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## Research Report

# Improved institutional settings promote employment

IAB-Kurzbericht, No. 10/2024

### Provided in Cooperation with:

Institute for Employment Research (IAB)

*Suggested Citation:* Brücker, Herbert; Samy, Maye Ehab; Jaschke, Philipp; Kosyakova, Yuliya (2024) : Improved institutional settings promote employment, IAB-Kurzbericht, No. 10/2024, Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung (IAB), Nürnberg, <https://doi.org/10.48720/IAB.KB.2410.en>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/302910>

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# IAB Brief Report

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10|2024

## In brief

- The employment rates of refugees who arrived between 2013 and 2019 increase with the duration of their stay: 63 percent are employed seven years after their arrival, while 68 percent are employed eight years after their arrival.
- For the cohort that arrived in 2015, the employment rate in 2022 was 64 percent. Among the female refugees who arrived in 2015, 31 percent were in employment, compared to 75 percent of men.
- At €13.70, the average gross hourly wage of this cohort in 2022 was above the low-wage threshold of €12.50.
- The acceleration of asylum procedures and gradual reduction in the time limits for employment bans are accompanied by an increase in the employment rates of refugees. Residency restrictions hinder the start of employment.
- The completion of language programs offered by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) as well as the labor market and career guidance provided by job centers and employment agencies are positively related to employment rates. Starting these measures earlier could accelerate the labor market integration of refugees.

## Labor market integration of refugees

# Improved institutional settings promote employment

by Herbert Brücker, Maye Ehab, Philipp Jaschke and Yuliya Kosyakova

**Various institutional hurdles such as asylum procedures, employment bans and residency restrictions impair the labor market integration of refugees. These hurdles are prevalent particularly at the beginning of their stay, and are reduced over time, as shown by analyses based on the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees. Language and other integration programs also gradually facilitate integration into the labor market. This improved integration is reflected in the increase in the employment rate of refugees who arrived in 2015 to almost two thirds in 2022.**

Around 2.2 million people seeking protection were living in Germany at the end of 2022 (excluding Ukrainians who have fled since the Russian war; Destatis 2024a). They mostly come from countries particularly affected by war, civil war

and persecution and have legally legitimized protection claims: 70 percent of them have a legally recognized protection or residence status, 11 percent have a rejected status and 19 percent have an open protection status (ibid.). The vast majority want to stay in Germany for longer or permanently (Brücker et al. 2023). Their integration into the labor market and society is therefore of central interest.

## Hurdles impair labor market integration

Refugees face greater challenges than other migrant groups with regard to labor market integration. Due to the circumstances of their flight from war, violence and persecution, refugees generally have less language skills, social networks and information when they arrive compared

to other migrant groups. They usually have no job offers when they arrive. In addition, the structure and quality of the education and training systems in the countries of origin often differ from those in the destination countries, which makes it difficult to transfer qualifications and professional experience (Brell et al. 2020; Kosyakova/Kogan 2022).

In addition to these individual and socio-structural factors, which have already been considered in previous IAB brief reports (e.g., Brücker et al. 2020; Kosyakova et al. 2021), institutional hurdles such as employment bans, the duration and outcome of asylum procedures or restrictions on the choice of residence and freedom of movement also affect their labor market chances. The availability of and participation in integration and qualifica-

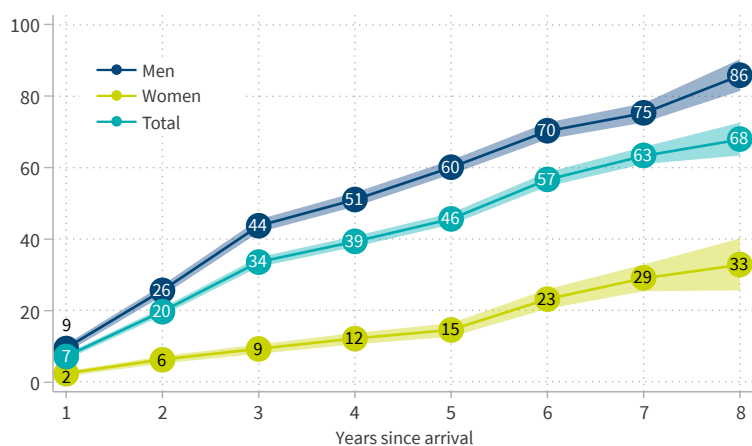
tion programs as well as job placement also play an important role. Factors such as a welcoming culture, contact with the local population or labor market discrimination can also influence labor market integration (Brell et al. 2020; Kosyakova/Kogan 2022).

In the following, based on an analysis of recent employment trends, we examine the influence of the institutional and integration factors in Germany on the labor market integration of refugees who arrived in Germany between 2013 and 2019. Using the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, a comprehensive longitudinal survey, representative statements can be made about the refugees who moved to Germany during this period and their household members (Info box 1).<sup>1</sup>

A1

### Employment rate of refugees by gender and length of stay

Percentage of working-age population (18 to 64 years)



Note: Employment is defined as the exercise of paid employment or self-employment.  
Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2016–2022, preliminary weights. © IAB

### Employment rises sharply

Due to institutional and individual hurdles, especially at the beginning of the refugees' stay, the employment rates are still low at less than 10 percent in the first year after arrival. However, employment rates increase significantly as the length of stay increases: On average, they reach 57 percent six years after arrival, 63 percent seven years after arrival and 68 percent for stays of eight years or more (see Figure A1).

At 64 percent in 2022, the employment rate of the cohort that arrived in 2015 was almost identical to that of the sample average seven years after arrival. 90 percent of all employed refugees were in employment subject to social insurance contributions in 2022, with the same value for the 2015 cohort. For all cohorts, it can be observed that employment rates stagnated during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 (Brücker et al. 2021), but rose again significantly from 2021 onwards.

For comparison: in 2022, the average employment rate of the population with migration experience, i.e. migrants who moved to Germany themselves, was 70 percent and the population average was 77 percent (Destatis 2023). This means that eight years after their arrival, the employment rate

<sup>1</sup> The Ukrainian nationals who have fled since the beginning of the Russian war are not the subject of this report. On the labor market integration of this group, see Kosyakova et al. (2023).

1

#### The IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees

The IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees is conducted annually by the IAB together with the Research Center of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF-FZ) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) at DIW Berlin (Brücker et al. 2017). The sample is drawn from the Central Register of Foreigners. Based on statistical extrapolation methods, representative statements can be made about people seeking protection who came to Germany between January 1, 2013 and June 30, 2019, as well as about their household members.

Our analyses are based on 9,339 refugees of working age (18 to 64 years) who have moved to Germany since 2013 (a total of 25,937 person-years). For the 2022 survey wave, 1,839 person observations are available. Around 55 percent of respondents had fled to Germany from Syria, 10 percent from Afghanistan, 12 percent from Iraq and the remaining quarter from other countries.

of refugees is almost as high as the average rate of the migrant population. Moreover, with a remaining difference of 9 percentage points, it has already come very close to the population average. When making the comparison, however, it must be considered that the age structure of refugees differs from the population average. Assuming the same age distribution for the population average as for the refugees, the difference in the employment rates would be around 2 percentage points lower.

## The gender gap is high

Although the employment rates of female and male refugees increase over time, there is already a clear gender gap in the first few years of the integration process (see Figure A1). After eight or more years of residence in Germany, the employment rate of refugee men (86 percent) exceeds the average rate for the male population in Germany (81 percent). In contrast, the employment rate of refugee women, at 33 percent, is well below the average for the female population (72 percent) (Destatis 2023).

The reasons for the gender differences in the employment rates of refugees are complex. They can be explained above all by the fact that women take on care work (especially with small children), that they invest less in language and education in Germany than men and that they make less use of advisory services. Another factor is that, on average, women were already less likely to be employed in their countries of origin and, if they were, then more often in professions whose access is highly regulated in Germany (for example in the education sector). This makes it more difficult for them to utilize their skills and qualifications on the German labor market (see Kosyakova et al. 2021).

## The quality of employment increases, benefit receipt decreases

As the length of stay increases, not only do employment rates rise, but the quality of employment also improves. For example, 76 percent of employed refugees who moved to Germany in 2015 were in full-time employment in 2022, and the proportion of temporary agency work amounted to 12 percent among those being employed.

The median gross monthly earnings for full-time employees of the 2015 cohort were €2,570, and €2,250 for all employees. With a median gross hourly wage of €13.70, the median wages of the 2015 cohort in 2022 were above the low-wage threshold of €12.50 in Germany (Destatis 2024b).

When comparing wages, it must be considered that the average age of refugees is much lower than the population average and their wages are lower due to the strongly seniority-related pay in Germany, simply because of their age and shorter work experience.

As employment rates and wages rise, the number of people receiving social benefits is declining. Of the refugees who arrived in 2015, 89 percent were receiving benefits under the Asylum-Seeker Benefits Act, unemployment benefit II or unemployment insurance in 2016, less than one year after their arrival. In 2022, this proportion had fallen to 39 percent.<sup>2</sup> This also includes refugees in employment, 21 percent of whom receive supplementary benefits under the German Social Security Code II (Citizen's benefit, in German: "Bürgergeld").

## Barriers decline as the length of stay increases

The rising employment rates with increasing length of stay can partly be attributed to the gradual removal of institutional hurdles. Particularly at the beginning of the integration process and during the asylum procedure, uncertainty about the prospects of remaining in Germany makes labor market integration more difficult because investments in employment relationships, including on the part of employers, are dependent on legal and planning certainty.

Following the sharp increase in refugee migration in 2015, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) significantly shortened the duration of procedures and thus clarified the residence status for the majority of refugees much more quickly than in the past (Kosyakova/Brenzel 2020). On average across all survey years, 38 percent of refugees were still in the asylum procedure in the first year

<sup>2</sup> This also includes persons in a dependent household (German: Bedarfsgemeinschaft) who receive benefits, even if these persons are able to support themselves from employment.

after arrival, but this figure fell to 4 to 5 percent in the following years (see Table T1). At the same time, the recognition rate increased to around 80 percent, while a fifth of applications were rejected.

T1

### Institutional and integration policy factors by length of stay

Shares in percent

	Years since arrival					Number of observations
	≤ 1	2	3-4	5-6	≥ 7	
Asylum application: recognized	52	66	73	78	79	24,560
Rejected	10	19	22	18	16	24,560
in the process	38	16	5	4	5	24,560
Employment ban (§ 61 asylum law)	48	34	27	22	20	24,356
Benefits in kind to cover household's needs <sup>1,2)</sup>	25	24	22	n/a	n/a	9,636
Free choice of residence <sup>2)</sup>	17	21	38	64	75	20,953
Federal state restriction	35	35	27	15	11	20,953
Place restriction	48	45	35	21	14	20,953
Integration course completed	12	34	52	67	71	25,603
Vocational language course completed	2	5	10	14	21	25,714
Other language courses completed	18	28	34	38	45	25,688
Labor market/career advice by job centers/employment agencies used	25	41	53	56	59	25,342
Felt very welcome on arrival <sup>3)</sup>	64					25,460
Currently feeling very welcome	57	51	41	44	28	16,267

<sup>1</sup> Measured at the 2016 and 2017 survey dates.

<sup>2</sup> Self-declaration by the head of household in the household questionnaire.

<sup>3</sup> One-time question to each person on their first participation.

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2016–2022, preliminary weights, own calculations. © IAB

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### Representativeness – do the survey results differ from the employment statistics?

Like every longitudinal study, the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey is also subject to the partial loss of participants in repeat surveys. In order to ensure representativeness, refreshment samples are regularly added. Statistical weights correct for distortions caused by the possible selectivity of participant dropouts. The validity of this method can be checked by comparing it with the official employment statistics of the Federal Employment Agency (BA).

In September 2022, as in the survey, the average employment rate of people from the eight main countries of origin of asylum was 43 percent. Around 70 percent of persons from these countries are asylum seekers.

The average employment rates of all refugees in 2022 were lower than those of the cohort that arrived in 2015, mainly because more than half of refugees arrived later than 2015 and the average employment rates at the beginning of their stay are much lower than for a stay of seven years. In addition, the employment rate refers exclusively to dependent employment (excluding the self-employed, freelancers and civil servants). Furthermore, particularly refugees who are well integrated into the labor market acquire German citizenship.

If the employment rates in the survey are calculated using the same definition as in the BA's employment statistics and the employment rates of the respective cohort are weighted with their share in the total population from the eight main countries of origin of asylum seekers in 2022, the average rate is 43 percent. The difference is therefore marginal and remains within the statistical sampling error.

Employment bans are another important hurdle. In the first three months after applying for asylum, taking up employment is absolutely prohibited. After that, refugees in the asylum procedure are subject to a general ban on employment until a decision is made on their asylum application (§ 61 asylum law). This applied until the end of 2023 for a maximum period of nine months (six months for parents of underage children), which has since been reduced to six months.

However, this employment ban is not absolute: after the three-month period, employment may be permitted by the immigration authorities if the Federal Employment Agency agrees. Persons whose asylum application has been rejected and who are in Germany on a tolerated stay are generally subject to a ban on employment until they leave the country, but may take up employment six months after the start of their tolerated stay with the permission of the immigration authorities.

These regulations led to a reduction in the proportion of refugees who are generally subject to an employment ban: Whereas almost half of them were within the first year of arrival (48 percent), their proportion fell to around 20 percent five years after arrival and then stabilized at this level (see Table T1). There were almost no people who were subject to an absolute employment ban during the period under review, but rather asylum seekers in the asylum procedure or tolerated persons who could receive work permits.

Although employment could be permitted for these groups and the immigration authorities have discretionary powers, it can be assumed that restricted access to the labor market will sustainably reduce employment chances.

The type of benefits granted to refugees in the asylum procedure can also influence integration. In the case of accommodation in a reception center, benefits to cover basic needs are primarily provided in the form of benefits in kind (§ 3 Asylum-Seeker Benefits Act). In the case of accommodation outside of reception facilities, cash benefits are primarily provided, although benefits in kind may be issued.

On the one hand, benefits in kind could impair mobility, communication and other activities that are important for labor market integration. On the

other hand, limited consumption opportunities could strengthen incentives to work. Within the first year of arrival, 25 percent of refugees mainly received benefits in kind. This proportion fell to 22 percent after three to four years (see Table T1).

Finally, restrictions on freedom of movement can reduce the chances of employment. Persons in the asylum procedure are obliged to live in a reception center until their asylum claim is decided (but for a maximum of 18 months; six months for parents with minor children) and are therefore subject to a residence obligation (§ 47 asylum law).

With the „Integration Act”, recognized refugees were also obliged to take up residence in the assigned federal state. The federal states can also assign them a place of residence (Section 12a Residence Act). However, the place of residence can be changed if employment, training or studies are taken up. The restrictions on freedom of movement associated with residency restrictions increase information and search costs, reduce access to networks and thus impair labor market opportunities (Brücker et al. 2020).

As Table T1 shows, the proportion of refugees who were free to choose their place of residence rose from 17 percent in the first year to 75 percent after seven or more years. In the first year, 35 percent were subject to a federal state restriction, while 48 percent were assigned a place of residence within the federal states. These percentages fell to 11 and 14 percent respectively seven and more years after immigration.

### Increasing participation in integration measures

The labor market integration of refugees is also influenced by integration and labor market policy measures, with language support playing a key role. Since the introduction of the Asylum Package I in 2015, the BAMF's integration courses have for the first time been open to refugees during their asylum process, but only for nationals from countries with „good prospects of staying”. However, it took time to build up the necessary course offerings, which led to a gradual increase in course participation: around half of the refugees had completed an integration course three to four years after arriving,

and after seven or more years the figure was just under three quarters (see Table T1).

The completion rate for advanced vocational language courses also rose slowly, reaching around a fifth after seven or more years. Table T1 also shows that in the first year after arrival, a quarter of refugees made use of the job market and careers advice provided by job centers and employment agencies. This proportion rose to 59 percent after seven or more years, although the potential has certainly not yet been exhausted here either.

### Fewer refugees feel welcome

Participation in social life and the opportunities for labor market integration are also determined by the population's willingness to accept immigrants. Empirical studies show that attitudes towards certain ethnic groups in the population vary greatly and that this has a significant impact on labor market opportunities (Keita/Valette 2019). Initially, many refugees felt welcome in Germany – around two thirds rated their sense of being welcome as the highest on a scale of one to five (see Table T1). However, this perception decreased with increasing length of stay: one year after arriving, 57 percent of refugees felt very welcome, five to six years after arriving the figure was 44 percent and after seven or more years 28 percent.

### Institutional factors are highly relevant

All of these institutional and political settings are crucial for labor market integration. In the following, we therefore examine the relationship between these contextual factors and the labor market integration of refugees – measured by the probability of being employed. To this end, multivariate regressions were used to control for numerous individual characteristics such as age, education and training, years since arrival and country of origin. The analyses were carried out separately by gender and are visualized in Figure A2. The estimated results are to be interpreted as statistical correlations and not as causal effects.

As the estimation results show, the probability of employment for men whose asylum application has been recognized is around 5 percentage points



higher than for those who are still in the asylum process (see Figure A2). This correlation is not statistically significant for women. There are no significant changes for people whose asylum application has been rejected compared to refugees in the asylum procedure.

Refugees who were subject to an absolute employment ban in the first three months generally did not yet take part in the survey. In the follow-up

survey one year later, we observe a 4-percentage point reduction in the probability of employment among refugee men who were subject to a general employment ban at the time of the previous survey, but who were permitted to work upon application, compared to refugee men whose access to the labor market was unrestricted in the previous year. There is no statistically significant correlation for women.

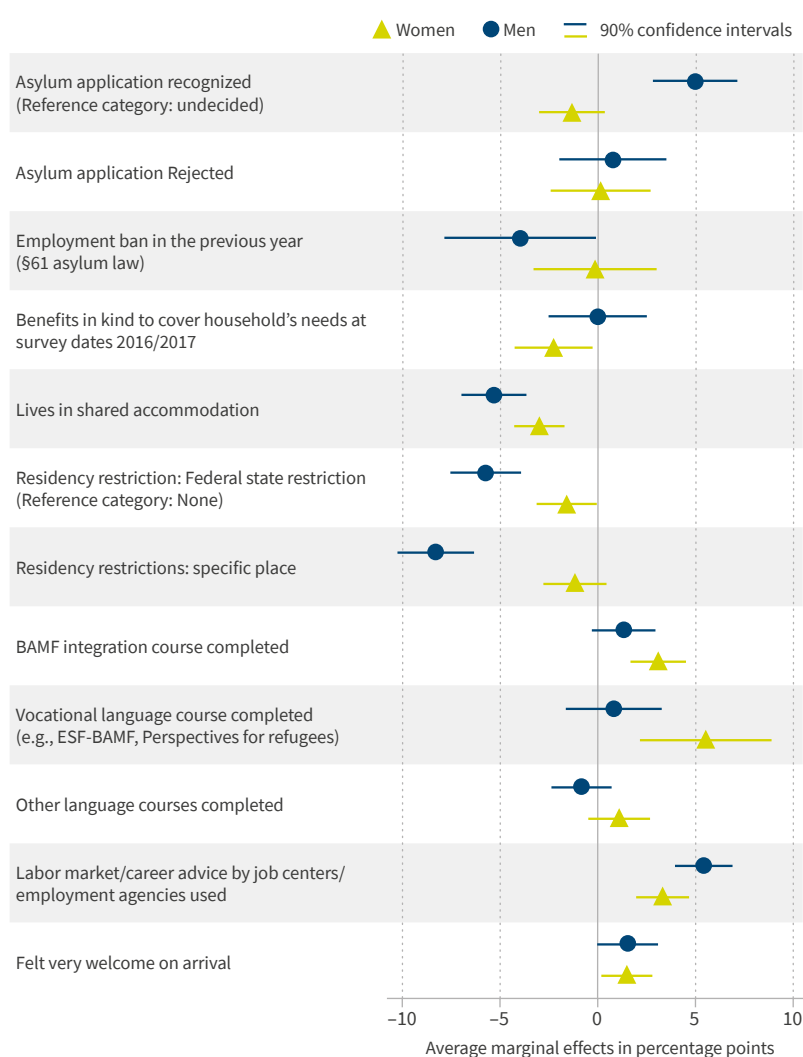
The granting of benefits in kind at the beginning of the stay (measured here in the earliest survey years 2016/2017) is associated with a lower statistical probability of being employed in the subsequent survey years (2018 to 2022) for women. No statistically significant correlation can be observed for men.

Accommodation in reception facilities (shared accommodation) has a particularly strong negative correlation with labor market integration: the probability of employment is a good 5 percentage points lower for men living in such facilities and around 3 percentage points lower for women. An additional analysis shows (not included in the graph) that this negative correlation remains when the influence of living in reception facilities on the probability of employment in the subsequent year is examined.

An even stronger statistical correlation can be seen in the case of residence restrictions: men who are tied to a specific place of residence due to legal or official restrictions are a good 8 percentage points less likely to be employed and men with state-specific residence restrictions are almost 6 percentage points less likely to be employed compared to those without residence restrictions. For women, these coefficients are also negative, but not statistically significant. These results are consistent with causal findings by Brücker et al. (2020) and Cardozo et al. (2023).

A2

## Multivariate analyses on the probability of employment



Notes: The figure shows the estimated results of a multivariate regression analysis using the ordinary least squares (OLS) method. The dependent variable is 0 for non-employment and 100 for employment, defined as being in paid employment or self-employment. Separate models for regressions with explanatory variables employment ban, residency restriction (excluding survey year 2016) and benefits in kind (excluding survey years 2016, 2017).

Further control variables in all regressions: Female, child ( $\leq 6$  years), interaction effect between female and child ( $\leq 6$  years), in partnership, age (18-25; 26-35; 36-45; 46-64 years), years since arrival, nationality (Syria; Afghanistan; Iraq; Iran & Pakistan; Somalia & Eritrea; other African countries; Western Balkans, other), skill requirement for job in origin country (helper; skilled worker; specialist & expert; not gainfully employed), school, vocational training, university degree before migration, recognition status of the qualification brought with them (no application submitted; application undecided; application rejected; application recognized; no foreign qualification available), currently in language course, survey year, federal state, missing values in control variables. Standard errors clustered at the individual level.

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2016–2022, own calculations. © IAB

## Integration measures and a welcoming culture have a positive impact

The BAMF's language support programs have a particularly positive correlation with employment opportunities for female refugees: after completing an integration course, their probability of employment is a good 3 percentage points higher, and after completing a further job-related language

course it is even 5.5 percentage points higher. For men, these effects are less pronounced and not statistically significant. Other language courses also show no significant effects.

The labor market and career counseling provided by job centers or employment agencies has a statistically significant positive correlation with labor market integration: taking advantage of such counseling is associated with a good 3 percentage points higher probability of employment for women and a good 5 percentage points higher probability of employment for men.

The welcoming culture and receptiveness of society also play a role in the labor market integration of refugees: The probability of employment increases by 1.5 percentage points for refugee women and men who felt very welcome in Germany when they arrived, although the correlation is only statistically significant for women.

## Discussion

Almost two thirds of refugees who have been in Germany for seven years – or of refugees who arrived in 2015 in the 2022 survey – were in paid employment. The majority of these – nine out of ten – were in employment subject to social insurance contributions. Other indicators such as the decline in fixed-term employment relationships and the increase in the jobs' skill-levels also point to a gradual improvement in the quality of employment, although median wages are still close to the low-wage threshold. A significant gender gap in employment rates remains, despite a significant increase in female employment.

These developments are partly attributable to the favorable labor market conditions in Germany, although the Covid-19 pandemic has delayed integration in 2020 and 2021, as previous analyses by the IAB show (see Brücker et al. 2021). Improved institutional settings and comprehensive integration measures have also contributed.

The results of the study show that the recognition of asylum applications and the easing of employment bans have a positive effect on the probability of employment. The same applies to the BAMF's language programs: Female refugees in particular benefit from completing the inte-

gration courses and even more from the more advanced job-related language courses. These findings are particularly significant, as refugee women generally have lower participation rates in such language support programs than refugee men, which is often related to caring for young children (Kosyakova et al. 2021). Making use of the labor market and career advice provided by job centers and employment agencies also increases the likelihood of taking up employment.

The findings also underline the hindering effect of residency restrictions, particularly place-specific restrictions within federal states. Although recent law changes have shortened the time limits for employment bans, the remaining bans are likely to continue to have a negative impact.

Participation in language courses and the use of labor market advice is often delayed – regrettably, given their positive effects on employment. Speed-ing up these processes could make the integration of refugees much easier. In addition, society's willingness to accept refugees and a welcoming climate are conducive to their integration into the labor market.

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**Imprint** | IAB-Kurzbericht (IAB Brief Report) No. 10, July 25, 2024 | Publisher: Institute for Employment Research (IAB) of Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 90327 Nürnberg | Editor: Martina Dorsch | Graphic layout: Nicola Brendel | Foto: Wolfram Murr, Fotofabrik Nürnberg and private | Rights: This publication is published under the following Creative Commons License: Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0) <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.de> | IAB on the Internet: <http://www.iab.de>. You can download this Brief Report and other publications from here free of charge | Inquires: [IAB.Kurzbericht@iab.de](mailto:IAB.Kurzbericht@iab.de) | ISSN 0942-167X | DOI 10.48720/IAB.KB.2410.en