

## Life situations of older refugees in Germany

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# BAMF-Brief Analysis

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5 | 2021

## Life situations of older refugees in Germany

by Amrei Maddox

### AT A GLANCE

- For the present analyses, primarily data from the third wave of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees for 2018 was analyzed. 12% of the refugees who arrived in Germany since the beginning of 2013 were 45 years old or over in 2018, mostly between 45 and 49 years old, and 2% were 60 years old or over. Older refugees came more often from Syria and less often from African countries than younger refugees.
- Older refugees had less schooling than younger refugees under 45 in 2018, but more often had vocational degrees and more work experience. This difference will continue to widen in the future to the disadvantage of older refugees due to the greater educational participation of younger refugees in Germany.
- In 2018, 14% of older refugees were employed. However, labor force participation has increased less since 2016 than among younger refugees. They also did not show an increasing participation in vocational training, as was the case for younger refugees.
- While refugees aged 45 to 54 lived mostly with a partner and children, the proportion of childless couple households increased in older age groups, and the proportion of one-person households also increased in the oldest age group (60 years old and over). In comparison, younger refugee men were more likely to live alone and less likely to have their own family. The opposite picture emerges among younger women.
- On average, older refugees had less frequent and less regular contact with Germans than younger refugees, especially at work and in friendships. In older age groups, the frequency of contact also decreased.
- Overall, older refugees had a similar level of life satisfaction as younger refugees. However, many older refugees were worried about their asylum procedure (52%), not being able to stay in Germany (66%) and/or having to return to their country of origin (73%). This was also the case - but to a lesser extent - among persons with completed asylum procedures. In addition, they were concerned about their own health and economic situation. These concerns were more pronounced among older refugees than among younger ones.



## Introduction

The age structure of people who have sought protection in Germany in recent years shows a high proportion of young people.<sup>1</sup> In 2015, 71% and in 2016, 74% of asylum seekers were younger than 30. In contrast, only 6 to 7% each were 45 years old or over and only 1% were 60 or older (BAMF 2016; 2017). Due to the low proportion of older persons, there is little knowledge about their characteristics, living conditions and needs.

For older refugees, several problems can overlap. They not only have to deal with the physical and psychological consequences of their experiences before and during the flight, but also with the challenges that come with advanced age. Among other things, older refugees have poorer health than younger refugees (Metzing et al. 2020) and are particularly affected by psychological stress (Metzing et al. 2020; Walther et al. 2020) and the risk of social isolation (Olbermann 2019). Older persons often find it particularly difficult to leave home and familiar surroundings, to separate from family members, and to make a new start in a foreign country (Bolzman 2014; Olbermann 2019). With increasing age, it also becomes more difficult to learn German or to gain a foothold in the labor market (Jurt/Sperisen 2020). On the other hand, older refugees often feel the desire to participate in society and contribute their knowledge and skills. In addition, they take on important roles in the community, e.g., as advisors and as preservers as well as mediators of their culture, or in the family, including for family cohesion and as supporters (Olbermann 2019).

Much of the evidence on older refugees to date is based on accounts of the experiences of people working with refugees and the results of qualitative interviews with refugees. These provide important information, but there is a lack of representative findings. Therefore, this analysis examines the situation of older refugees using data from the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees (see infobox). First, an overview is given of the demographic composition of this group, the circumstances of their arrival and their first time in Germany. Next, the focus will lie on their family situation and their social integration in Germany. Finally, the concerns and satisfaction of older refugees in various areas of life are examined. The aim of the analysis is to provide information on the living conditions and emotional states of the older refugees and to provide

indications of the areas in which there is a need for action. Problematic situations can become even more acute with increasing aging, which is why it is important to identify and counteract them in good time.

## Older refugees in Germany

Older refugees are defined for the analyses as refugees aged 45 and older. The age at the time of the survey in 2018 is used for this purpose. There are several reasons for this delimitation, which deviates from the usual definition of the group of the elderly based on the retirement age: firstly, given the very young age structure of the refugees, persons aged 45 and older belong to the elderly in relative terms. Secondly, the group of older people makes up only a small proportion of the refugees. However, in order to make reliable statements, a sufficiently large number of cases is necessary. Thirdly, qualitative interviews show that the subjective age, i.e. the individually „felt“ age, of refugees is often significantly advanced compared to their actual age (Bernhard/Röhrer 2020: 35f.).

The analyses use data from the third wave of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees for 2018. In order to capture changes over time, data from the first two waves are used in some places (see infobox for more detailed information on the study). For 2018, information is available on 817 refugees who were 45 years old or over.

In the analyses, a) younger refugees who were between 18 and 45 years old at the time of the survey and b) older persons without refugee experience (45 or older) are used as comparison groups. For the comparisons with persons without refugee experience, the data from the main SOEP study (Goebel et al. 2019) are used.

## Origin, gender and age of the older refugees

As mentioned at the outset, older persons make up only a small proportion of the refugees. The average age of all refugees who have arrived in Germany since 2013 was 31.6 years in 2018. Only 12% were 45 years old or over in 2018. Of these, most were between 45 and 49 years old (39%). Only just over one-fifth of old-

<sup>1</sup> The term refugees is not used here in the legal sense, but as a collective term for people who have applied for asylum in Germany, regardless of whether or how this application was decided (see also Kroh et al. 2016 and in the Infobox).

## INFOBOX: THE IAB-BAMF-SOEP SURVEY OF REFUGEES

For the nationwide IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees, interviews have been conducted annually since 2016 with persons who arrived in Germany between January 1, 2013 and December 31, 2016 and who applied for asylum here, regardless of the course and outcome of the asylum procedure. Thus, persons who were in the asylum procedure (asylum seekers) and those who had already been granted protection status were taken into account. Furthermore, persons were interviewed whose asylum application had been rejected but whose departure or deportation had been suspended for various reasons and who had therefore been granted a suspension of deportation (Kroh et al. 2016). In addition, the household members of these individuals are also interviewed.

The sample was drawn on the basis of the Central Register of Foreigners (AZR). Using statistical weighting procedures, the results obtained on the basis of the data are representative of households in the population delimited above (Kroh et al. 2016; Kühne et al. 2019; Jacobsen et al. 2019). All data refer to self-assessments of the refugees.

The survey program is comparatively extensive (Kroh et al. 2016), which allows comprehensive analyses of the living conditions of the refugees. In the analyses, it is therefore possible to take into account a wide range of relevant characteristics, such as time of entry, gender, age, country of origin, level of education or residence status.

er refugees were 60 or older (21%; see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it can be seen that people continue to flee into old age. The oldest person in the present sample was 93 years old in 2018. Men are slightly younger in the group of older refugees, with an average age of 52.8, than women, with an average age of 54.2.

As in the total of all refugees, the main countries of origin of older refugees were Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (Figure 2). However, compared to younger refugees, they are more often from Syria (60 vs. 42%) and less often from Afghanistan (7 vs. 15%) or African countries (4 vs. 16%). In addition, there are proportionally more women among the elderly (42%) than among

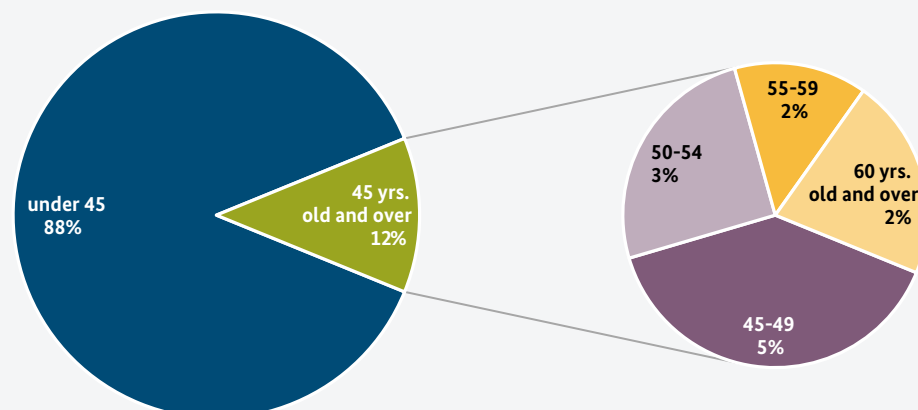
the young (28%). The proportion of older persons is highest among refugees from Syria (17%) and lowest among refugees from Afghanistan and the other countries of origin (7% each).

## Arrival and settling in Germany

In the following, the circumstances of the older refugees' entry into Germany will be analyzed, i.e. whether they came alone or accompanied. A good half of the older refugees had been living in Germany for three years (54%) in 2018, and just under a fifth for two (19%) or four years (18%) in each case. For this reason, the development of asylum procedures, which determine the framework conditions for living in Germany, as well as the schooling and professional situation of older refugees will be examined subsequently.

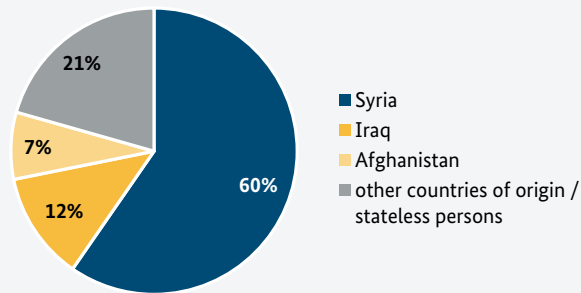
<sup>2</sup> These percentages refer here to the shares of the age cohorts in the group of older refugees, whereas figure 1 reflects their shares in the population.

Figure 1: Refugees by age in 2018



Source: IAB-BAMF SOEP survey of refugees, v35; 2018.  
Base: 4,391 respondents. Data weighted.

**Figure 2: Older refugees by country of origin in 2018**



Source: IAB-BAMF SOEP survey of refugees, v35; 2018. Base: 817 respondents. Data weighted.

### Who did the older refugees arrive with?

On average, 70% of older refugees who were 45 or older in 2018 came to Germany accompanied by family members. This proportion was highest among those aged 55-59 (86%). Only a few came to Germany with other accompanying persons, such as friends or acquaintances. Age and accompanying persons at entry show a U-shaped correlation among older refugees: members of the youngest as well as oldest age groups entered Germany more often alone. Thus, just over a quarter (28%) of 45-49 year olds and just over a third of refugees aged 60 and older (34%) had arrived in Germany alone, compared to only 19% of 50-54 year olds and 13% of 55-59 year olds, respectively. Among younger people under 45, there were proportionately more people traveling alone and fewer who came to Germany with family members (alone: 44%; with family: 47%). Entry together with other persons not

belonging to one's own family was also somewhat more common among younger persons (10 vs. 5%) (see Figure 3).

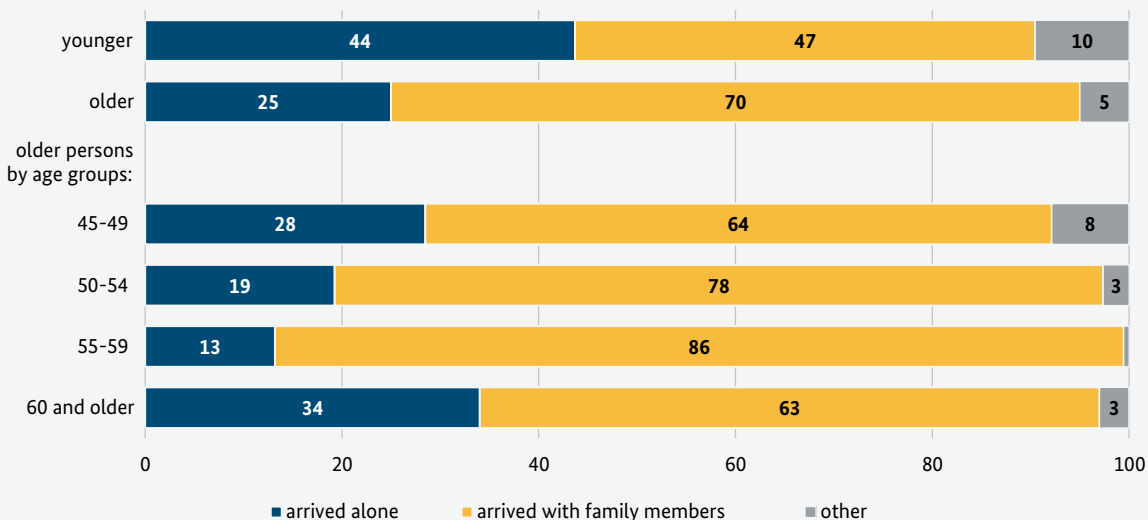
Among older refugees, women came more often as part of a family than men (women: 80%; men: 64%). Older men, on the other hand, entered alone more frequently (men: 31%; women: 17%). Since older men also mostly fled as part of a family, the gender differences are significantly smaller than among young refugees (not shown). The majority of women who arrived in Germany between the ages of 18 and 25 were part of a family group (82%; alone: 15%; other: 2%), while men of the same age mostly arrived alone (65%; in a family group: 25%; other: 9%) (Niehues 2021).

### Development of asylum procedures

The outcome of the asylum procedure determines whether refugees can stay in Germany and sets the framework for life in Germany. Whereas in 2016 just under a third of older refugees who had arrived between 2013 and 2016 were still in ongoing asylum procedures (31%), in 2018 most asylum procedures had been completed (ongoing procedures: 10%). Most of them were granted protection status<sup>3</sup> in the process. This share increased from 48% in 2016 to 79% in 2018.

<sup>3</sup> The category of protection status includes, in particular, persons entitled to asylum (residence permit pursuant to Section 25 (1) Residence Act), persons who have been granted refugee status (residence permit pursuant to Section 25 (2) Residence Act) or who have been admitted under reception programs (residence permit pursuant to Section 22 or Section 23 Residence Act). This also includes persons who have received a settlement permit following their residence permit (Section 26 (3) AufenthG).

**Figure 3: Persons accompanying refugees on entry to Germany by age of refugee (in percent)**



Source: IAB-BAMF SOEP survey of refugees, v35; 2016-2018. Base: 4,296 respondents. Data weighted. Note: Values below 2% are not shown.

In contrast, younger refugees under the age of 45 have always had a higher share of open procedures and a lower protection status rate over the years. Temporary suspensions of deportation and other statuses accounted for comparatively small shares of cases in both groups, below 10% each, with little change over time (Figure 4). The differences between younger and older refugees result primarily from the different composition by country of origin, which have different overall protection rates.

### School and professional qualifications

For the integration of older refugees into the labor market, it is crucial which schooling and vocational training they bring with them. In addition, they also have the opportunity to catch up on their school leaving qualifications and/or to learn about the professional landscape and working life in Germany through vocational training and to expand their existing skills. The following section examines the school and educational qualifications with which refugees have come to Germany and the extent to which they have made use of the opportunities to participate in education in Germany.

#### Highest level of education achieved

A good quarter of older refugees had only basic education in 2018 (27%) and 15% had not attended school. This compares with 21% with a tertiary education qualification. 37% had completed secondary education. Older men are, on average, more highly educated than women in this regard: not only did they attend school

more often (92 vs. 76%), but they also attained higher educational qualifications: 41% of older men had secondary education and 25% had a tertiary education qualification, compared with 32% and 17% of older women, respectively (not shown).<sup>4</sup>

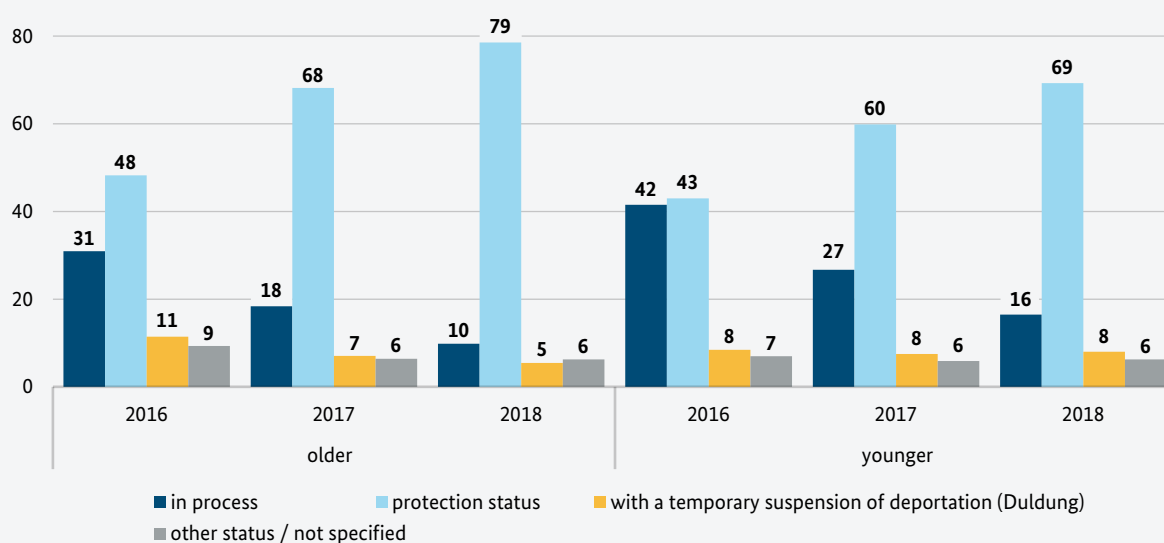
Younger refugees under 45 years of age had attended school more often (91%) than older refugees (85%). In addition, they had more often completed primary or secondary education (45 vs. 37%), but less often tertiary education (18 vs. 21%). In addition, younger refugees - in contrast to older ones - show an increasing participation in education in Germany over the years (2016: 7%, 2017: 10%, 2018: 16%; not shown), so that they will be able to extend their advantage even further (see also Niehues 2021; de Paiva Lareiro 2019).

#### Professional education and work experience in the country of origin

25% of the older refugees had completed vocational training in their country of origin, while another 3% had started training but not completed it. The vast majority, however, had not undergone vocational training

<sup>4</sup> The highest level of education achieved is reported here according to the ISCED 2011 classification for the year 2018. An overview of the ISCED 2011 classification and its equivalents in the German education system can be found on the website of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research: <https://www.datenportal.bmbf.de/portal/en/G293.html> (14.12.2020); see also Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2020: XVIII). The available data include degrees gained in Germany. These are only isolated cases among older refugees; they are more common among younger ones. Thus, the figures do not allow for a differentiation between human capital brought with them and acquired after arrival.

Figure 4: Development of asylum procedures of older and younger refugees between 2016 and 2018 (in percent)



Source: IAB-BAMF SOEP survey of refugees, v35; 2016-2018. Base: 1,314 respondents (2,337 observations). Data weighted.



(72%).<sup>5</sup> These quite low proportions can be explained by less developed vocational education systems and a lower importance of formal certificates for professional practice in the countries of origin (Brenzel et al. 2019). The situation is similar among younger refugees under the age of 45: 14% had completed vocational training and another 9% had started but not completed it. The fact that well over one-third of younger refugees did not complete a vocational training program they had started suggests that this was not possible due to the unfavorable situation in their country of origin or that they had to leave the country early. Thus, older refugees have a higher average level of vocational training than younger ones. In addition, older people are slightly more likely to have university degrees (21 vs. 18%).

There are no significant differences by origin and gender in the vocational training of older refugees. In contrast, there are very clear gender differences in their work experience: while 96% of older men were employed prior to fleeing, this is significantly less common among older women (43%). Overall, younger refugees were less likely to have work experience than older ones (64 vs. 73%), although younger men were nevertheless significantly more likely to have been employed before fleeing than older women (73 vs. 43%; younger women: 40%).

### Education and language in Germany

The literature shows that the subjective age of refugees is often more advanced than their actual age: some refugees already feel in their 20s that they are too old for schooling or vocational training, as they feel they are taking a step backwards. They have usually already attended educational institutions, learned professions and worked in their country of origin. Compared with their peers in their country of origin, they feel as if they should be further along in life (Bernhard/Röhler 2020: 35f.). In addition, young refugees have a stronger family orientation than their peers without refugee experience and more often already have families to care for (Niehues 2021: 7f.). Financial responsibilities to family members in the country of origin can also influence preferences regarding education and labor market participation (SVR-Forschungsbereich 2017). This is also reflected in educational aspirations and participation: with increasing age, the desire of

refugees to acquire school and/or vocational qualifications in Germany as well as their actual participation in education decreases (Brenzel et al. 2019: 56ff.). Accordingly, older refugees also often see no prospects for themselves in the German education system and labor market. Rather, they see structural integration in the future and as a task for their children (Bernhard/Röhler 2020; SVR-Forschungsbereich 2017).

The present data paint a similar picture: in 2016, respondents indicated on a scale of 0 “definitely not” to 10 “definitely” how likely they thought various scenarios were. Most of the older refugees already considered it very unlikely that they would go to school (average: 2.8) or study (average: 1.3) in Germany in two years’ time. Education and further training seemed to them to be more realistic scenarios, but still rather unlikely (average: 3.9). In 2018, there were accordingly very few exceptional cases of older refugees who attended or completed school in Germany. Slightly more, but still very few, took the path of vocational training or further education: in 2018, 3% of older refugees undertook training, mostly in the form of further education or retraining (not shown).

Furthermore, the literature shows that the acquisition of the German language becomes more difficult with increasing age and involves more (time) effort, but is not impossible (Scheible/Rother 2017; Tissot et al. 2019; de Paiva Lareiro et al. 2020). This is also reflected in the available data: in 2018, most older refugees reported being able to speak German rather poorly (38%) or only moderately (36%). Another 10% stated that they could not speak German at all. Only 15% assessed their German as good and 1% as very good. In the older cohorts, German skills are increasingly poor: for example, a good two-thirds (67%) in the oldest cohort said they could not speak German at all or rather poorly. Only 6% of this group could do so well (Figure 5).

Older people also benefited from taking part in a language course:<sup>6</sup> while in 2018 two-thirds of older refugees who had not taken part in a language course said they could not speak German at all or not very well, this proportion was lower, at 39% of older people who had taken part in a course before and 56% of older people who were currently taking part in a

<sup>5</sup> By comparison, only 10% of people without an immigrant background in Germany have no vocational qualification. This proportion is also just as high among 60-65-year-olds and somewhat lower still among 45-49-year-olds. Persons with a immigrant background are less likely to have vocational qualifications, especially if they themselves entered Germany as adults (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2020: 69).

<sup>6</sup> Language course participation here refers to participation in courses organized by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, i.e. integration and/or vocational language courses (job-related German language support in accordance with §45a AufenthG; ESF-BAMF courses). Other German courses are not taken into account here. In 2018, 21% of older people had not (yet) taken part in any such course. 18% were taking part in an ongoing course at the time of the survey and 62% had already taken part in at least one course in the past.

course at the time of the survey. Course participants assessed their German speaking skills more frequently as average or good. Nevertheless, the self-assessed language level of older refugees remains below that of the younger ones, even with course participation: in contrast to the elderly, 11% of younger refugees reported being able to speak German very well and 35% well in 2018. Only 16% could do so rather poorly in 2018 and 2% not at all (Figure 5).

### Integration into the labor market in Germany

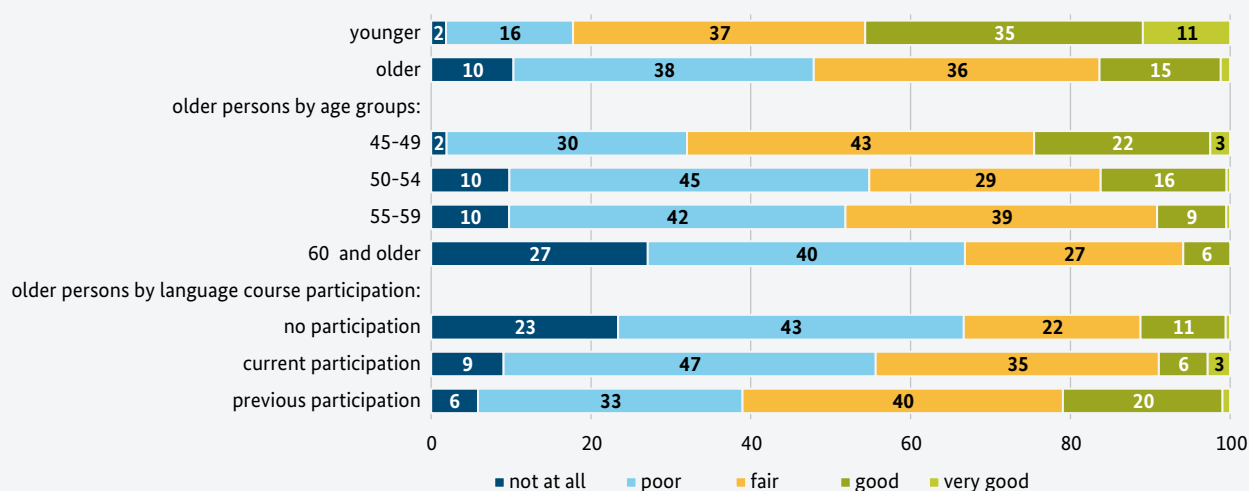
A different picture emerges with regard to the labor market: while older refugees in 2016 considered future participation in education in Germany to be rather unlikely, they assessed their participation in the labor market after two years as more likely (average: 5.8 on a scale of 0 to 10; older people younger than 65: 6.3). However, their expectations were lower than those of those younger than 45 (average: 6.8). Consistent with this difference in assessments, the labor force participation of older refugees showed less of an increase than that of younger ones. Labor force participation among older refugees increased from 9% to 14% between 2016 and 2018, while those under age 45 saw an increase more than twice as high, from 9% to 30% during this period. Thus, older refugees were less able than younger refugees to match their 2016 estimate of the likelihood of employment after two years.

The share of persons in education, training or internships increased from 5% to 9% among younger persons, whereas it remained unchanged at around 1% among older persons. On the other hand, 30% of

unemployed and 16% of employed older refugees took part in a language course and/or a labor market measure offered by the Federal Employment Agency in 2018 (total: 28%; integration or ESF-BAMF course: 20%), which is proportionately higher than among younger refugees (total: 20%; integration or ESF-BAMF course: 11%).

There are various reasons for the lower level of integration of older refugees into the labor market: above all, the significantly poorer German language skills and the lower average level of education are likely to play a central role. In addition, some are already beyond working age. In 2018, 8% of older refugees were 65 or older, and another 14% were between 60 and 64 years old. Nevertheless, if only older people under 67 are considered, the labor force participation rate hardly changes (15%). In addition, the (re-)employment probability in Germany generally decreases with increasing age. This is due to specific problems of older people that often make it difficult to place them in the labor market, such as health restrictions, a lack of qualifications or IT and foreign language skills, and limited spatial mobility (Homrighausen/Wolf 2018). These general problems are exacerbated in older refugees by other aspects specific to fleeing or migration, such as a lack of German language skills or a poorer psychological constitution due to experiences before or during their flight (Metzing et al. 2020: 69f.; Walther et al. 2020). Furthermore, it happens that degrees and professional experience from the country of origin are not (fully) recognized or documents are missing (Brenzel et al. 2019; Jurt/Sperisen 2020). However, the latter affects older and younger refugees in the same way.

**Figure 5: Self-assessed German language skills (speaking) of refugees by age and language course participation in 2018 (in percent)**



Source: IAB-BAMF SOEP survey of refugees, v35; 2016-2018.

Base: 4,287 respondents. Data weighted.

Note: Values below 2% are not shown.



There are also gender differences in labor force participation in both groups: older men were slightly more likely to be employed than older women in 2018 (men: 17%, women: 10%). Among younger refugees, women not only had lower labor force participation (9 vs. 38%), but also education participation than men (4 vs. 11%; see also Niehues 2021). The generally lower labor force participation of women in combination with the higher proportion of women among older refugees is thus also likely to help explain the lower average labor force participation of older refugees.

What is not lacking, however, is a desire for employment: 58% of unemployed working-age elderly (younger than 67) in 2018 said they would definitely want to work in the future. This desire was much stronger among older men than among older women (women: 39%; men: 72%). Only 5% of older men and 26% of older working-age women said they certainly did not want to work. Overall, the desire to work was much stronger in the youngest age groups of the elderly than in higher ones. The high motivation is also consistent with findings from qualitative research: the desire to work is rooted in the desire for financial independence and the feeling of being able to act and contribute to society (SVR-Forschungsbereich 2017).

In summary, it can be stated that older refugees mostly, and more frequently than younger ones, came to Germany as part of a family. Most asylum procedures were completed in 2018, with protection status mostly granted. Overall, older refugees have somewhat less schooling but more extensive vocational training and work experience than younger ones. Nevertheless, they were less likely to be employed in Germany, but this is probably not due to their motivation but, among other things, frequently due to their lack or poor knowledge of the German language.

## Family and social inclusion in Germany

For various reasons, such as separation from the immediate and extended family network due to the flight, older refugees are particularly affected by social isolation. The local family thus plays an important role in the lives of older refugees. It can provide support and stability; older people are also often responsible for family cohesion (Olbermann 2019). However, unfavorable dynamics can also arise for them, e.g., relying on translation assistance from family members (Jurt/Sperisen 2020). In view of the low educational and labor market participation and the more difficult language acquisition of older refugees, family and other

social contacts in Germany are therefore likely to be of particular importance.

### Family

Couple households with at least one younger child (younger than 17) represented the most common household constellation among refugees aged 45 to 49 in 2018, accounting for half of households, followed by single households (17%) and single parents (14%). In the older age groups, these were proportionately less common, with the exception of single parents. In contrast, couple households without children or only with older children gained in importance. In the oldest age group (60 and older), single-person households were also more frequent again (22%) (Figure 6). This is due in part to their higher proportion of widowed (21 vs. 6-10%) and divorced persons compared to the other age groups of older refugees (10 vs. 4-6%), as well as the higher proportion of adult children living independently.

Compared to older ones, younger refugees under 45 were significantly more likely to live in single-person households (44 vs. 17%), but couple households with younger children also accounted for a substantial share of households in this age group (33%) (Figure 6). At the same time, due to a more pronounced family orientation of young women (Niehues 2021), there are substantial gender differences among younger people: 58% of men under 45 lived alone and only 23% as a couple with at least one younger child. By contrast, among young women, only 8% lived in single-person households and 59% in couple households with younger children. Single parents were also more likely to be female (women: 17%; men: 3%). Among older refugees, similar, but less pronounced, gender differences emerge: older women were less likely to live alone (12 vs. 20%) and as a couple with younger children (11 vs. 44%), but more likely to live as single parents (25 vs. 6%) and in other types of housing than older men (15 vs. 5%) (not shown).

The comparison with persons without refugee experience (Figure 7) shows that older refugees in higher age groups still live much more frequently with their own children in the household. This is particularly clear in the oldest age group: while the majority of the population without refugee experience at this age lived as a couple without children (55%) or alone (37%), this was much less common among older refugees (27 and 22%). Among other things, this may be due to the rather high number of children (Gambaro et al. 2018: 910) and the lower average age of refugees in the oldest

age group (60 and older) (refugees: 65.2 years; population without refugee experience: 72.1 years).

The comparison with persons without refugee experience (Figure 7) shows that older refugees in higher age groups still live much more frequently with their own children in the household. This is particularly clear in the oldest age group: while the majority of the population without refugee experience at this age lived as a couple without children (55%) or alone (37%), this was much less common among older refugees (27 and 22%). Among other things, this may be due to the rather high number of children (Gambaro et al. 2018: 910) and the lower average age of refugees in the oldest age group (60 and older) (refugees: 65.2 years; population without refugee experience: 72.1 years).

In the family situation of refugees, it is also relevant that relatives often (still) live abroad, which has a negative impact on their life satisfaction, especially if they have their own children or partner (Gambaro et al. 2018). The separation from family members can be highly stressful for older refugees and make their settling in Germany more difficult, as family integration and cohesion are of particular importance to them (Olbermann 2019; SVR-Forschungsbereich 2017). For refugees, the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey provides information on the place of residence of the spouse, minor children, parents, siblings, and more distant relatives, but not of adult children and grandchildren. The spouse of 19% of older refugees lived abroad in 2018, and 19% also had at least one minor child living abroad. In addition, the parents of 37% of older refugees lived abroad, most commonly those aged 45-49

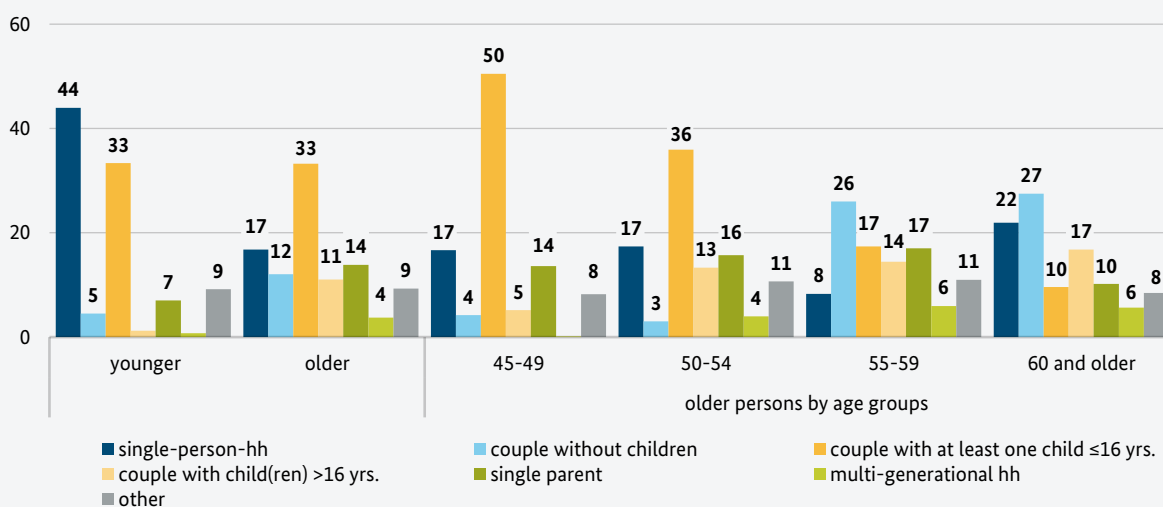
(55%). Siblings and/or more distant relatives also often lived abroad.

The situation of younger refugees under the age of 45 was similar, although their parents lived abroad more often (72 vs. 37%), presumably because the parents of older refugees were more often already deceased. However, they were less likely to have minor children (6 vs. 19%) or partners (11 vs. 19%) abroad. Here, the gender ratio is reversed from that of household composition: younger men had a partner (14 vs. 4%) and/or at least one minor child (7 vs. 2%) abroad more often than younger women. The fact that younger people in 2018 were less likely to live with a partner and their own child(ren) in a joint household and also less likely to have members of the nuclear family living abroad is likely due to the higher proportion of single people, especially among younger men: 53% of younger refugees (men: 64%; women: 26%) are single compared to only 4% of older people. Often, they simply have not (yet) started a family.

### Social inclusion

Contacts with Germans can counteract the feeling of social isolation among refugees (Siegert 2019) and are associated with an increased sense of well-being (de Paiva Lareiro et al. 2020). They also provide important sources of help and information (Siegert 2019) as well as opportunities for language use, thus promoting language acquisition. On the other hand, sufficient knowledge of German and opportunities to meet are initially prerequisites for building relationships with Germans (Scheible/Rother 2017). However, older ref-

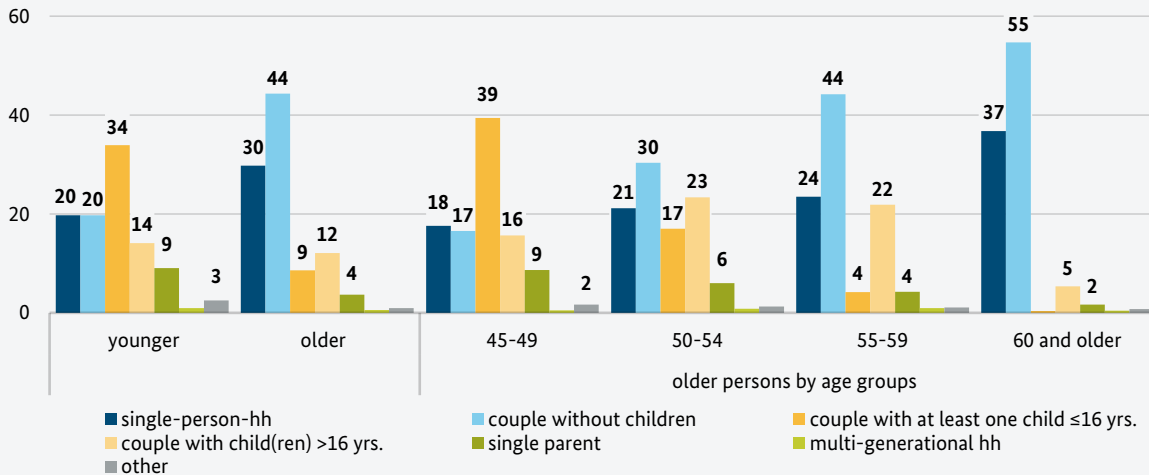
Figure 6: Household composition of refugees by age in 2018 (in percent)



Source: IAB-BAMF SOEP survey of refugees, v35; 2018.

Base: 4,376 respondents. Data weighted.

Note: Values below 2% are not shown.

**Figure 7: Household composition of the resident population without refugee experience by age in 2018 (in percent)**

Source: SOEP, v35; 2018.

Basis: 25,217 respondents. Data weighted.

Note: Values below 2% are not shown.

Older refugees often lack not only German language skills (see above), but also opportunities to meet and find it difficult to establish contacts. This can lead to them feeling lonely and excluded (Jurt/Sperisen 2020). The lack of contact opportunities can be explained, among other things, by the low level of integration of older people into the education system and labor market, since the quantity and frequency of contacts with Germans correlate positively with educational and labor market participation (Brenzel et al. 2019).

The available data show that older people have less regular contact with Germans than younger refugees. While the frequency of contact in the neighborhood is similar in both groups, it is lower for older people, especially at work and in friendship relationships. Overall, 46% of older refugees never or rarely had contact with Germans in 2018 (younger: 31%). Only 28% had contact daily or several times a week (younger: 45%). In both age groups, men have more frequent and regular contact than women. In addition, there is an overall negative trend across the age cohorts within the group of older refugees: while 38% of those aged 45-49 had contact with Germans at least several times a week in 2018, this was the case for only 10% of the oldest age group (60 and older). And while 37% of those aged 45-49 never or rarely interacted with Germans, this was the case for almost two-thirds of the oldest age group (65%) (Figure 8).

In summary, older refugees are more likely to live with family members, including (older) children, than younger men and than people without refugee experience. This can protect them from social isolation

and provide support, especially given their lower educational and labor market participation. Families will also become even more important as they age. The low social contacts of older refugees with Germans, especially among the older age groups and among women, also reveal that their social participation is still relatively in its infancy.

## Concerns and satisfaction in different areas of life

In order to learn more about their living conditions, the satisfaction and concerns of older refugees in various areas of life are examined below. In addition to the asylum procedure, their own health, their own economic situation and their general satisfaction with life are of central importance in this regard. The respondents were able to indicate whether they were not concerned, somewhat concerned or very concerned about the respective area of life. In addition, they were asked to indicate how satisfied they were in these areas on a scale of 0 "completely dissatisfied" to 10 "completely satisfied".

### Concerns about future prospects in Germany

About a quarter of older refugees were either somewhat (25%) or very (27%) concerned about their asylum procedure in 2018 (Figure 10). This was particularly the case for those whose procedures had not yet been completed (some concerns: 28%; major concerns: 68%) or who had a temporary suspension of deportation

status (some concerns: 14%; major concerns: 78%).<sup>7</sup> In addition, concerns about not being able to stay in Germany (67% with some or major concerns) and/or having to return to their country of origin (73% with some or major concerns) were widespread among older refugees (Figure 10). This is consistent with the pronounced desire of older refugees to stay: in 2018, 88% of older refugees said they wanted to stay in Germany forever. Another 16% wanted to live here for a few more years. 41% of older refugees were also somewhat or very concerned about not being able to return to their country of origin (Figure 10). However, these concerns and the intention to stay were similarly pronounced among younger refugees, so they do not represent a special feature among older refugees.

### Corners about own health

In both the population with and without refugee experience, concerns about one's own health increased with age in 2018 and intensified. Satisfaction with one's own health decreased accordingly (Figure 12). As the literature shows, this is mainly explained by the poorer physical condition that comes with age. Although older individuals with and without refugee experience do not differ on average in their physical health (Metzing et al. 2020), older refugees were more

concerned about their health in 2018. Nonetheless, in most age groups, they reported similar satisfaction with their health on average as individuals without refugee experience. The exception is the oldest age group, in which refugees were not only significantly more likely to be very concerned (56%) than persons of the same age without refugee experience (20%), but also more dissatisfied with their health (5.0 vs. 5.9) (Figure 12), despite being younger on average (see above). It is possible that the poorer medical care before the flight and the stresses and strains of fleeing had a particularly adverse effect on them.

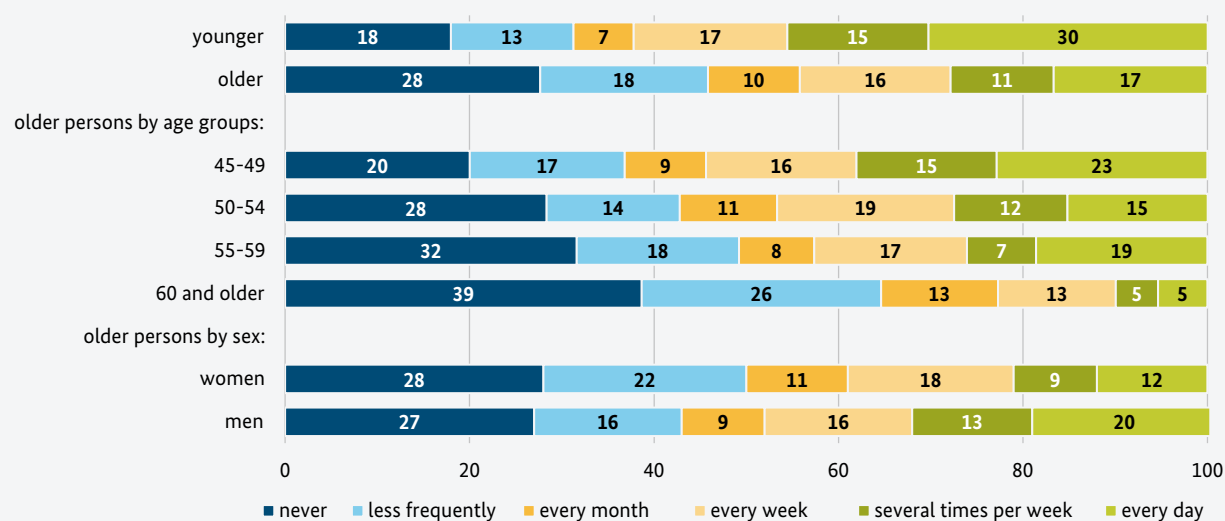
Younger refugees under 45 years of age were significantly more satisfied with their health (8.2 vs. 6.1) and less concerned than older refugees (41 vs. 73 % with some or major concerns), but also than persons of the same age without refugee experience (satisfaction: 8.2 vs. 7.3; 41 vs. 58% with some or major concerns). This is related to their above-average physical condition, which is not only better than that of older refugees, as expected, but also than that of persons of the same age without refugee experience (Metzing et al. 2020).

### Concerns about one's own economic situation

Refugees of all ages were overall more worried and had bigger concerns about their own economic situation in 2018 than people without refugee experience and were less satisfied with their personal income. This is likely in part due to higher rates of unemployment, lower income (de Paiva Lareiro et al. 2020), and a different employment structure among refugees compared to the population of the same age without

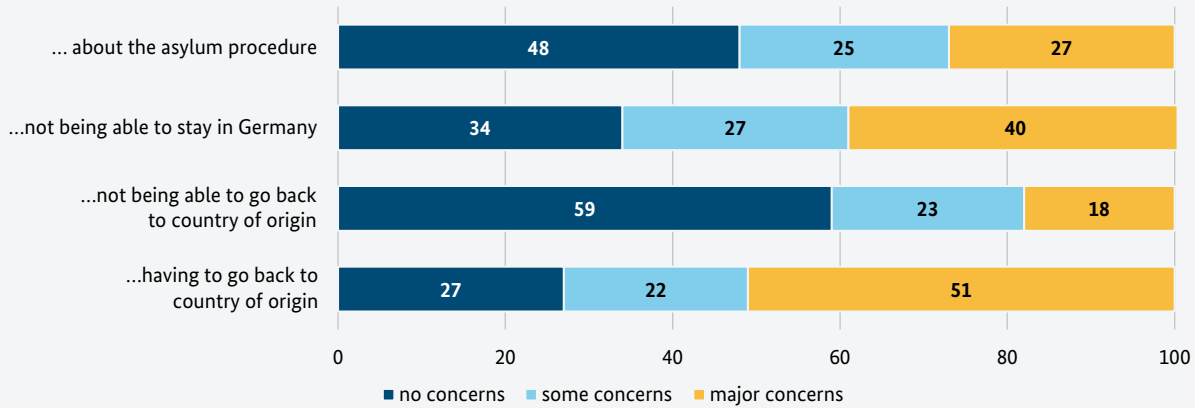
<sup>7</sup> Even persons with a granted protection status were still partly concerned about the outcome of their asylum procedure despite their completed asylum procedure: 25% of this group of persons were somewhat concerned about it and 18% were very concerned. This seems to be mainly due to concerns about a possible revocation or non-renewal of their residence permit in the case of beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. However, concerns about family members' asylum procedures could also play a role.

Figure 8: Frequency with which refugees spent time with Germans in 2018, by age and gender of refugees (in percent)



Source: IAB-BAMF SOEP survey of refugees, v35; 2018. Base: 4,378 respondents. Data weighted.

**Figure 9: Older refugees' concerns around the asylum process in 2018 (in percent)**



Source: IAB-BAMF SOEP survey of refugees, v35; 2018.  
 Base: 768-782 respondents (varies by response behavior). Data weighted.

refugee experience (Brenzel et al. 2019; Kosyakova 2020). Among refugees, economic concerns also increased in the older age groups (Figure 13).

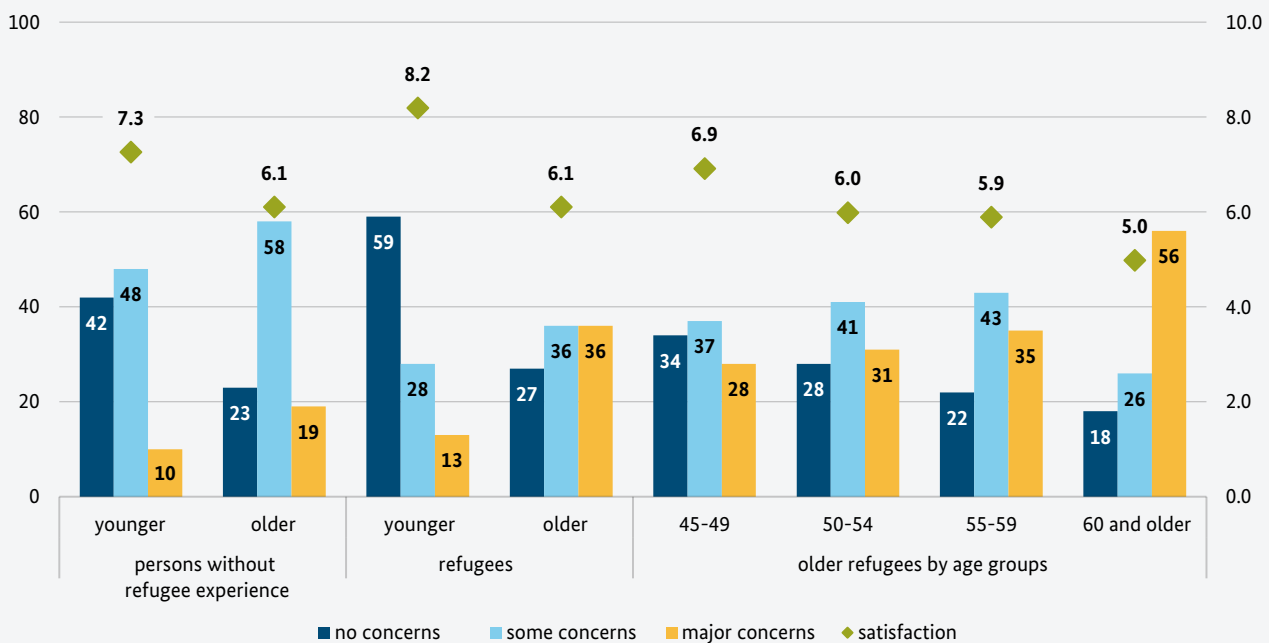
The exception is again the oldest age group (60 and older), who were less likely to worry than younger refugees (no worries: 28 vs. 11-25%) but were most dissatisfied with personal income (4.5 vs. 5.0- 5.4) (Figure 13). The latter is unsurprising given that they received the lowest average net household income. Among the population without refugee experience, it

was also the oldest age group that was least worried (no worries: 58 vs. 40-43%).

**General life satisfaction**

On average, older refugees were moderately satisfied with their lives in 2018 (average: 7.05 out of 10). Despite older refugees' greater health and economic concerns on average, their more frequent unemployment, and their fewer contacts with Germans, there are no significant differences in the general life sat-

**Figure 10: Worries about and satisfaction with own health of refugees and persons without refugee experience by age in 2018 (in percent and average values)**



Source: SOEP and IAB-BAMF SOEP survey of refugees, v35; 2018.  
 Base: 29,875 respondents. Data weighted.

isfaction between older and younger refugees. When these factors are considered, older refugees were even more satisfied with their lives on average than younger refugees.<sup>8</sup>

Previous findings show that refugees who live with a partner and/or their own children are more satisfied with their lives (de Paiva Lareiro et al. 2020). Marriage and family could thus have a protective effect, as living together as a family can protect against loneliness and its negative psychological consequences (Beutel et al. 2017). As younger refugees were less likely to be married (33%) and more likely to live alone (44%) than older ones (62 and 17%, respectively), they were less likely to benefit from this protective effect so far. This is especially true for younger men. In addition, younger people lived more often in communal accommodation (27 vs. 14%), which may have an additional negative impact on well-being (de Paiva Lareiro et al. 2020). It is also conceivable that older people are more likely to adapt attitudes and expectations to their living situation. A comparison of older persons with and without refugee experience reveals, similarly to younger per-

sons under 45, a significant difference in general life satisfaction to the detriment of the refugees (average values: 7.05 and 7.30; younger persons: 6.98 to 7.47). Older refugees from Afghanistan (average: 7.63) and Iraq (7.51) report higher satisfaction on average, while persons from countries other than the three largest countries of origin (Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq) report lower satisfaction.

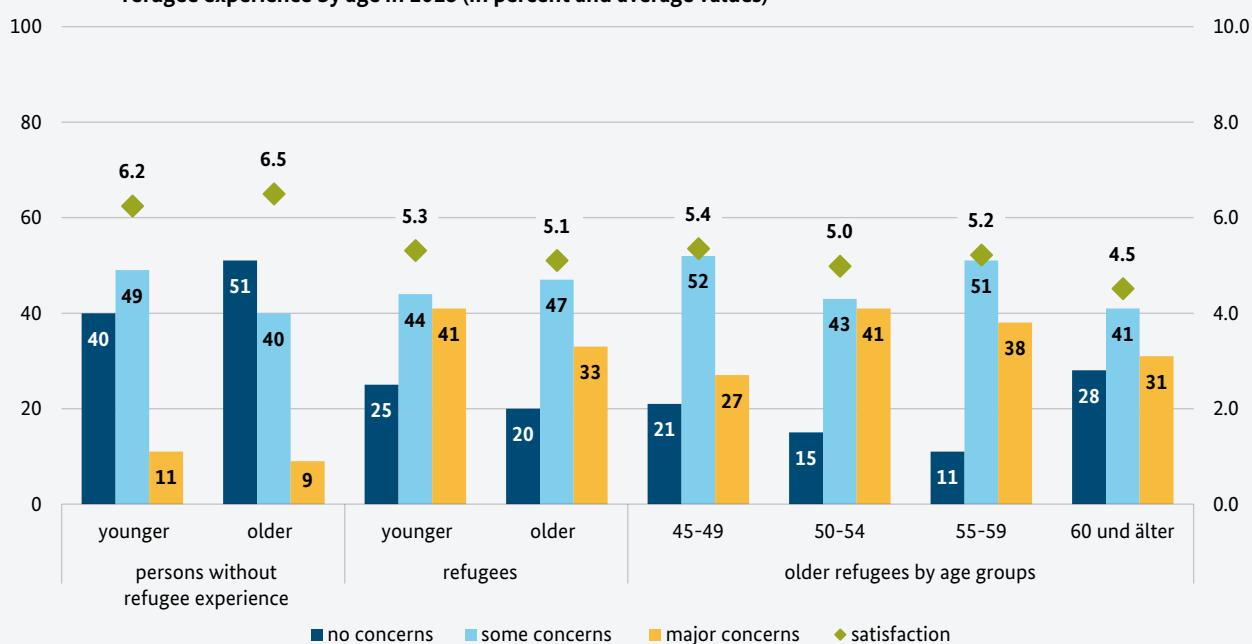
This chapter shows that many older refugees are worried about their asylum procedure, their health and their economic situation, with health and economic concerns being even more prominent in the older age groups. The oldest age group plays a somewhat special role in this regard. Despite greater worries and lower social and structural integration, older refugees were no less satisfied with their lives than younger ones. Marriage and family could be a protective factor here.

## Summary and conclusion

The analyses of the living situations of older refugees show that they differ in important ways from younger refugees under 45: they have a higher proportion of women and a different composition by country of origin. A central point is their much lower integration into the labor market. Not only are older refugees less likely to be employed, but their professional integration is also slower over the years. Decisive factors here include their significantly lower German language skills,

<sup>8</sup> This result is based on a weighted linear regression, not presented in detail here, with the general life satisfaction of refugees as the dependent variable and membership of the group of younger or older refugees as the central explanatory variable. Concerns about their own economic situation and health, frequency of contact with Germans and employment situation were included in the model as further explanatory factors. In addition, the analysis controlled for self-assessed German language skills (speaking), origin, and gender.

**Figure 11: Concerns about own economic situation and satisfaction with personal income of refugees and persons without refugee experience by age in 2018 (in percent and average values)**



Source: SOEP and IAB-BAMF SOEP survey of refugees, v35; 2018. Basis: 29,619 respondents. Data weighted.



which testify to a learning process that becomes more difficult with age and to different starting conditions (Scheible/Rother 2017). Almost half of the older refugees stated in 2018 that they could not speak German at all or rather poorly. Here, the situation is even more precarious in the older age groups. On the other hand, older refugees have an advantage over younger ones, at least in terms of professional qualifications, since they have been able to complete vocational training more frequently with a similar level of participation and thus more often have formalized knowledge. Added to this is their extensive professional experience. However, due to their higher participation in school and vocational training as well as in the labor market, younger refugees will presumably be able to compensate for or even reverse this disadvantage in the future.

Next, older people have less frequent and less regular contact with Germans than younger refugees, which is even more pronounced in the older age groups. This is compounded by their poorer physical and mental health (Metzing et al. 2020), which is also reflected in greater worries about and lower satisfaction with their own health. With higher age, health concerns increase even more and satisfaction decreases. With regard to their economic situation, older refugees worried slightly more often but on average less than younger ones and were slightly less satisfied with their income. Despite less integration into the labor market, poorer German language skills, fewer social contacts with Germans, and greater concerns about their health and economic situation, older refugees are not less satisfied with their lives than younger refugees. In fact, when controlling for these characteristics, they are more satisfied. Here, marriage and family life, among other things, seem to have a protective effect. The great importance of family for the lives of older refugees, which is also evident in the literature (e.g., Jurt/Sperisen 2020), is also reflected in the fact that older refugees mostly, and more often than younger ones, came to Germany accompanied by family members and lived with them more often in 2018 than younger refugee men, but less often than younger refugee women. And language deficits and less contact with Germans are also likely to make family even more important.

Based on these results, in addition to health, which has been discussed in more detail elsewhere (e.g., Metzing et al. 2020), three areas can be identified in which particular challenges emerge with regard to older refugees: German language skills, the labor market and social inclusion.

**Language skills** are of central importance for integration in the various areas of society. For example, German language skills are important in order to cope independently in everyday life, to establish social contacts, to succeed in the labor market, and to communicate needs and wishes. Although older people who have taken part in a language course have better German skills on average, these still lag significantly behind younger refugees. Therefore, the prerequisites, needs and abilities of older people should be considered even more in integration and other language courses, even if they often only make up a smaller proportion among all course participants. Other older immigrant groups would also benefit from this.

Secondly, older refugees have as yet untapped potential for the **labor market**. With an average age of 53.4 years in 2018, they are still quite young. In addition, older male refugees in particular have extensive professional experience as well as a high motivation to work. However, a discrepancy between actual and desired employment is apparent. In 2018, only 15% of older working-age refugees (younger than 67) were also employed. However, more than three-quarters of the unemployed of the same age said they would definitely (58%) or probably (21%) want to be employed. This desire was particularly strong among younger older people and men. However, their German language skills are often still inadequate and many lack school and vocational qualifications. Increasing integration of older refugees into the German education system, e.g., to catch up on educational or vocational qualifications, will however prove difficult because they are less willing to do so due to family obligations, among other things. On the other hand, the amount of second- and third-chance educational opportunities, which sometimes vary between federal states and are not always transparent for refugees (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung 2020: 19), can also make access more difficult. However, older people would benefit in many ways from integration into the labor market, including opportunities to speak German, build social relationships outside the family, and also feel that they are making a contribution and are needed. Targeting and placing older people, taking into account their respective experience and knowledge, could help older refugees gain a foothold in the labor market.

Third, greater **social inclusion** of older refugees is a challenge. In the entire group of older refugees, but especially in the oldest age group (60 and older), there is still a considerable need to catch up. However,

intensifying contact could bring a variety of benefits and go beyond purely social aspects, such as social integration and protection against loneliness and social isolation. For example, in addition to existing counseling services such as migration and asylum social counseling and courses to empower migrants in everyday life (e.g., MiA courses), social contacts represent additional sources of assistance as well as information about German society and its structures, including educational opportunities, the job market, finding housing, or leisure activities. In addition, such contacts provide opportunities for refugees to practice German and gain greater confidence in German language use. Here, for example, the creation, further development, and increased promotion of meeting places and special tandem programs would be conceivable so that they are also as well adapted as possible to the needs and prerequisites of older refugees.

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