances less than weekly




In 2024 24% of the general population had contact with friends less than weekly

**Syrian Dutch people experience anxiety or depressive feelings more often**
Percentages with an MHI-5 score lower than 76 (2024)



# Findings Ch. 2 – Labor force trajectories of Syrian Dutch people

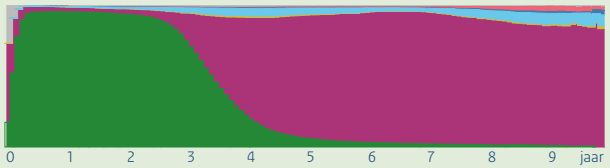
*Paula Vrolijk, Zoë Driessen, Han Nicolaas, Lisanne van Leeuwen (Statistics Netherlands)*

Labor force participation among Syrian Dutch people increases the longer they reside in the Netherlands, but this rise has leveled off in recent years. It is unclear whether this stabilization means that the same individuals retain employment for a long period, or whether there is an underlying dynamic of some people finding work while others lose their jobs again. The employment career of Syrian Dutch people should not be assumed in advance to be a linear process, but rather a trajectory in which different phases follow one another and in which early experiences (such as prolonged education) can influence later labor market participation. We examine this by means of a sequence analysis. This approach not only looks at whether they are employed, but especially at how their employment careers develop. The analysis shows that six career trajectories can be distinguished (see figures). In conclusion, there are clear differences among Syrian Dutch people in individual career trajectories, and aggregate figures mask the high degree of diversity in their careers.

## Legend labor force trajectories

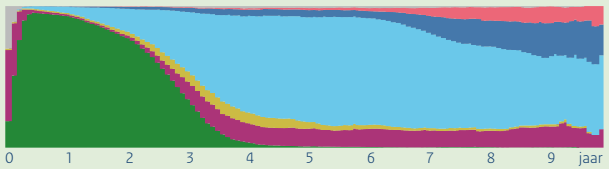
- Civic integration
- Education
- Not employed
- Flexible contract
- Permanent contract
- Unknown
- Self employed

### Predominantly non-working (39%)



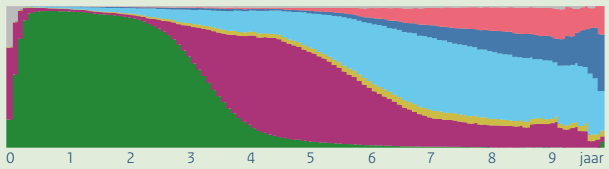

Relatively many women, predominantly with a partner and children, as well as older people and people who have not passed the civic integration exam.

### Predominantly flexible work (17%)



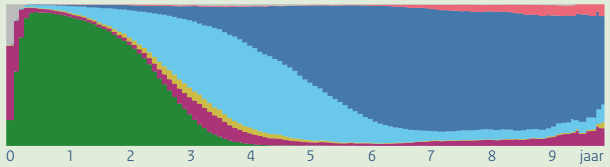

Primarily young single men or men with a partner and children. Often work through temporary employment agencies and in sectors like hospitality and transportation.

### Late start with work (16%)



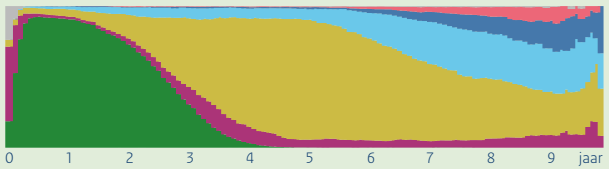

Predominantly middelaged men with a partner and children. They represent the middle income category.

### From flexible to permanent (12%)



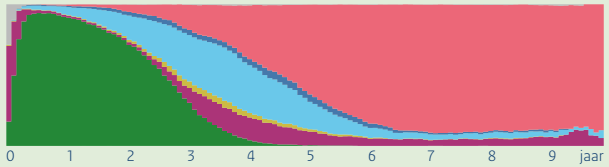

Often young men who have relatively often passed the civic integration exam. On average, they earn the highest hourly wage.

### Predominantly in education (8%)




Relatively many young women who have passed the civic integration exam (or have a temporary exemption).

### Self-employed (7%)




Primarily young men with a partner and children, on average with lower hourly wages.

# Findings Ch. 3 – Hidden stories: Social mobility of Syrian Dutch people in the long term

*Vardan Barsegyan, Mees Geenen & Zenab Tamimy (WODC)*

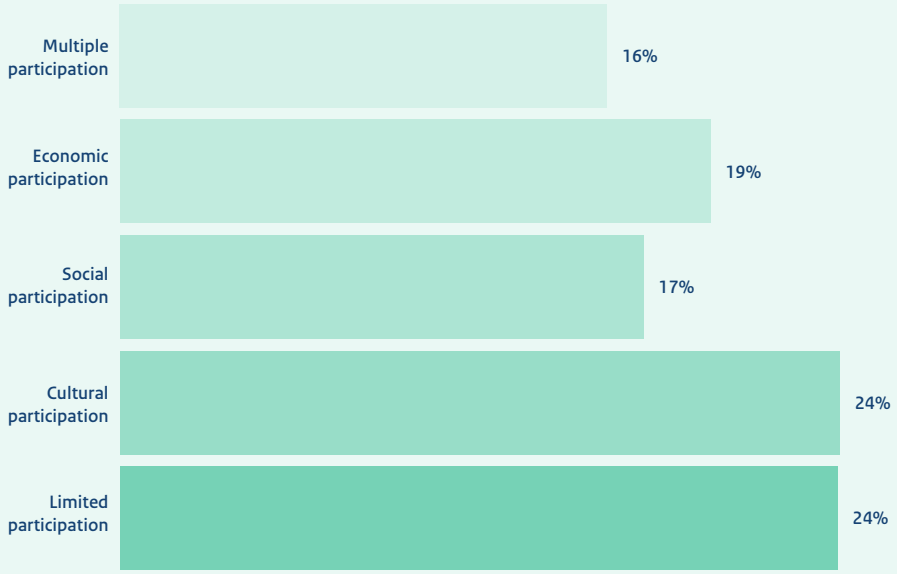
We research how social position attainment correlates across in different dimensions (economic, social, cultural, see box 3) over time. We find different patterns of position attainment among Syrian Dutch people, so-called 'participation groups'. The results show five different participation groups. One group participates relatively much on all dimensions, three groups primarily participate in one of the three dimensions, and the last group participates relatively little in all dimensions. These groups arise early, but not directly after arrival and the attainment of an asylum status; they crystalize a few years after arrival.

We research how people move between participation groups over time (upward or downward social mobility). This provides insight into developments instead of snapshots. We define upward social mobility as a transition to a group with a relatively higher degree of participation and downward social mobility as a transition to a group with a relatively lower degree of participation. Transitions between groups with a similar amount of participation are considered horizontal mobility.

Social mobility occurs relatively often: depending on the participation group, about half to two thirds of members experience social mobility during the study period. Social mobility is least common in the limited and multiple participation groups. That is, if people participate in multiple ways early on, they often continue to participate extensively later, while people who participate to a limited extent usually continue to do so later. Women and older people, compared to men and younger people, have a lower chance of upward mobility. About ten years after arriving in the Netherlands, women are more often in the limited and less often in the economic participation group. Older Syrian Dutch people are more often in the cultural participation group and less often in the economic and multiple participation groups. In the short term, this also applies to people who stayed longer in reception locations or were transferred multiple times, although this effect disappears over time. By contrast, a high pre-migration educational level and obtaining the civic integration diploma make it easier to continue to belong to the multiple participation group.

Policy factors such as length of stay at a reception center primarily play a role in the first years after being housed in a municipality. Early differences then emerge, which often no longer disappear thereafter. It is precisely vulnerable groups who experience less social mobility. To promote participation and reduce inequality, early, targeted policy is therefore needed: women, those with lower levels of education, and older people are more often found in limited participation groups and experience less upward mobility.

**Relative distribution of Syrian Dutch people among the participation groups (2024)**




**Box 3. Dimensions of participation**

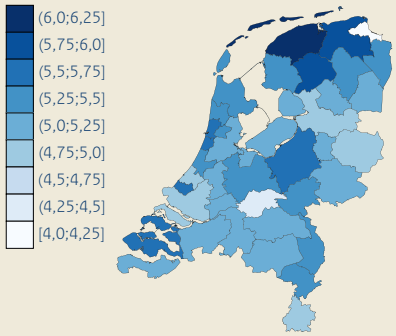
We examined twelve indicators, which we group into three dimensions: the economic dimension (being employed, satisfaction with financial situation, general and mental health); the social dimension (frequency of social contact with Syrians, with Dutch, and with other migrant groups); and the cultural dimension (feeling at home in the Netherlands, identification with the Netherlands, degree of difficulty with speaking, reading, and writing Dutch).

# Findings Ch. 4 – The influence of the region of residence on the lives of Syrian Dutch people over time

*Kasper Otten (WODC/EUR)*

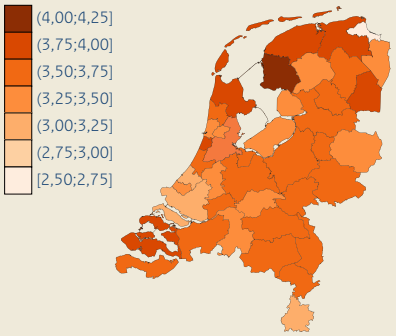
Due to the housing policy (Dutch: 'huisvestingsbeleid'), status holders are dispersed across the Netherlands and cannot choose where they are placed. This chapter examines whether and how the region of residence affects the likelihood of participating in society. It looks at four central dimensions of status holders' lives: labor market participation, language proficiency, mental health, and social contacts. The region of residence turns out to affect each of these four dimensions—where status holders are placed thus influences their participation opportunities. This influence is generally small, but not negligible. There are clear differences between dimensions in terms of when the region has an effect. Which regional characteristics are associated with favorable and unfavorable outcomes also differs by dimension, as described alongside the figures below.

The results underscore the influence of the region of residence. Knowledge about which regions are favorable for which dimension can be used to provide additional support to status holders who, due to their region of residence, are disadvantaged on a given dimension. For instance, people placed in an unfavorable region for labor market participation can receive extra guidance in finding work, while those placed in an unfavorable region for language attainment can be offered additional language classes. Based on our findings, the period in which this support is best provided can be aligned with the period in which the region of residence has an effect.



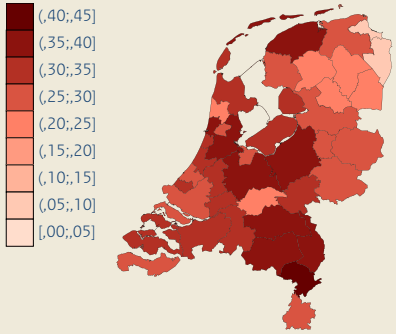

## Dutch language skills

In regions with a larger share of inhabitants without a migration background and safer regions, language skills are higher. In these regions they can probably more easily connect with Dutch people, which benefits their language acquisition. The influence of the region is primarily notable in the early stage, in which people are busy with civic integration.



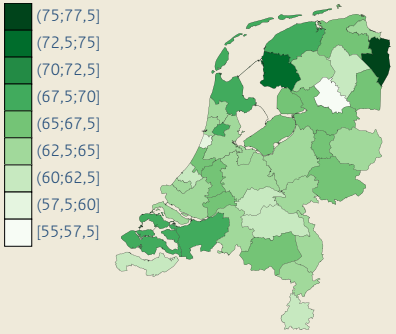

## Social contacts

In safer regions, Syrian Dutch people more often have contact with Dutch people without a migration background, and in regions where more people vote for radical-right parties, less often. This may be because there is a greater social distance between Syrian Dutch people and other residents in those regions. The influence of the region is relatively stable over time.




## Labor market participation

The influence of the region of residence is primarily notable in the middle period, when people take the step to work after finishing civic integration. Labor market participation is lower in regions with a higher proportion of unemployment.




## Mental health

Over time, regional differences continue to exist; the influence of the region on mental health is therefore relatively stable over time. However, these differences do not appear to be explained by the regional characteristics examined.

# Findings Ch. 5 – Cause or consequence? Mental health as a precondition and result of participation

*Zenab Tamimy (WODC)*

The mental health of many Syrian Dutch people is not in a good state (see Ch. 1). This chapter examines the extent to which (problems in the area of) mental health have consequences for the participation of Syrian Dutch people, and the extent to which they in turn result from participation. The results show both: mental health affects participation, and participation affects mental health, but the effects do differ by phase and domain..

Shortly after arrival, mental health is primarily influenced by feeling at home. Status holders who feel more at home in the Netherlands shortly after the residence permit is granted are therefore better protected against mental health problems. Remarkably, this relationship reverses in later phases: in the medium term, good mental health actually leads people to feel more at home in the Netherlands.

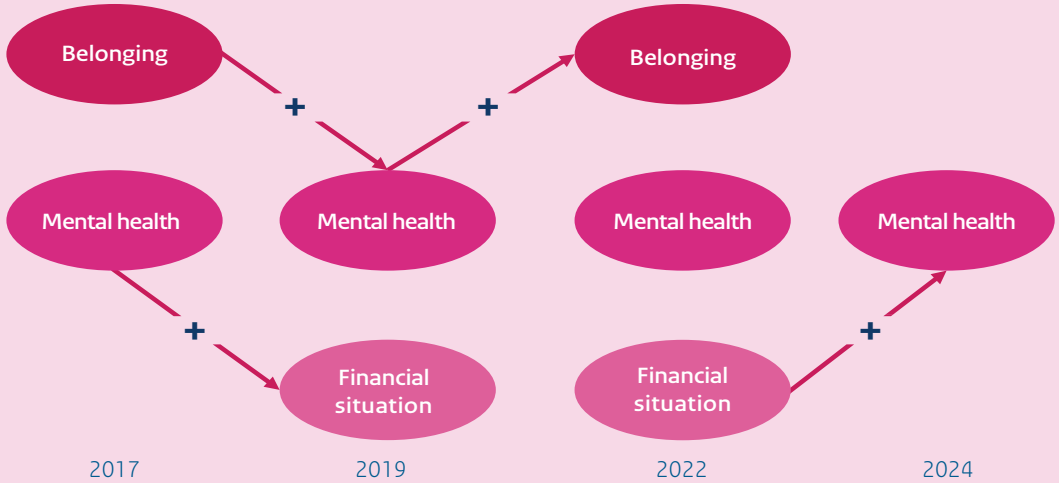
In the long term, we mainly see the influence of economic participation: eight years after the residence permit is granted, it is primarily the financial situation that affects subsequent mental health. This relationship also turns out to be reciprocal, but then mainly in the early phase: status holders who are mentally healthier soon after arrival are in a better financial position later on.

The findings show that mental health is both a precondition and a result of participation. This reciprocity increases the risk of a negative spiral of persistent mental health problems and reduced participation when timely intervention is lacking.

It is therefore important to support mental health early, continuously, and in a low-threshold manner, for example by making it part of pathways for housing, language, and work. This yields multiple gains in the longer term. Early investment in improved mental health pays off in stronger economic participation later on. Sustainable efforts to improve mental health ensure that (former) status holders also feel at home in the Netherlands long after arrival.

This requires that feelings of being at home are especially fostered in the initial phase. In the long term, pathways that promote sustainable, structural participation are essential to safeguard and improve mental health, such as effective from-welfare-to-work programmes and stimulating educational routes. After all, mental health is not an isolated care domain, but a pivotal point of participation.

**Causal relationships between belonging and mental health, and financial situation and mental health**
Only the significant causal relationships over time are displayed (2017, 2019, 2022, 2024)



# Conclusions and main findings

In this study, various approaches were used to examine developments in the acquisition of social position and the living situation of Syrian Dutch people who obtained a residence status in the Netherlands around 2015. From the multitude of findings, we draw a number of overarching conclusions.

### Diverging developments: progress, stabilization, and decline

This study clearly shows that the idea of position attainment as a linear development in which positions across different dimensions gradually improve does not hold. With regard to labor market participation and language acquisition, we see a clear improvement in the first years, which later levels off for the group as a whole. Average mental health hardly changes over the study period and remains worryingly unfavorable. People feel lonelier and less at home, and they experience discrimination more often the longer they reside in the Netherlands (Ch. 1). Social contacts decrease over time, both with people without a migration background and with other Syrian Dutch. These findings run counter to prevailing integration theories that developments in different domains (language, work, social contacts) positively reinforce each other and over time lead to an improved position (cf. Ager & Strang, 2008). Those who, like us in this study, consider multiple dimensions, see various divergent developments.

### Phases in position attainment in language and work

Across the different chapters it becomes clear that for developments in labor market participation and language acquisition, it is possible to distinguish an early, middle, and later period after status has been granted.

#### Early period (the first three years)

The first years after arrival are marked by a high degree of dynamism in the areas of language and work. In this period, individual, regional, and policy factors weigh most heavily (Ch. 3, Ch. 4). People start the civic integration program, and during that period there is a clear increase in Dutch language proficiency (Ch. 1), although this increase is not equally strong across all age and educational groups. In this period it also turns out to matter in which region people have been placed (Ch. 4). In some regions people learn Dutch better than in others — for example, those where the regional share of residents without a migration background is higher. In this early period few people make the move into work (Ch. 1, Ch. 2) — for the vast majority, civic integration is their main activity. Combining work and civic integration is rare in this study group — who participated in civic integration under the previous law (see also Miltenburg & Dagevos, 2020).

#### Middle period (4-7 years)

The middle period is the period in which people have completed civic integration and which therefore marks a new phase. Notably, in the middle period Dutch language proficiency stabilizes, a development we see across all age and educational groups (Ch. 1). However, large differences between individuals emerge: younger people and those with a higher level of education speak Dutch (much) better than older people and people with a lower level of education, for whom Dutch proficiency stabilizes at a low level. This is a well-known pattern in language acquisition: younger people (Hartshorne, Tenenbaum, & Pinker, 2018) and people with higher educational attainment acquire a new language (much) faster (Kirsten & Seuring, 2021). The differences in language level arise mainly during the civic integration period (Nooitgedagt & Dagevos, 2026).

The middle period is characterized particularly by the increase in labor market participation. Completing civic integration creates room to take the step into (often flexible) work (Ch. 1, Ch. 2). We initially see this strong increase especially among men, and later and much less among women. How successful the move into work is in this phase depends in part on the region of residence. In regions with higher levels of unemployment, people find it harder to make the transition into work (Ch. 4). Economic participation in this period also has consequences for the longer term; Syrian Dutch people who are in a better financial position in this phase are better protected against mental health problems in the long term (Ch. 5). In this middle period clearer patterns of social position attainment begin to crystallize (Ch. 3), with women and people with lower levels of education in particular building up a cumulative disadvantage.

#### Later period (8-10 years)

The societal positions that people occupy in the earlier periods strongly influence their social positions in the later period. In other words, there is path dependency. This is evident first from the career trajectory analyses (Ch. 2): those who did not participate in the labor market in the first seven years generally do not do so in later years either. The research on participation groups (Ch. 3) also indicates that the position adopted after a number of years to some extent determines the subsequent course of position attainment. These findings point to the importance of investments in the first years after arrival.

Even so, there is still considerable dynamism in the later period. Although women's labor force participation is at a lower level, it continues to rise slightly. Among those in work, there is a gradual improvement in position, visible in more permanent contracts, more contracted hours, and higher occupational levels (Ch. 1). The research on participation groups also shows that positions are not completely fixed and that there is still social mobility in later years (Ch. 3).

### Large differences within the Syrian-Dutch group

The results of this study indicate that education, age, and gender are major differentiators when it comes to position attainment, not only in the initial phase, but also in the longer term. Older adults — often around age 50 among Syrian Dutch — women, and people with lower levels of education have weaker Dutch language proficiency and significantly less favorable labor market positions and career trajectories. Upward mobility into favorable participation groups is also primarily observed among people with higher levels of education, men, and younger people. Individual characteristics prove to carry substantial weight.

### Mental health as a linchpin for socio-economic position and belonging

It is not a new finding that status holders often have poor mental health. What is new are the outcomes of the analyses conducted for this report, which show that mental health functions as a cause of differences in participation and belonging, which in turn have consequences for differences in mental health. This interplay — mental health as both cause and consequence — underscores the importance of mental health for the opportunities and well being of (former) status holders, and thus also the importance that mental health should have in policy.

### The importance of policy: reception, housing, and civic integration policy

This study highlights the importance of policy for participation across various domains in both the short and longer term. Housing policy has differing effects on labor market participation, language acquisition, and social contacts (Ch. 4). In particular, labor market conditions and opportunities for social encounters in a region (the share of residents with or without a migration background, political preferences) co determine the position and living situation of Syrian Dutch. In line with earlier research, the findings of this study point to the influence of the reception period. A lengthy asylum procedure and prolonged stay in reception centers, relocations during the reception period, and the absence of independent housing for status holders have a demonstrably negative effect on participation and upward mobility (Ch. 3).

With regard to civic integration policy, this study again shows that civic integration marks an important phase in the lives of (Syrian) status holders: almost everyone participates, for a large group it is the main activity in the first years after status has been granted (Ch. 2), and completing civic integration contributes to upward mobility (Ch. 3).

## Key policy considerations

Against the backdrop of this broad range of findings from this study, we would like to bring four findings to the attention of policymakers that point to an unfavorable (development in) position attainment or living situation:

1. The persistently poor mental health of many Syrian Dutch people.
2. The finding that 40% of Syrian Dutch people who have been living here for quite some time have had little to no paid work. This applies especially to women; 70% of them have had little to no paid work.
3. The substantial and persistent differences in Dutch language proficiency between age groups and people with different levels of education.
4. Decline in social contacts and sense of belonging; increase in perceived discrimination.

These findings were, to a greater or lesser extent, also present among earlier refugee groups in the Netherlands (Bakker, 2016; Maliepaard, Witkamp, & Jennissen, 2017). This indicates that we are dealing with a particularly stubborn challenge. If policy is to have an effect here, it needs to become more effective. Below, we discuss our key points of consideration for policy. The government has a broad set of tools to improve the social position and living situation of refugees with its existing reception and civic integration policy. However, to achieve that, important adjustments are needed within both reception and civic integration policy. We discuss these in light of the current bottlenecks in policy and in relation to recent policy developments (in particular the recently issued “Starting Memorandum on Work and Participation for Newcomers,” Dutch: “Startnotitie Werk en Meedoen Nieuwkomers”).

### Improving existing policy

#### Reception policy: more opportunities for participation, but longer waiting times

From this and other research we know that reception policy affects both the mental health and later participation opportunities of status holders. Frequent relocations, limited facilities and inadequate privacy, the lack of opportunities to learn the language and work, and the long wait for a status give status holders a poor start. There is a lot to be gained here. Recent policy developments make a first attempt in this direction. For example, the coalition agreement states that in reception “where necessary, efforts will be made to [...] improve trauma and addiction care (Rijksoverheid, 2026, p. 37),” underscoring the importance of paying more attention to the mental health issues of asylum seekers during the reception period. Policy has also taken steps in the area of participation. With the removal of the 24 week requirement and the end of 2023, 2023 asylum seekers have had more opportunities to work, and this is visible in the figures (Statistics Netherlands, 2024). The Starting Memorandum on Work and Participation for Newcomers proposes additional measures (such as allowing work not after 6 but after 3

months) aimed at stimulating the labor force participation of (prospective) asylum seekers. In addition, (prospective) asylum seekers are given the opportunity to learn Dutch from the start of the reception period. These plans, which researchers and policymakers have been advocating for some time, will hopefully ensure that the asylum period is less characterized by "lost time" or "waiting time" and will contribute to better mental health and more favorable participation opportunities. It is important, however, that such policy efforts also reach groups that this study shows are at high risk of falling behind, such as people with lower levels of education and older adults.

Whether these positive expectations will be realized is, however, an open question. The aforementioned Starting Memorandum articulates the aim of a "stable admissions and reception landscape." That is currently not the case, although stability is crucial for the participation and mental health of asylum seekers and status holders. The duration of stay in reception and waiting times are only increasing, and asylum seekers often have to relocate during the reception period. These are factors that we know hinder mental health, language learning, and employment opportunities. Moreover, with the introduction of the European Pact on Asylum and Migration waiting times in reception are expected to rise (Netherlands Court of Audit, 2026a). It is not unlikely that even more people will end up in emergency reception centers, which will not help improve the already substantial mental health problems among asylum seekers. It therefore remains essential to invest in stability during the reception period (few relocations), dedicated facilities for residents, and ample opportunities for participation. But to truly boost language acquisition, participation, and improvements in mental health problems, the duration of the reception period will have to be reduced substantially.

**Civic integration policy: language at B1 level and emphasizing work, with some bottlenecks**

Since 2022, a new Civic Integration Act has been in force, intended to ensure that a large share of participants in civic integration attain a higher language level (B1) and enter employment more often. A dual approach is a key objective of the policy, meaning that language learning and (labor market) participation are combined and reinforce each other. To what extent the current civic integration policy can make a significant contribution to the policy issues we identified is still hard to say. The civic integration period lasts three years, and only recently were the first quantitative data released (Statistics Netherlands, 2026). Interim evaluations, however, point to various bottlenecks in civic integration policy (Netherlands Court of Audit, 2026b; Damen et al., 2026; Witvliet, Van der Zwan, Mack, & Belhaj-Haddou, 2026). There are long waiting and processing times, there are indications that fewer participants than expected will complete civic integration at the B1 language level, and working and participating in civic integration do not always reinforce each other in practice.

The aforementioned Starting Memorandum proposes several measures to address these and other bottlenecks in civic integration. The premise is clear: "Paid work is the standard," according to the memorandum. There should be more opportunities to work during civic integration, the number of starter jobs will be expanded, and measures will be introduced to ensure that working status holders will live in the municipality where they work. In principle, these are promising proposals, but there are also caveats.

***A stronger focus on work***

The emphasis on labor market participation in the proposed policy necessitates clarity about the place of work within civic integration policy, both for implementation and for status holders themselves. At present, working and participating in civic integration get in each other's way: those who work have less time to devote to civic integration classes, and those who want to focus strongly on civic integration have less room to work (Dagevos et al., 2026; Damen et al., 2026). It is important to make provisions for this. One way could be to offer more evening classes. However, research shows that concentrating on the material in evening classes is often difficult (Damen et al., 2026). There is therefore likely more to be gained by offering dual pathways in which work and learning are aligned. This is happening only to a limited extent so far, and it is something the cabinet wants to focus on more strongly (Dagevos et al., 2026; Damen et al., 2026). When fleshing out this policy, careful thought should be given to how learning on the job can be facilitated. There are indications that in many jobs where status holders end up, opportunities for learning and development are limited (Dagevos et al., 2026; Damen et al., 2026). There is a risk that work will come at the expense of language acquisition. It is important to prevent a "work above all" approach from leading to a group at the lower end of the labor market that does not learn Dutch well, with negative consequences for suitable job opportunities and social embeddedness, as we now seem to be seeing among Ukrainian refugees (Nooitgedagt, Oijevaar, & Van Enk, 2026; Tamimy & Maliepaard, 2026).

Research shows that having a Dutch diploma increases the chance of finding a job that better matches one's level of education (Bakker, 2016; Kanas & Van Tubergen, 2009). Nevertheless, our study shows that only a small share of status holders follows that route. From a participation perspective, that is unfortunate. The education track in the current Civic Integration Act offers more opportunities for this. So far, however, participation has been limited, despite the relatively large group of young status holders (Statistics Netherlands, 2026). That it can be different is shown, for example, by the choice of the Municipality of Amsterdam to promote this track, which is reflected in the participation figures (De Gruijter, Acherrat, & Gehring, 2025). It is important that the new approach to getting status holders into work does not discourage participation in the education track.

*Civic integration policy does not work equally well for everyone*

The aim of civic integration policy is to promote the language skills and labor force participation of status holders. Our research shows that there are substantial and persistent differences between groups in these two areas. It is probably unrealistic to expect that all asylum seekers and status holders will be able to learn Dutch equally well (e.g., older adults, people with low literacy) or work equally often (e.g., older adults). In fact, after 10 years the labor market participation of men among Syrian Dutch people is not much lower than that of the general population. However, women's labor force participation lags far behind men's, despite their comparable Dutch language proficiency. This means the untapped labor potential among women is extremely large. Research on the labor force participation of Syrian Dutch women points to the importance of several factors, such as traditional views on women's roles, their family situation, and discrimination (Van der Zwan & Van Tubergen, 2024). Importantly, current policy also appears to insufficiently reach women (De Gruijter et al., 2025). Although increasing the participation of female status holders is one of the goals of the current cabinet, no concrete steps have yet been proposed. If the goal is to increase the labor force participation of status holders, it is therefore essential to focus much more explicitly on women.

## Important steps in reception and civic integration policy, but not all bottlenecks have been removed

With the reception and civic integration policies, the government has important instruments at its disposal to improve the mental health, language acquisition, and labor market participation of asylum seekers and status holders, and to address the bottlenecks we identified above. In recent years, we see that policy has increasingly focused on promoting language learning and labor market participation. In light of the points of consideration we formulated, these are important steps. In the aforementioned starting memorandum, the emphasis shifts even more toward work, and toward learning the language at and through work during reception and civic integration. Additional gains can be made if reception and civic integration policy are more closely aligned, enabling municipalities to implement civic integration and participation activities earlier and more effectively. It has long been the standing advice of scholars and a long-cherished wish of (municipal) administrators (ABDTopconsult, 2024; VNG, 2025) and civil society organizations to view reception and civic integration as a continuous chain (and not as separate policy areas). It is very important, however, that the emphasis does not shift too far toward work, so that it does not come at the expense of learning Dutch.

## Supplementary policy

The reception and civic integration policies aimed at asylum seekers and status holders cover the first years of their stay in the Netherlands. One of the conclusions of this study is that, over the 10-year period examined, there is no unambiguous movement toward a stable and improved position and living situation. Another observation is that there is no specific policy focused on more socio-cultural issues such as sense of belonging and social contacts, which we find tend to develop unfavorably rather than favorably. There are therefore good reasons to consider whether policy is needed for the period after civic integration and for policy aimed at matters such as sense of belonging, social contacts, and discrimination.

A good starting point for this line of thinking is to examine the extent to which general provisions for (former) status holders have the same reach and the same effectiveness as for people from the general population. Think, for example, of the Participation Act, youth care, and mental health care institutions. If this is not the case, it becomes possible to determine in a targeted way how to improve services for (former) status holders.

Furthermore, it is important to inventory effective initiatives that promote the broad embedding of status holders in this country. This research shows that the degree of feeling at home is subject to erosion over time and that experiences of discrimination increase. There has also been much unrest in the past period around the opening of new asylum reception centers, which in some places manifested itself in violent behavior toward reception facilities (NOS, 2026). It is not inconceivable that this reception adversely affects asylum seekers' ability to feel at home in the Netherlands and, in that way, also their mental health. The feeling of not being (allowed to be) part of a society potentially has all kinds of adverse consequences, and it would therefore be regrettable if, 10 years from now, we will have to conclude that the initially strong sense of belonging among Syrian Dutch people or new status holders has ebbed away over the years.

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