



Cahier 2024-3

A suitable place for status holders?

Experiences with the living environment and housing policy of Syrian and Eritrean status holders

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Cahier

De reeks Cahier omvat de rapporten van onderzoek dat door en in opdracht van het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Datacentrum is verricht. Opname in de reeks betekent niet dat de inhoud van de rapporten het standpunt van de Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid weergeeft.

Summary

A suitable place for status holders?

Experiences with the living environment and housing policy of Syrian and Eritrean status holders

This report describes the findings of a study into the experiences of status holders with the Dutch housing policy, and into factors in the initial living environment that they believe contribute to building a new life in the Netherlands. By surveying respondents of Syrian and Eritrean origin who came to the Netherlands between 2014-2017, we can not only compare the experiences of different origin groups, but also include changes in the importance of different factors over time. The results show that while policy mainly focuses on labour market opportunities when matching status holders to a municipality, for status holders themselves, many other factors are also important, such as the presence of family, language and other education, public transport and various facilities. Individual characteristics of people and changes in personal situation over time further cause differences in the perceived importance of these factors. Experiences with the process of matching to a municipality and allocation of a home are mixed. Respondents generally struggle with the lack of control in determining their place of residence in the Netherlands. Many respondents indicated that, in their view, little or none of their housing preferences and/or their personal situations were taken into account. A lack of information, or correct information, about the matching process appears to play a role in the unfulfilled expectations. At the same time, there is an understanding from status holders about the tight situation in the housing market and an awareness that many groups in the Dutch housing market have to wait a long time for a home.

Transfer policy

After a status holder has received a residence permit, they will be entitled to a home. Obtaining a home often marks the start of building a new life in the Netherlands. From the first home of their own, status holders start looking for education and work, and start participating in social life. Fast and suitable housing is therefore important for a good start in the Netherlands, but is not self-evident in the current housing market. The vast majority of status holders end up in rental housing (96%), mostly through a housing association (social housing). This sometimes gives rise to the idea in society that status holders are allocated a very large part of the available social housing, but recent research by Statistics Netherlands shows that in 2021 only 6% of all vacated housing association homes went to households with status holders.¹ Waiting times for social housing are increasing, including for status holders, with the result that an increasing proportion of reception places in asylum seekers' centres are occupied by people with residence permits waiting for housing.

The COA (Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers) makes the match to a region and municipality, after which the municipality becomes responsible for

¹ See [6 procent vrijgekomen corporatiewoningen in 2021 naar statushouders | CBS](#). Retrieved January 2024.

providing (suitable) housing. Where possible, the background characteristics of the status holder are taken into account in their transfer to an asylum seekers' centre and, subsequently, when matching them to a municipality. Until 2016, only the 'hard' transfer criteria were taken into account: having a job or following a training course, the presence of first-degree family, or a medical indication. Since 2016, COA has been applying the 'screening and matching' policy, in which 'promising matching' plays an important role. Here, not only the hard criteria described above are retrieved, but also the so-called 'soft' criteria such as education/studies undertaken, diplomas obtained, employment history, future goals in terms of work and education and any network in the Netherlands. On this basis, the COA draws up an opinion on accommodation in one of the current 35 labour market regions. Once it has been decided where the status holder can best be accommodated, it is examined whether it is possible to already accommodate the status holder in an asylum seekers' centre near the intended municipality, as this can contribute to the rapid participation of status holders in Dutch society. In practice, it is not possible to take into account all preferences and criteria, as the tightness in the housing market and the aim of spreading status holders across the Netherlands also play an important role in the match to a municipality and the allocation of a home. What is desirable and what is possible can vary widely, especially given the current high influx and the large group of status holders who are still awaiting a home.

Set-up and method

While some insight has already been gained into the practical implementation of the housing policy and the effects of the policy on labour participation, less is known about how status holders themselves view the policy, what their experiences have been with the process of matching and obtaining a home, and about what has been important to them in the living environment when building their lives in the Netherlands. This study aims to provide more insight into this, specifically looking at people from Syria and Eritrea who came to live in the Netherlands between 2014 and 2017. After all, this target group is similar to the target group of the status holder cohort longitudinal study (LOCS) project, of which the present study forms part.

The study combines quantitative and qualitative data. First of all, for this study, four focus groups and ten individual interviews were conducted with the target group. A total of 42 respondents participated in this qualitative part of the study. In the focus groups and interviews, experiences with the housing process were described and various matters were discussed that were important for respondents with regard to their living environment to build their lives in the Netherlands. The quantitative analyses in this report use the large-scale survey research 'Nieuwe Statushouders in Nederland' (New Status Holders in the Netherlands - NSN) of the LOCS project. The most recent round of this survey (NSN2022) included various questions about living and housing, providing insight into such things as satisfaction with one's home and neighbourhood. These data are presented in this report (in boxes) and only concern the Syrian group.

Factors in the living environment that are important in building a new life

The focus groups and interviews reveal that the presence of work, family, language and other education, and public transport are seen as very important for building a life in the Netherlands. But other facilities, municipal policy on civic integration and participation, and the location of the (last) asylum seekers' centre also played a role,

according to respondents. Moreover, quantitative analyses among Syrians in the Netherlands show that when people live close to their workplace, educational institution, and family, they are more satisfied with the neighbourhood they live in.

Work

Since 2016, when transferring status holders, the opportunities of status holders in the regional labour market have been specifically taken into account. Respondents themselves also indicated that it is important to live in a place with employment opportunities. Although many respondents think that there are more job opportunities in the city, quantitative data show that having a job is not related to the degree of urbanisation of the living environment. However, accessibility does play a big role. If it is easy for people to travel between home and work, this is seen as positive. The presence of good public transport is crucial.

Education

Proximity to appropriate education is considered very important. This can include proximity to high-quality language schools and further education, as well as proximity to children's primary and secondary schools. Some respondents indicated that they had to travel far to find a language school that also offered classes at a higher level. Follow-up courses were sometimes not available nearby either. As a result, several people have given up their ambitions to pursue further education.

Family

Respondents who already have family in the Netherlands generally expressed a desire to live near this family. Although the presence of first-degree family members is taken into account in the transfer, this does not apply to the presence of other relatives such as siblings or uncles and aunts, even though this is considered desirable by some respondents. Proximity to family has both a practical component (help) and an emotional one (feeling at home).

Public transport

The presence of public transport is seen as essential. A lack of public transport in certain regions makes it more difficult to find suitable work or education. Even if public transport is available, ticket prices or the low frequency of services can still be an obstacle. A private car is usually not available, especially in the first years, which means that people depend on public transport for many activities.

Social contacts

Many respondents indicated that they find it important to be able to build social contacts in the living environment. Various experiences were shared. For example, respondents living in various smaller towns and villages have had both positive and negative experiences with the attitude of neighbours and community members. Some people have good contact with their neighbours and consider them family, while others have little contact and, in some cases, feel discriminated against or unwelcome. Mixed signals can also be found in an urban environment. While some respondents indicated that they feel more at home in the city because of the visibility of other migrants, some respondents indicated that they find it annoying that they have been

accommodated in a neighbourhood with many people with a migration background. On the other hand, compatriots have actually been important to some respondents by providing help in the initial period after arriving in the Netherlands, or in making them feel at home in the Netherlands.

Other facilities

Respondents who ended up in a more urban environment did indicate that they liked the fact that they can more easily go to shops that sell foods that they also used in their country of origin. In non-urban areas, a standard supermarket is often quite a distance away, and there are often no shops that sell products from the country of origin, for example.

Municipal policy integration and participation

The focus groups also discussed that municipal policies in the field of civic integration and participation differ, which can have a major influence on the opportunities for status holders to develop themselves further. Respondents indicated that this difference could have an impact on their chances of finding suitable work. This applies not only between municipalities but also at employee level within municipalities. According to them, some employees are focused on helping someone find work as quickly as possible, whereas others look more at what is needed for work at a high level, and the latter are more willing to approve following a training course.

Location of (last) asylum seekers' centre

In general, attempts are made to accommodate people in an asylum seekers' centre near the municipality to which the status holder has been matched. Due to the current uneven distribution of asylum seekers' centres across the Netherlands, amongst others, this is not always possible. The experiences of status holders are mixed. Some respondents indicated that they liked already knowing the area where they were going to live. Some had already built social contacts in the community where they were going to live. In other cases, however, the asylum seekers' centre was too far from the municipality to build anything at all. Moreover, it matters where the asylum seekers' centre is located: when there are few facilities in the area and the options for public transport are limited, living near the asylum seekers' centre is less conducive to building a life, according to respondents.

Individual characteristics and life course

In addition to the above characteristics of the living environment, individual characteristics may also play a role in living experiences and the importance people attach to certain things in their living environment. Individual characteristics include age, level of education or the presence of children in the household. For example, some young respondents like to live in a city to take advantage of educational or work opportunities, and for respondents with children it is important to have a school for their children nearby. In addition, life events, such as having children, can cause people to view or prioritise important issues in their living environment differently. Living closer to family, for example, then becomes more important.

In this study, we surveyed people who have been living in the Netherlands for an extended period of time. This longitudinal component shows that the simple passage

of time and the process of 'settling somewhere' has played a role in how respondents give meaning to things that they consider to be important in their living environment. Several respondents were able to explain how they eventually came to feel at home in their living environment by becoming attached to their place of residence and building a social network within it. This points to the affective dimension of feeling at home. Building a life in the Netherlands is therefore not only a process of acquiring a position in Dutch society, in the sense of receiving education and participating in the labour market, but also an affective and emotional process.

Transfer policy experiences

Respondents generally indicated that, looking back, they had struggled with the lack of control over where they came to live in the Netherlands. Although not everyone was dissatisfied and criticism on the transfer process can go together with satisfaction with the house and/or place of residence, but according to several participants, the outcome of the match did not correspond to what had been expressed in the conversation. It seems that it is precisely by engaging in the conversation and discussing preferences and ambitions that people get hope that they will be listened to, when in reality there are many more issues involved in matching to a municipality and the allocation of a home.

Although people are in principle happy to get housing, several people indicated that the home they received was too small for their family, was located far from family, did not match their ambitions in the field of work or education, or was not located in their preferred region. Especially in the Eritrean group, examples came along of parents, both single and partnered, with children who did not have a separate bedroom or who lived in a housing complex that was actually not suitable for children. This caused a lot of stress for these respondents.

The quantitative analyses further show that many Syrians indicated that they are satisfied with the home and neighbourhood in which they live. At the same time, one in six respondents reported experiencing housing stress, and the mental health of people of Syrian descent is significantly related to satisfaction with their home and neighbourhood.

Another major concern raised by respondents was the relationship between obtaining housing and having family reunification proceedings pending. Several respondents were allocated a home that was too small to accommodate family members still coming through family reunification. Respondents reported that promises, whether actual or perceived, of a larger home at a later date were not fulfilled and that people live for a long time in a home too small for the new family situation.

Refusing an offered home is virtually impossible, and refusal also basically voids the right to shelter. Several respondents indicated that they experienced pressure to accept a home that they did not like. Moving on to another home after obtaining the first home is the resident's own responsibility and, in today's tight housing market, this is not easy and sometimes simply impossible, partly due to a lack of resources. Although the quantitative analyses of this study show that a large proportion of Syrians wish to move, the number of Syrian and Eritrean people in the Netherlands who have moved in recent years is relatively low.

At the same time, respondents were aware of the context of high influx of asylum migrants, the housing shortage and the difficulty (other) Dutch people have in finding a home. They showed understanding that not all individual circumstances can always be taken into account, but also indicated that they did not find the procedure transparent. Respondents were generally critical of the information they received during the process of matching to a municipality and housing allocation. There is further evidence that information (which is not always accurate) about the housing process circulates within the Syrian and Eritrean communities and, in addition, experiences with obtaining a home are shared and compared, which can lead to the perception that not everyone is treated equally.

In conclusion

Since moving is complex in practice due to the severe tightness in the housing market, it is all the more important to accommodate status holders as much as possible in places that suit them. The policy of 'promising matching' aims to achieve this, with a particular focus on labour market participation. Based on this study, it can be stated that it is also very important for status holders themselves to have work and to live in a place where employment opportunities are nearby. At the same time, this study shows that several other issues are important in the eyes of people from Syria and Eritrea and that their importance differs depending on background characteristics such as age and family composition.

The findings of this study suggest that respondents would have liked to decide for themselves where they would live and what would have been a suitable place for them. Although they were able to state their preferences in conversations with COA, respondents often felt that these were not taken into account. Naturally, due to the tightness in the housing market (which has only become tighter since the arrival of the cohort surveyed in this study) and municipal targets, not all criteria can be met, but since this study shows that housing has a major influence on all kinds of processes related to building a life in the Netherlands, it would be good to take into account more of the personal situation of status holders. At the same time, it is important not to create false expectations about what is possible. A more transparent allocation process could also contribute to this; people now often do not understand why some are accommodated in their preferred place and others are not. Among the Eritrean group, for example, there is an assumption that Syrians are more likely to end up in desirable locations. Taking more account of individuals' personal situations, better information, a transparent process and expectation management could contribute to a better process and less dissatisfaction among status holders. At the same time, the reality is that, for the time being, there is a tension between the tight housing market and targets on the one hand and customisation and alignment with the individual situation of the status holder on the other.

A completely different option, allowing status holders to find a home themselves, increases the risk of abuse by landlords. Research conducted in Belgium, where status holders are allowed to stay in asylum reception centres for a maximum of four months after being granted a residence permit and then have to look for a home themselves in an equally tight housing market, shows that they have great difficulty finding a home and are faced with exclusion and malpractice in the process. However, investments could be made in allowing people to look for a home themselves, with which they are supported, and abuse by landlords being strictly monitored.

If the location of the (last) asylum centre where people stayed was close to the final place of residence, in a number of cases this contributed to their settling in well in the municipality, due to already being familiar with the living environment and/or through already established social contacts. The aim of receiving asylum seekers as much as possible in the matched region and in the vicinity of the municipality where someone will ultimately live, will become more common following the introduction of the Asylum Reception Facilities in Municipalities (Enablement) Act (Dispersal Act), as this act ensures a more balanced distribution of the reception of asylum seekers across the Netherlands.

This study clearly shows that the home and living environment are important for quality of life. Housing forms an important basis and source of stability in people's lives and is connected to life course events and to other domains, such as work and income, social contacts, and health. When the housing situation is not in order, it can have a major impact on people and their well-being. Moreover, housing issues not only affect people's well-being and participation in Dutch society, but also their trust in the Dutch government. Although this applies equally well to other population groups, and in many respects status holders have similar desires and preferences as well as similar problems regarding housing, the major difference here, however, is that status holders still have to completely rebuild their lives, and find their way in a society that is new to them with different norms and values and rules. In general, newcomers start with less knowledge of the Dutch system and housing market and have fewer skills to navigate it. Moreover, they also have even less access to social and financial resources. This makes their position and experience of the living environment different from that of Dutch people without a refugee background.

Het Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Datacentrum (WODC), Kennisinstituut voor de rechtsstaat, is een onafhankelijk kennisinstituut dat valt onder het ministerie van Justitie en Veiligheid. Het WODC draagt bij aan behoud en verbetering van de rechtsstaat via het (laten) uitvoeren van kwalitatief hoog wetenschappelijk onderzoek. En door het aanbieden van gevraagde en ongevraagde kennis, verbeterpunten en (waar mogelijk) denkrichtingen.

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