

## What to Consider While Researching Young Refugees and Migrants: Takeaways from a Field Research in Turkey

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### **Abstract**

*The youth perspective still has not been sufficiently included in the relevant research processes although research on young refugees becomes even more important to analyze this group's situation and needs, produce policies, and meet their needs. Conducting research on young refugees, as a subject at the intersection of youth research and migration research, requires a series of sensitivities regarding methods, approaches, and other components of the research processes. In this study, the research process, major takeaways, and prominent insights concerning doing research about young refugees will be shared based on the experience of a field study which was completed in 2019 in Turkey. In addition to the methodological and ethical discussions, the study also aims to share the elements that are recommended to consider while integrating young refugees into the processes and the inferences obtained from the experience within the scope of the field research.*

**Keywords:** Youth migration; research; young refugees; international migration; methodology

### **Introduction**

The young population is remarkably high in both forced and voluntary migration processes that take place in many parts of the world. However, in terms of theoretical and methodological analysis, the youth perspective still has not been sufficiently included in the relevant research processes. This situation, similarly, reveals in studies on international migration in Turkey although youth constitute a significant proportion of the population living under international protection in the country. For instance, current statistics show that the population between the ages of 15-30 among Syrians corresponds to approximately one-third of the total Syrian population in Turkey (PMM, 2022). However, young migrants and refugees still constitute a group that is underrepresented in academic research processes.

Although many initiatives and projects have been developed to support young refugees and migrants at the national and local levels, comprehensive research on providing data on this group and their needs has not been sufficiently developed yet. For this reason, research on young refugees becomes even more important to analyze this group's situation and needs, produce policies, and meet their needs. However, conducting research on young refugees, as a subject at the intersection of youth research and migration research, requires a series of sensitivities regarding methods, approaches, and other components of the research processes. In this context, it is aimed in this study to share the elements that are recommended to consider while doing research about young refugees and migrants, based on a field study completed in 2019 in cooperation with Yaşar University Jean Monnet Chair of Migration and

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the Community Volunteers Foundation which is still the most comprehensive field research on young refugees in Turkey.<sup>2</sup>

## **Our Research Experience**

### **Rationale:**

When we came together with the representatives of the Community Volunteers Foundation and Young Approaches in Health project in 2017, the main idea of the representatives was to design a research to assess the effectiveness of the Community Youth Centers which were supported by the UNFPA Turkey funding and to identify the expectations of young refugees from these centers. During the meetings, we agreed to use the potential of this cooperation for a wider research initiative and to design a more comprehensive research both analyzing the situation and needs of young refugees in Turkey and also the effectiveness of youth centers for them. While discussing this idea, our most important premise was that there was still no comprehensive field study in Turkey regarding young refugees up until that date.

### **Research design:**

Based on this need, we identified four pilot regions and provinces in Turkey where we could reach out to relevant groups and where the relevant youth centers were located. While selecting these provinces, we also took the insensitivity of the refugee population and regional distribution into consideration.

We decided to conduct not only face-to-face surveys but also focus group meetings to better understand and interpret the data from the field. We have limited the aim of our research to a general question: What is the current situation of young refugees in Turkey regarding the main components of integration and what do they need? We kept the question so broad since there was no comprehensive study on this subject in Turkey yet and we thought that there was a great need to take a general picture of the current situation. We also aimed to provide an important guide to the relevant stakeholders for their future strategies regarding young refugees in Turkey.

While identifying the sub-themes within the scope of our research question, we were aware of the danger of being lost in a very large subject pool. At this point, the existing literature on social cohesion/integration helped a lot to identify the sub-themes that we need to focus on. As a result, questions were structured on six themes. The first question set under the title of “education” was created by focusing on the status of young refugees continuing education, the reasons for school dropout or exclusion, their access to support mechanisms regarding education, and the complementary roles of courses outside of formal education. The second set of questions, “employment, and economic situation” were structured to understand the situation of young refugees living in Turkey in terms of having a regular job, income and economic status, household, and responsibility, working types, entry to the employment market, the process of finding a job and barriers to employment. The subject of “communication”, as the third theme, was shaped to understand the level of social cohesion in general by focusing on their level of communication with Turkish society and especially with other young people living in Turkey. “Health”, which was another major theme in our

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<sup>2</sup>The full report of the research study which is mentioned in this article is fully available at <https://www.genmulteciler.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/situation-and-need-analysis-study-report-to-improve-support-mechanisms-for-young-refugees-in-turkey.pdf> and more information about the Chair is available at <https://migration-eu.yasar>



research, was one of the prioritized topics of the UNFPA Turkey's agenda, especially when funding community centers and supporting their activities. Since it is a topic that covers the essential needs of the relevant target group, such as post-traumatic processes and sexual health, both UNFPA and TOG stated that there is a great need to provide detailed data on these issues and that they want to prioritize them by giving extensive coverage to the questions in the field research. The fifth set of questions was shaped under the title of "Life and Future in Turkey". Under this heading, we believed that the "Youth" dimension should be better investigated in the lives of young refugees. There were many studies on the refugee population living in Turkey in general. What would make our research distinctive was the aim of revealing the situation and needs of the youth, who constitute an important part of the refugee population in Turkey. As will be discussed later in this study, ignoring, or missing the "youth" dimension while conducting research on young refugees would prevent the research from providing reliable data. Therefore, we added questions under the sub-headings of "Being Young", "Needs as a Youth" and "Youth and the Future" to the question sets under this topic. Finally, the last set consisted of questions about the Youth Centers and the expectations of young refugees from these centers.

The survey questions applied to the sampling were composed of different types of questions (101 questions in total) covering nominal, ordinal, interval, and ratio scales, open and closed-ended, yes and no, listing, ranking, and classification. Projective techniques were also used to give more space to individual diversity as well as aggregated answers. The design and reporting of the research were based on an extensive review of academic literature on young refugees and migrants. In particular, academic literature on "social cohesion", and "young refugees" and previous field studies in different countries were also very helpful in the research design process.

### **Going to field:**

The Community Volunteers Foundation has a very large young volunteer network in Turkey. This was one of the greatest chances of this research process for reaching out to young people and for making all research processes more participatory. As a result, our entire team consisted of young people including the Community Volunteers' representatives, the working groups that applied the surveys in the field, and also our field team who accompanied us in the focus groups for interpretation.

The fieldwork of the research process, which started in November 2018, was carried out by Community Volunteers' teams during 2019 in İzmir, Diyarbakır, Hatay, and Ankara provinces of Turkey, with the participation of young refugees between the ages of 15-30. A total of 1402 young refugees participated in the survey. In addition, focus group meetings were held in these provinces with the participation of 41 young refugees in total. The sample group was determined based on the total population of Syrians and refugees under temporary protection in Turkey, according to the data of the Turkish Presidency of Migration Management (PMM), within the scope of the Krejcie & Morgan method. In this context, although our research does not claim to be an absolute representation because it covers only 4 provinces in Turkey, it has been one of the first comprehensive studies on young refugees living in Turkey and especially Syrian youth, which constitutes the most dominant group, and provides practitioners and policy-makers information regarding the current situation, problems, and opportunities.

### **Takeaways from the Field Research:**

Field studies on different aspects of youth migration have a complementary role in many ways. First, it allows the discussion of migration and youth beyond statistics, numbers, and figures. At the same time, field studies are necessary to develop needs and situation analysis which are required for policy-making and activity development processes. When the right methods are employed, the research outputs might be a precious tool for young immigrants and refugees to reflect on themselves. Moreover, field studies also have a guiding role for policy production by considering that policy-making processes are mostly proceeded without interactive dialogue and participatory processes.

In this part of the study, the points that we paid attention in our research or that we realized that we should pay attention to during the implementation process will be briefly summarized. While some of these issues are generally important for research that can be designed on any issues, the points that attract particular attention in research conducted specifically for young refugees and migrants will be highlighted with specific examples from our field research experience.

### **Ethical Responsibilities**

Undoubtedly, ethical responsibility is an essential component of any research processes. However, in addition to general ethical responsibilities, “what does ethical responsibility entail when working with groups such as immigrants and youth groups?” is another major question to be considered while designing and doing research in this area. Block et al (2012) emphasize that 3 important issues are of great importance in studies regarding young immigrants and refugees. These are “maximizing the benefits of involving participants in the process, but minimizing potential risks for them, obtaining their consent, and choosing research methods that can have a positive impact on participants' lives”. Goredema – Braid (2010:48) described anonymity, safeguarding, competency, and confidentiality as a part of ethical responsibility, especially when conducting research with young people.

In particular, there is a need for providing balance between the enthusiasm of the researcher to access more information and the awareness that the research process deals with a group that is in a humanitarian crisis (Birman, 2005). For instance, our research experience demonstrated that respondents may not be as “open” as the research requires or the researchers expected. It should not be ignored that there may be many reasons for this ambiguity. These include the anxiety of hiding their identities or the reflection of the psychological state that they have. In addition, this situation brings us to the point that every question that is wanted to be asked cannot be asked. Because some questions might be a reminder of traumatic experiences, especially for those who have left their place for compelling reasons.

### **Consent**

Consent is a mandatory part of research processes that involve participants. For several reasons, the issue of consent becomes more important in research processes related to young migrants and refugees. The first of these reasons is related to the fact that the step of consent might sometimes be skipped by researchers due to the age of the respondents. Another reason is related to the language or literacy level of the participant group. While designing consent forms, the assumption is that everyone is literate or able to understand the text. However, this



may not always be achieved for young immigrants and refugees, and it is an important obstacle to overcome. It should not be overlooked that in some cases, consent may also include the consent of the families of young immigrants and refugees. In our research experience, we understood also sometimes the silence of the participant might mean reluctance of him/her and this should be considered as part of consent by hesitating to force a participant to answer every question, in particular, during the focus group meeting.

### **Knowledge and awareness of intercultural differences**

Another important point is related to the necessity of having prior knowledge about the cultural norms of the group being addressed (Birman, 2005). This issue requires particular attention, especially in questions about religious practices, cultural traditions, marriage, and male-female relationships. The experience within the scope of our research has shown that the inclusion of the team members to the research team who have high cultural knowledge about the research group, and even people from that culture, where possible, had a great advantage. It is very effective to have a translator from that culture as well. This type of multicultural research team can both establish a friendly bond with the target audience and open a communication channel. At the same time, a multicultural research team may not only prevent mistakes due to intercultural differences but also may ensure to reveal of nuances and data that may be overlooked or not noticed. It is also important to avoid, as much as possible, the questions that sound like “othering” and/or reminds the culturally constructed borders while preparing the survey questions.

### **Risk of getting lost in translation:**

The issue of translation is central to many aspects of research on young migrants and refugees. In studies where research methods such as interviews and focus groups are used, the “clarity of the questions” can also affect the perspectives of the participant youth as much as the research results. Testing the translations of the questions addressed to young refugees and immigrants in the research, if possible, with the help of someone from that culture, is important not only to check grammar or language consistency in another language but also to overcome the obstacles and misunderstandings that can be brought by cultural codes. It should not be ignored that some questions may not be clearly understood or that concepts may have different meanings in different cultures. Again, in all these processes, the ethical responsibilities of the simultaneous interpreter, such as making word-to-word translations and not adding comments, should be clearly defined by the beginning of the research.

### **Ensuring the participation of young people and providing proportional / equal representation**

Participatory research becomes even more important in studies on young immigrants and refugees, although it is not always possible to achieve. The definition of “participation” can include different levels and can range from just listening to young people to designing the whole process with them and making decisions about the research process together (Jardine & James, 2012: 1).

The methods followed in accessing the young immigrants and refugees who will participate in the fieldwork constitute another aspect of the issue that needs to be given sensitivity. The rush of research processes can sometimes lead to inferences about the whole target group by focusing on certain age ranges or people from certain ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, it can

be ignored that this group does not consist of a homogeneous mass. Non-governmental organizations or local governments that provide services to the target group can be an important connection or reference point to reach out to young migrants for interviews or focus groups during our research. However, in cases where young refugees are reached through organizations, the profile of the target group that organizations work for should also be considered. Because, for example, an organization providing services only for unemployed young migrants may bring you a student-only sampling group, which is resulted in a non-inclusive sampling and may provide misleading data. Equal inclusion of genders is also important for sampling.

### **Recognition and correct identification of the target group**

Especially in data-based studies conducted in Turkey, there are studies giving the impression that only Syrians reside in Turkey with the demand for international protection. The researchers should be aware of the diversity of young refugees in terms of identity and ethnicity, the method should be designed accordingly, and the data should be interpreted within this scope.

As Chase et al. emphasized (2020:458), when examining and discussing the migration experiences of young people, there is a risk of "overlooking" not only their ethnic identity but also many dimensions of their identities, and the risk of ignoring the multidimensionality of their lives or affixing the label of "vulnerability" as a direct presupposition to young people. We need to pay attention to this issue by using the concept of "young refugee" instead of "refugee youth", by being aware of the fact that their identities are not just about immigration or being a refugee, and always keeping the "youth" factor in mind while designing the research.

For example, in our research, we were aware that refugee is not the only identity or label attached to them, and we have prepared a section and question set under the title of "being young". It is necessary to take this into consideration both to produce proper research results and to establish a healthy dialogue with young immigrants and refugees during the research process. Sometimes it is difficult to discover whether the problems and vulnerabilities are caused by being young or being a refugee, and it may be necessary to discover this in focus groups and by using other tools. Because perspectives without sensitiveness in this issue may encode them only as subjects and may miss the fact that they can be an active actor in the society they live (Chase et al 2020: p. 463).

### **Proper communication with the right method:**

This effort starts by giving orientation to those in the field and ensuring that they have communication skills with young people. It is also always recommended that the research team have knowledge of the principles and rules of "non-violent communication". While the proposed collaborative and participatory methods are used, efforts should be made to build all these processes in a structure that will contribute to a positive transformation of the participant young group without creating the feeling of taking the information and leaving them behind.

Correct communication might also require attention in the questions asked to young immigrants and refugees during fieldwork. For example, in our study, we preferred the question "What kind of option do you foresee for your future", by fearing that a question formalized as "do you plan to return to your country?" might be guiding or misunderstood.



Again, our research experience has shown us that in-group interaction is important in focus groups, but it is equally important to create an atmosphere that allows each participant to be included, assuming that they will not be judged. New methods might always be tried to encourage silent participants. It may also be necessary to prevent focus group members from responding or interfering with each other as much as possible. In addition, there may always be dominant participants. Methods that encourage others to speak should be used. In this context, it may be necessary to have moderator/facilitator who has adequate communication skills with young people.

### **Conclusion: What are the limits of researchers' responsibility?**

All the points previously mentioned in this study may become prominent in different phases of research process with young refugees and migrants. In addition to these points, as researchers we must prepare ourselves also on how to deal with emotions in fieldwork (Romocea, 2014). But this does not mean numbness and complete isolation. Sometimes some young refugees may ask you to act as an intermediary or facilitator. While studying and doing research about young refugees, we are in contact with a group that has needs and wants to reach support mechanisms in many areas of life. There may be situations where the researcher is faced with the request of providing support to the processes related to the participant's life. Although it is not a must and the researcher has his/her own ethical and moral responsibility for a decision to go beyond the research and to help the target group, it is recommended to have information on which stakeholders we can direct them for their questions and requests. Therefore, it may also be necessary to get the support of a non-governmental organization / local government and to have enough information for providing guidance, especially during field studies.

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