The Contribution of Immigrants to Urban Economies: Exploring Citizens' Opinions in Athens, Greece

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Abstract

Migration processes pose important social problems and demand appropriate integration policies. With this perspective in mind, the present study investigates native residents' opinion on the contribution of immigrants to urban economy in Athens, Greece, using a self-reported questionnaire submitted to a convenience sample of 446 native residents 18+ years old. In spite of the current economic crisis, mixed responses were recorded about the extent Greek government should allow new immigrants to come, live and work in the country. Conversely, citizens' opinions were rather homogeneous and negative when speaking about the state benefits granted to immigrants. Respondents who believe that, in the near future, a high (and possibly increasing) number of immigrants should be allowed to live, and work in Greece, demonstrated to be fully aware of the importance of integration policies. By contrast, in line with the 'secular' role of families permeating the Greek society, married people were more inclined to refuse any policy of immigrants' integration compared to single people. Future research should emphasize how institutions, national/local policies, and contextual aspects including ethnic networks, social capital, and labor market conditions, may influence immigrant integration in traditional, Mediterranean societies.

Keywords: *Immigrants; Urban economy; Integration; Acceptance; Southern Europe*

Introduction

Economic development in origin and destination countries was intimately associated with emigration and immigration trends, and both population inflows and outflows were demonstrated to exert significant impacts on economic systems, especially in urban areas (Papadopoulos, 2004; Zekovic and Maricic, 2020; Vinci et al., 2023). Native populations perceived migration processes differently on the base of the main reason of movement (e.g. labor, transit, or return migration), and the income level of the origin and destination area (Lancee & Sarrasin, 2015). Especially in cases of abrupt and massive emigration from the native country, migrants are mostly unable to decide where to go or, if they can, they are often unable to travel to their intended destination (Bishop et al., 2013). Migrants thus become a sort of 'trapped population' in transit countries because of lacking economic resources and/or legal restrictions, e.g. the provisions of the Dublin Regulation for European countries (Mahia et al., 2020).

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Over 50 percent of the world's population actually live in urban areas (Carlucci et al., 2018), and major population increases in the near future are expected to occur in cities (United Nations, 2019). Migration will account for around half of this urban expansion, with cross-border movement being progressively less common than regional migration (Ciommi et al., 2018). Displacement is also becoming a typical 'urban' issue, with the majority of displaced people and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) now residing in cities rather than rural camps (Cadge et al., 2010; Svoboda & Gillard, 2015; UNHCR, 2017).

In Europe, Spain, Italy, and Greece serve as major entry points for undocumented immigrants (Dubet, 1989). For instance, Kurdish migrants frequently travel to the Netherlands, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Germany, passing through Greece (Papadopoulou, 2004). France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany, are historically popular destinations for migrants from Africa, passing through Italy (Barou, 2014). Currently, the three primary (and mostly illegal) migratory routes into Southern Europe are through Spain, Italy, and Turkey/Greece; in most cases, these sea-routes provide an illegal and unsafe entrance to Europe (Baldwin-Edwards, 2006).

While migration-related policies are typically governed at national level, local authorities are frequently obliged to develop and implement migration-related policies and to share information and expertise with other government entities (Cadge et al., 2010). Effective migration containment strategies require more coordination and internal coherence when faced with the growing complexity of transcalar migration policies and the multiple levels of governance authority and public decision processes (Dustmann & Preston, 2006). In this perspective, local administrations and regional government entities have a special potentiality to integrate urban actors and stakeholders, both native and immigrants (International Organization for Migration, 2021).

From the individual perspective, civic and territorial behaviors refer to the idea that citizens freely and politically support the egalitarian national principles (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007). Conversely, cultural and religious distinctions lack political legitimacy in the public domain and are thus relegated to the private sector (Barou, 2014). This aspect is characterizing societal principles and beliefs in Greece, a transit hotspot for immigration toward Europe from the Eastern gate (Gavalas et al., 2014). Failing to prepare for a growing population because of immigration, as in the case of Greece, can stress city services, intensify competition for property and housing (Simon, 2008), and exacerbate social and environmental problems in already fragile and economically weak metropolitan systems (Héran, 2010). As a result, several societal problems may arise, namely urban poverty, increasing vulnerability to gender-based violence and exploitation, xenophobia, and social conflicts (International Organization for Migration, 2021). Based on these premises, and taking account of earlier studies related with social rearrangements and acceptance of transforming urban backgrounds, our study investigates the factors that differentiate the level of acceptance of native Greeks toward immigrants as a contribution to effective integration policies at both country and regional level.

Literature review

The investigation of native people' beliefs and perceptions of immigrants' contributions to urban economies was the primary goal of this study. As a preliminary task, the current literature was scrutinized from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. Pertinent studies

were selected to provide the necessary ground to implement the survey illustrated below in this paper (namely a collection of instruments such as questionnaires and item scales) and contribute to identify relevant variables. While immigration processes were recognized as a broadly debated topic in many countries (Marroquin & Saravia, 2022) – since most of native citizens express concerns about the (supposedly negative) socioeconomic impact of new immigrants on local systems (Mantovan, 2018) – the positive contribution of immigrants to urban economies cannot be ignored (Dustmann & Preston, 2006).

In this perspective, there are several ways in which immigrants contribute to the urban economy (Escriva, 1997). First, they often take on low-wage jobs that many citizens are not willing to do, e.g. in agriculture, hospitality, and construction sectors, contributing largely to keep the productivity of these industries high (Fakiolas, 2003). Second, immigrants start businesses (from corner stores to tech-startups) that create jobs and enhance local conditions for economic growth, providing goods and services that might not be available otherwise (Economou & Mitoula, 2013a, 2013b). Third, immigrants contribute to urban economies by paying taxes (Lazaridis & Romaniszyn, 1998). Even undocumented immigrants pay taxes through sales taxes and property taxes, among others (Mahia et al., 2020). By paying taxes, immigrants contribute to the funding of public services such as education, healthcare, and transportation (Dustmann & Preston, 2006), which benefit both native citizens and immigrants alike (Fakiolas, 2003).

From the other side, the attitude of citizens towards immigration influences their opinion about (i) the desired acceptance rate of new foreign incomers (from null to high) and (ii) the extent of public resources dedicated to full integration policies (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). This information is key to raise public awareness of the intensity of future immigration processes, and influences the design and implementation of any integration strategy (Burgers & Engbersen, 1996). Attitudes towards immigrants reveal a linkage between macro-economic issues associated with migration processes (such as urban poverty or economy disadvantage) and more specific (individual) issues such as immigrants' well-being (Bishop et al., 2013). In this perspective, higher education levels in native populations were demonstrated to be associated to more open beliefs and attitudes towards migrants and refugees (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007). Lancee and Sarrasin (2015) documented a self-selection into education accounts for almost all the favorable relationships between education level and immigration sentiments.

Distinguishing the impact of education's level on the positive attitude toward immigrants from other (related and un-related) contextual and individual factors is possible since they are intimately connected with both individual (demographic) attributes (e.g. age) as well as external conditions such as political correctness and positive feeling towards ethnic diversity (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). Huber and Oberdabernig (2016) stated that positive opinions of native population towards immigration decline with age in countries where immigrants are more reliant on welfare than native people. Taken together, these studies support the conclusion that age is associated with unfavorable sentiments regarding immigration, which is consistent with a larger association between ageing and conservatism (Tilley & Evans, 2014). However, other studies have demonstrated that age is no longer a major predictor of sentiments towards immigration when cohort effects are taken into account (Jeannet & Dražanová, 2019). Research using a longitudinal approach has shown how context throughout adolescence influences political opinions, as in the case of experienced inequality

and desires for wealth redistribution (Roth & Wohlfart, 2018). A belief toward immigrants' acceptance is finally correlated with being descendent of foreigners (Riniolo & Toivanen, 2023).

Immigrants' integration started with social integration through housing, education, and employment (Simon, 2008). This assimilation process does not preclude any particular type of community development (Papadopoulos, 2004). Immigrants' identification in the host community and country was the final step in this process (Mantovan, 2018). Through naturalization, immigrants gain access to a complete political involvement (Dubet, 1989). Especially those living in urban areas might seize the chance to adapt to dominant cultural traditions and share beliefs that give them prospects toward upward social mobility (Escriva, 1997).

Despite these positive aspects, some native citizens remain skeptical of the impact of immigrants on urban economies (Alaimo et al., 2022; Zekovic & Maricic, 2020). Some argue that immigrants take jobs away from native citizens and depress wages (Lazaridis & Romaniszyn, 1998). However, research has shown that the impact of immigrants on wages is relatively small (Burgers & Engbersen, 1996), and they often take on jobs that are not in direct competition with native citizens (Högström, 2018). Other citizens may argue that immigrants are a burden on public services, particularly healthcare and education (Huber & Oberdabernig, 2016). However, empirical studies have shown that immigrants actually contribute more in taxes than they receive in public services, meaning that they are not a net burden on the economy (Di Feliciantonio et al., 2018). Based on these mixed findings, researchers and policymakers are urged to define the contribution of immigrants and design strategies that facilitate their integration in urban economies, determining in turn a net benefit for the local community as a whole.

Methodology

Purpose of our survey was to collect public opinions and attitudes regarding the contribution of immigrants to urban economies. A self-reported questionnaire designed for these specific purposes was designed and preliminary submitted to a pilot sample of 10 respondents checking for ethical issues and misunderstandings that were removed in the final version of the questionnaire. Some questions were rephrased to better reflect the purpose of the study and a five items Likert scale was finally set up for each relevant issue. The revised questionnaire consisted of two sections. Demographic/contextual aspects were collected in the first section. The second section investigated about respondents' thoughts and attitudes towards immigrants, focusing on their specific contribution to urban economies.

Google Forms was an online platform used to disseminate the questionnaires online and collect the responses of interviewed participants selected on the base of a convenience sampling strategy. The survey encompassed 8 months from March to October 2021 and respondents provided their informed consent prior to answering the questionnaire's questions. In order to fulfill ethical issues, personal email addresses or Internet Protocol (IP) address logging were never recorded together with the individual responses. The reference population of our survey included 18+ years old residents in the Greater Athens' area with Greek citizenship. A total of 446 respondents provided complete responses to the questionnaire; this sample was considered appropriate for a preliminary, quantitative analysis of the phenomenon at stake.

Mean values and standard deviations were used to describe quantitative variables collected with the survey. Absolute (N) and relative (%) frequencies were used to describe qualitative variables. The factorial structure of the questionnaire's results was checked for the presence of underlying factors using Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with 'oblimin' rotation (Carmines & Zeller, 2011). A Cronbach's Alpha reliability analysis was carried out on each factor separately and on each scale collectively (Taber, 2018). Alpha coefficients between 0.6 and 0.7 indicate a 'sufficient' reliability. 'Good', 'very good' and 'excellent' reliability was associated respectively to values between 0.7-0.8, 0.8-0.9, as well as 0.9-1.0 (Ursachi et al., 2015). Additionally, a normality test was performed using histograms and documenting how all extracted factors have a statistical distribution close to normal (Salvati and Zitti, 2009). Finally, a pair-wise correlation analysis using Pearson coefficients was run testing for significant relationships among factors (Ciommi et al., 2019). Multiple linear regressions finally identified the best-fit relationship between the independent variable and the selected predictors (Lamonica et al., 2020). Two-side significance levels ($p < 0.05$) were adopted for inferential purposes through computation with SPSS package (release 25.0).

Results

Respondents were predominantly females (67.3%) and young (48.7% in the age 18-28 years old). Nearly 40% of respondents held a Compulsory-Secondary Education degree, 35.0% have a University degree, 13.2% have a Post-high School education degree, and 11.9% have a Master or PhD degree. Most of the participants in this survey (60.3%) are single as far as the marital status is concerned, and 98.2% are Greek nationals. In line with Athens' primary in the metropolitan area, more than 40% of participants resided downtown. Three respondents out of ten are employed in the private sector, 27.8% are students, 17.9% work in the public sector, 9.0% are unemployed, and 7.6% are self-employed (Supplementary Materials, Table 1).

All the questionnaire items (n = 23) correlated pair-wise at least with another item (Pearson r > 0.3), suggesting reasonable factorability. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index (0.91) delineated an excellent adequacy of the study sample to exploratory factor analysis. A significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($p < 0.05$) confirmed how questionnaire's variables are suitable to detect a factorial structure. By controlling for a factor structure with 'oblimin' rotation, EFA extracted three factors (Supplementary Materials, Table 2).

Ten items were associated with the first factor, with loadings ranging between 0.38 and 0.79. They reflect the individual perceptions about the issue of 'immigrants' integration', including the individual beliefs about the openness degree of the Greek society toward immigrants. As an indirect control of internal consistency, Cronbach's Alpha (0.91) delineated a satisfactory reliability of this factor.

Six items were associated with the second factor, with loadings ranging between 0.33 and 0.86. They were mostly reflective of individual beliefs about the 'non-acceptance of immigrants' integration', namely how immigrants' integration has an impact on respondents' life. Cronbach's Alpha (0.82) indicated a satisfactory reliability reflecting the internal consistency of the factor-items' structure. The third factor, with loadings ranging between 0.39 and 0.67, was labelled as 'institutional benefits' and included items that assessed the perceived balance between native-born citizens and immigrants receiving state benefits. Cronbach's Alpha (0.65) delineated a good reliability and internal consistency of the factor-items' structure.

The statistical distribution of Factor 1 scores was centered around 3 (average: 3.16), and reflects the predominance of mixed judgments as far as the appropriateness of immigrants' integration is concerned (Supplementary Materials, Figure 1). In other words, respondents' beliefs on the extent to which Greece, in the near future, should allow new immigrants to live and work in the country are extremely heterogeneous. Additionally, more than half respondents declared to be against immigrants' integration (Factor 2 average scores: 2.36). Additionally, respondents' judgments on the policy-targeted balance between the native population and immigrants receiving state benefits were generally negative (Factor 3 average scores: 2.25).

Pearson coefficients testing the level of pair-wise correlation between the three factors displayed different intensity and sign. As expected, beliefs on the normative appropriateness of immigrants' integration were negatively associated with the refuse of immigrants' integration ($r = -0.63$, $p = 0.01$). The remaining correlations were less intense and mostly insignificant (beliefs on the normative appropriateness of immigrants' integration *vs* institutional benefits: $r = 0.25$; non-acceptance of immigrants' integration *vs* institutional benefits $r = -0.16$).

A multiple linear regression was run to predict the non-acceptance of immigrants' integration based on their perceptions of the appropriateness (and normative desirability) of immigrants' integration, institutional benefits, age, gender, marriage status, residence in downtown Athens, educational level, and age (Table 1). A best-fit regression equation was estimated ($F_{(7,438)} = 43.97$, $p < 0.001$) with adjusted-$R^2 = 0.41$ (Model 2). The level of acceptance/desirability of immigrants' integration was estimated with the following equation: 4.11 (intercept) - 0.55(Perceptions of the regularity of immigrants' integration) - 0.02(Institutional benefits) - 0.03(Female) + 0.21(Married) - 0.04(downtown Athens) - 0.02(Educational Level) + 0.03(Age).

Table 1. Results of a Multiple Regression Analysis identifying predictors of the non-acceptance rate of immigrants' integration (Factor 2) taken as the dependent variable*.

Predictor	Model 1 (reduced)			Model 2 (full)		
	B	SE(B)	β	B	SE(B)	β
Perceptions of the regularity of immigrants' integration (Factor 1)	-0.60	0.04	-0.62*	-0.55	0.04	-0.57*
Institutional benefits (Factor 3)	-0.01	0.05	-0.01	-0.02	0.05	-0.02
Female				-0.03	0.07	-0.02
Married status				0.21	0.08	0.11*
Living in downtown Athens				-0.04	0.06	-0.02
Educational Level				-0.02	0.03	-0.02
Age				0.03	0.03	0.05
Adjusted R²			0.39			0.41
Fisher Snedecor F statistic			143.0			44.0

Dependent Variable: Non-acceptance of immigrants' integration; predictors' collinearity (VIF < 2.5); regression residues have normal distribution; both models are statistically significant (* $p <0.05$); gender, family status, and place of residence were excluded from both models because of high VIF.

Perceptions about the regularity of immigrants' integration and the marriage status were significant ($p < 0.01$) predictors of the level of non-acceptance of immigrants' integration. Institutional benefits, gender, living in central Athens, educational level, and age resulted to be insignificant predictors of the individual beliefs toward immigrants' integration. A more compact model (1) based uniquely on Factors 1 and 3 (adjusted-$R^2 = 0.39$), documented the significant, negative impact of Factor 1, meaning that 'the perception of the normative appropriateness of immigrants' integration' has a negative effect on the individual beliefs toward immigrants' integration, in respect with Factor 3.

Discussion

Immigration is a major issue contemporary societies deal with, with negative implications for both the source country - losing population and labor force - and the host country (Ciommi et al., 2022). By analyzing the shift from mechanical to organic solidarity in 'The Division of Labor in Society', which detailed the division of labor in its contemporary forms (Zeković & Maričić, 2020), Durkheim (1893 in 2019) demonstrated how shared values and solidarity served as the foundation for social cohesiveness and integration of immigrants characteristic of any contemporary society. Collective consciousness of organizations and individual responsibility of citizens characterized advanced industrial cultures (Jeannet & Drazanova, 2019). Our work emphasizes how contextual aspects, national and local policies, and cultures - including ethnic networks, social capital, and labor market conditions - affect immigrant integration (Vlachadi, Spinos, & Mitoula, 2014). While integration policies should establish the necessary conditions for improving migrants' skills and capabilities, abrupt and unexpected population inflows reduce the effectiveness of any integration strategy (Barou, 2014). Sudden (e.g. crisis-based) restrictions on government spending placed additional pressure on local communities, shifting positive into negative perceptions on immigration (Dubet, 1989).

Since the 1980s, Southern Europe – being regarded historically as an emigration region – experienced unexpected and intense immigration (Vinci et al., 2023; Lemonakis et al., 2023). Portugal, Spain, Italy and, to a lesser extent, Greece, began to attract foreign immigrants (Escrivâ, 1997), thanks to a combination of socioeconomic, political, and demographic factors (Lazaridis & Romaniszyn, 1998). In this perspective, the empirical results of our survey provide a coherent investigation of selected aspects of the Greek society and immigration trends (Dustmann & Preston, 2006). On average, respondents' opinions about the extent to which Greece should allow new immigrants to live and work in the country were largely heterogeneous, turning to rather negative perceptions of the economic potential (and normative appropriateness) of immigrants' integration. Moreover, respondents were very negative about any state benefit granted to immigrant people. A refined analysis of sample data indicated how a positive belief of the normative appropriateness of integration processes led to an explicit acceptance of more intense immigration flows in the near future (Sunata, 2017). Married people were, on average, less favorable to immigrants' integration compared with single people (Karaköse & Yaylacı, 2023). This result is possibly in line with the 'secular' role of family (i.e. composed of a native father, mother and children) permeating the Greek society (Gavalas et al., 2014).

Although the exploratory aims and scope, our study calls for additional research into the 'regional' dimension of immigrants' acceptance and integration policies (Fakiolas, 2003),

considering alternative perspectives (e.g. analyzing separately the effect of gender, age, and political beliefs). Since the main limitation of our study was the small sample size (Carmines & Zeller, 2011), representative surveys are required in this field of study and the use of electronic surveys (e.g. mailing lists, social media platforms) should be critically analyzed and discussed (Andrade, 2020). Additionally, the individual's exposure to media, scholarly publications, and literature, should be more deeply evaluated and rated based on the respondent's perspective.

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Appendix

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents' sample.

		Number	Percentage
Gender	Men	146	32.7
	Women	300	67.3
Age	18-28	217	48.7
	29-39	73	16.4
	40-50	82	18.4
	51-61	63	14.1
	>62	11	2.5
Education	Compulsory-Secondary Education	178	39.9
	Post-Secondary Education	59	13.2
	University Degree	156	35.0
	Postgraduate-Doctoral Degree	53	11.9
Family Status	Unmarried	269	60.3
	Married	138	30.9
	Other	39	8.7
Citizenship	Greek	438	98.2
	Other	8	1.8
Place of Residence (municipality)	Athens	184	41.3
	Agioi Anargyroi-Kamatero	29	6.5
	Elliniko - Argyroupolis	18	4.0
	Ilioupoli	20	4.5
	Keratsini - Drapetsona	43	9.6
	Marathon	29	6.5
	Moschato-Tavros	16	3.6
	Peristeri	22	4.9
	Other	85	19.1
Job Status	Public sector employee	80	17.9
	Private sector employee	133	29.8
	Self-employed	34	7.6
	Unemployed	40	9.0
	Student	124	27.8
	Other	35	7.8

Table 2. Results of the Exploratory Factor Analysis and Cronbach's Alpha.

	Factor			
Items	Regularity of immigrants' integration	Non-acceptance of immigrants' integration	Institutional benefits	Cronbach Alpha
22	0.79			
20	0.77			
16	0.72			
19	0.70			0.91
17	0.68			
23	0.68			
21	0.66			

18	0.47		
14	0.42		
13	0.38		
26		0.86	
28		0.85	
27		0.84	
25		0.78	0.82
15		0.34	
9		0.33	
30			0.67
29			0.64
10			0.48
11			0.40
31			0.39

*Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring. Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization (KMO>0.5; Bartlett's Test of Sphericity<0.5). Factor loading cut off point 0.3.

Figure 1. Histogram and normal fit of the scores' distribution of Factor 1 (left), 2 (middle) and 3 (right).