

Development of German language skills, worries and life satisfaction among refugees during the first year of the Covid 19 pandemic: Fifth wave of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees

Niehues, Wenke

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Fifth wave of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees

Development of German language skills, worries and life satisfaction among refugees during the first year of the Covid 19 pandemic

by Wenke Niehues

SUMMARY

- This is the fifth year that the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey has analysed the life situation of refugees who came to Germany between 2013 and 2016. In 2020, for the first time, more than half of the respondents (52 percent) assessed their German language skills as „good“ to „very good“. On average, the German language skills of refugees also increased from year to year, but a flattening of the learning curve can be observed from 2018 onwards. This means that the average increase in German language skills from 2019 to 2020 is no longer statistically significant.
- As well as prior to the pandemic, group differences in German language skills are still evident in 2020. Especially women with small children, lower educated and older refugees reported 2020 comparatively lower German language skills.
- The proportion of people who “worried a lot“ about aspects of their lives such as their prospects of being able to stay in Germany, their economic situation or health has decreased over time. For refugees with a granted protection status the proportion was higher shortly after their arrival, i.e. from 2016 to 2018, yet being longer in Germany the proportion decreased from 2018 to 2020. A similar trend can be seen among respondents with an ongoing procedure. Only in the case of tolerated respondents did the proportion of highly concerned respondents remain stable over the years at a comparatively high level.
- Contrary to expectations, there was no increase in the number of highly worried refugees during the first year of the pandemic. Only among tolerated refugees did the proportion of persons who worried a lot about their own health increase statistically significantly from 2019 to 2020.
- In light of the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020, another finding is surprising: while the average general life satisfaction among refugees hardly changed from 2016 to 2019, it increased from 2019 to 2020. However, this does not affect all refugees equally: 27 percent of respondents were more satisfied in 2020, 56 percent were similarly satisfied in both years and 17 percent were less satisfied in 2020.



The majority of people who come to Germany to seek protection in the recent years has been living in Germany for several years now. While in the early years of arrival the focus of the survey has been on the first steps of integration, in the fifth year of the survey the focus has shifted to the progress of integration processes. Previous research has already been able to show some positive developments. For example, refugees¹ who arrived between 2013 and 2016 feel mostly welcome in Germany and the vast majority wants to stay in Germany in the long term (de Paiva Lareiro et al. 2020). In addition, they have been able to enter the German labour market more quickly than previous refugee groups (Brücker et al. 2020) and their German language skills have improved continuously over the years (Niehues et al. 2021).

However, previous research also shows that not all groups succeeded equally in arriving and integrating in Germany quickly and that there are differences between the genders. Older refugees, for example, found it more difficult to learn the German language, to establish social relationships and to integrate into the labour market (Maddox 2021). Even after five years of residence, the employment rate among refugee women is lower than among refugee men (Kosyakova et al. 2021). The reasons for these differences are manifold and range from individual challenges (e.g. lower level of education) and reasons (e.g. family orientation instead of employment orientation) to structural hurdles (e.g. lack of regular childcare provision; Maddox 2021; Niehues 2021; Tissot et al. 2019; Tissot 2021).

However, the Covid 19 pandemic poses a new challenge for the integration process, especially for the vulnerable group of refugees. It seems reasonable to assume that the Covid 19 pandemic and its manifold effects could hit refugees particularly hard. This seems to be particularly true in the case of the labour market, as data shows that refugees experienced a stronger increase in unemployment rates during the first „lockdown“ (March to May 2020). They lost their jobs more often and were less able to make use of short-time work or home-office arrangements than people with a different² or without a migrant background (Brücker

et al. 2021).³ Moreover, shortly after the end of the first „lockdown“, four out of ten refugees assumed that their German language skills would deteriorate as a result of the pandemic (Niehues et al. 2021). Since language skills are a key prerequisite for integration into other areas of society such a decrease could have far-reaching consequences for subsequent integration steps.

Studies that look at the psychosocial stress during the pandemic, however, come to a more differentiated picture and point out that refugees can or could possibly be better at absorbing the psychological stress caused by the pandemic than people without or with a different migration background in Germany. For example, Entringer et al. (2021) show that the psychological stress among refugees remained unchanged during the first „lockdown“. Although loneliness increased in all population groups during this period, the increase for refugees was less pronounced, so that the values between the groups converged. People without a migration background felt thus on average as lonely during the first „lockdown“ as refugees felt in 2017. However, due to high baseline levels of psychosocial distress among refugees, even small increases or the slowing down of improvements in mental well-being during the pandemic should be viewed with concern, as they may pose an additional hurdle to the integration process.

With the data from the fifth wave of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (Infobox 1), information is now available from five consecutive survey years (2016 to 2020), which can be used to trace the integration processes of refugees who entered Germany between 2013 and 2016.⁴ Since the data for the fifth wave was collected between August 2020 and February 2021, it is now possible to examine how in the course of the first year of the Covid 19 pandemic integration processes have changed compared to the previous years (2016 to 2019). It should be noted that the events surrounding the Covid 19 pandemic were and are

1 The term refugee is not used in the legal sense, but as a collective term for persons who have applied for international protection in Germany, regardless of whether or how this application was decided (see also Kroh et al. (2016) and Infobox 1).
2 In this report, „other migration background“ refers to persons who have a migrant background but not a refugee background. These can be third-country nationals who have not applied for asylum in Germany or persons with EU citizenship.

3 Although employment rates among refugees also rose more quickly after the first „lockdown“ in 2020, due to a slower increase in employment rates after the „lockdown“ compared to the years before the pandemic, long-term negative consequences of the pandemic can be assumed (Brücker et al. 2021).
4 At the time of the survey in 2020, 2 percent of the respondents have lived in Germany for less than four years, 16 percent for four years, 65 percent for five years, 14 percent for six years and 4 percent for more than six years.

Development of German language skills

Language is considered a key to integration. A good knowledge of German is important for participation and integration in numerous areas of society, such as building social relationships, taking up employment or participating in education (Esser 2006; Portes/Rumbaut, 2006).

In times of the Covid 19 pandemic, good German language skills further play an important role in order to access current information on the pandemic situation, Covid 19 rules or vaccinations against Covid 19. Although crucial information in Germany is often provided by public authorities in several languages, it can be assumed that refugees with a good to very good command of the German language are better able to grasp the dynamic events surrounding the pandemic and, for example, to register for a (booster) vaccination. Accordingly, results by Wulkotte et al. (2022) show that in November/December 2021, the vaccination rate was higher among people with German as their mother tongue or with very good self-assessed German skills than among people with poor German skills.

Previous analyses showed that refugees who entered Germany between 2013 and 2016 have continuously improved their German language skills since their arrival in Germany and have attended integration or other language courses (Niehues et al. 2021). However, not all groups have succeeded in acquiring the German language at the same pace. Especially women with small children, older refugees or refugees with a lower level of education have so far reported poorer German language skills compared to men, younger and more highly educated refugees. In addition, women with small children in particular reported structural hurdles in accessing integration courses (Tissot et al. 2021). A greater unfamiliarity with learning new languages among people with a lower educational background and among elderly people may have contributed to different language learning trajectories (Niehues et al. 2021). However, analyses with data from 2019 indicate that, over time, women with small children, lower-educated and older refugees in particular have increasingly succeeded in building up intermediate German language skills.

Whereas in the first period after arrival in Germany the focus of analyses was on the rapid acquisition of basic German language skills by refugees, over time the focus has shifted to the maintenance and development of advanced German language skills. In principle, a dis-

inction can be made between different learning phases in the acquisition of a second language: A steeper learning curve with greater learning progress at the beginning of the learning process is followed by a flatter learning curve when language skills are already advanced (Hartshorne, 2006 et al. 2018; Kosyakova et al. 2021). Accordingly, it can be expected that refugees with increasing residence and advancing German language skills will report lower increases in language acquisition over time. Looking at the development of German language skills among refugees since 2016, the special situation of the pandemic that has prevailed since March 2020 must also be considered. An interruption or discontinuity of language courses, a switch to digital instruction in virtual classrooms or hybrid course models⁶, restrictions on contact with friends and at work, or even a job loss may have made it more difficult for refugees to acquire and maintain German language skills during this time.

Learning curve in German language acquisition flattened over the years

Every year since 2016, refugees have been asked to assess their German speaking, reading and writing skills on a 5-level scale as part of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey. For this report the different skills were combined into an overall German language index (see Infobox 2). Focussing on the individual answer categories in the upper part of the scale, it can be found that in 2020, for the first time, more than half of the respondents (52 per cent) stated that they had “good” to “very good” German skills. Over time, the increase in the number of persons with self-assessed “good” to “very good” German skills rose more strongly in the first years after entry to Germany than from 2018 to 2020 (2016 to 2017: +11 percentage points; 2017 to 2018: +10 percentage points, 2018 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020: +5 percentage points each). Corresponding to this, the share of persons with self-assessed. Corresponding to this, the share of persons with self-assessed German language skills in the lower range of the scale (“not at all” to “badly” German language skills) have decreased less since 2018 than it was the case in previous years (2016 to 2017: -8 percentage points; 2017 to 2018: -14 percentage points; 2018 to 2019: - 5 percentage points; 2019 to 2020: -2 percentage points). Overall,

⁶ To ensure that participants in integration courses can maintain their previous level of learning and continue to attend courses during the Covid 19 pandemic, a bundle of measures was introduced (introduction of online tutorials, five different course models). Further information on changes in the integration course during the Covid-19 pandemic can be found in Kay et al. (2021).

these developments indicate a flattening of the learning curve over time, although this has already begun from 2018 to 2019.

The flattening of the learning curve over time becomes even clearer when looking at the average German language skills. The average self-assessed German language skills increase from year to year, but from 2018 onwards these increases are smaller (increases from 2016 to 2017: 0.26 points; 2017 to 2018: 0.35 points; 2018 to 2019: 0.35 points; 2019 to 2020: 0.07 points; Figure 1).⁷ From 2019 to 2020, the increase is so moderate that it is no longer statistically significant. That means that in contrast to previous years the self-assessed German language skills of the refugees on average have not further improved from 2019 to 2020.

With data from prospective years, it will be easier to assess whether the developments from 2019 to 2020 are primarily a effect of the Covid 19 pandemic or whether this is in line with a long-term flattening of the learning curve. There may be different reasons for

the observed flattening of the learning curve. One possible explanation is that with the rather rough self-assessments in the context of the survey, improvements of the German language skills of advanced learners cannot be adequately mapped.

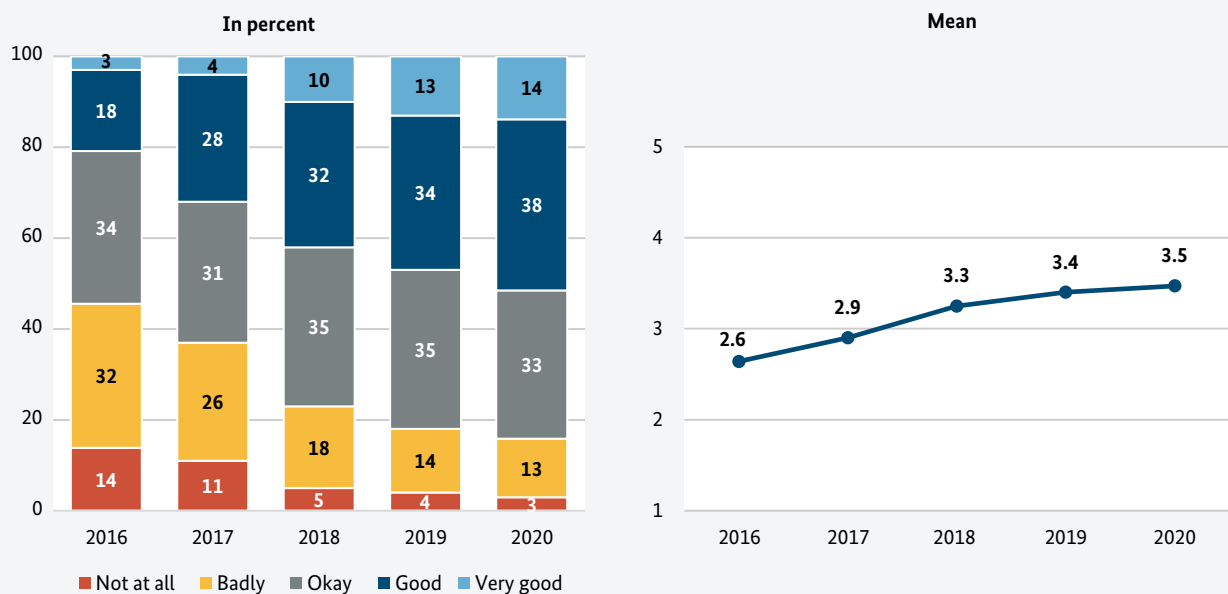
A greater awareness of errors or gaps in knowledge of more advanced learners may also lead to lower self-assessments. Another possibility is that with longer residence in Germany and, in many cases, advanced proficiency, the averaged learning curve across all respondents has flattened since 2018 due to the typical decline in learning progression, which would be consistent with findings from other studies such as Kosyakova et al. (2021). However, the Covid 19 pandemic could also have contributed to the fact that respondents assess their German language skills in 2020 to be worse than before the pandemic (e.g. due to fewer opportunities to use the German language) or that knowledge levels in fact did not improve further during the Covid 19 pandemic.

Differences in German language skills between subgroups still exist in 2020

As reported at the beginning, it is already known from previous analyses that it has not been equally possible for all refugees to acquire advanced German language skills. These differences between subgroups can still be found in 2020 (Figure 2). For example, men reported higher German

⁷ The results presented here are intra-individual comparisons between the survey years, so that statements can be made about the refugee population in the respective survey year. This is not the same as intra-individual trends over time, e.g. according to the length of stay in Germany. However, since the majority of the refugees in the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees arrived in 2015 and 2016, there is a high correlation.

Figure 1: Development of self-assessed German language skills from 2016 to 2020



Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2016-2020, data weighted.

INFOBOX 2: MEASURES

This report examines German language skills, worries and life satisfaction. Below their measurement is described.

German language skills

In the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, German language skills have been assessed annually since 2016 with the help of self-assessments for three areas (speaking, writing, reading). The following questions are used for this purpose:

- “How well can you speak German?”
- “How well can you write in German?”
- “How well can you read in German?”

On a 5-point scale (not at all; badly; okay; good; very well), respondents can assess their respective competences. For this report, the different skills were summarised with the help of an index. The data for the three questions were averaged so that the index also has a 5-point scale (1 = “no” knowledge of German; 5 = “very good” knowledge of German). The German language skills determined in this way allow a rough assessment of the language skills in everyday life.

Worries

In the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, worries have been assessed annually since 2016 on the basis of a 3-point scale (no worries at all, worries somewhat, worries a lot) among all respondents with regard to the prospects of staying in Germany, their own situation and the future of their country.

The following questions are used for this purpose:

- “Do you worry that you will be unable to stay in Germany?”
- “Do you worry about your own economic situation?”
- “Do you worry about your health?”

For this report, the response categories “worries somewhat” and “no worries at all” are grouped together so that the analyses can distinguish between people who worry “a lot” compared to people who worry “somewhat” or “not at all”.

Life satisfaction

General life satisfaction has been measured annually since 2016 with the question “How satisfied are you, currently with your life in general?” Respondents can rate their satisfaction on an 11-point scale from 0 (“completely dissatisfied”) to 10 (“completely satisfied”) to indicate their current satisfaction scores.

To distinguish respondents whose life satisfaction has worsened, remained unchanged or improved from 2019 to 2020, the difference between the satisfaction scores of 2019 and 2020 was calculated. If the difference was positive and greater than one point, respondents were assigned to the “increase” category. If the difference was negative and greater than one point, respondents were assigned to the “decrease” category. If the amount of the difference was less than one point, respondents were assigned to the category “unchanged”.

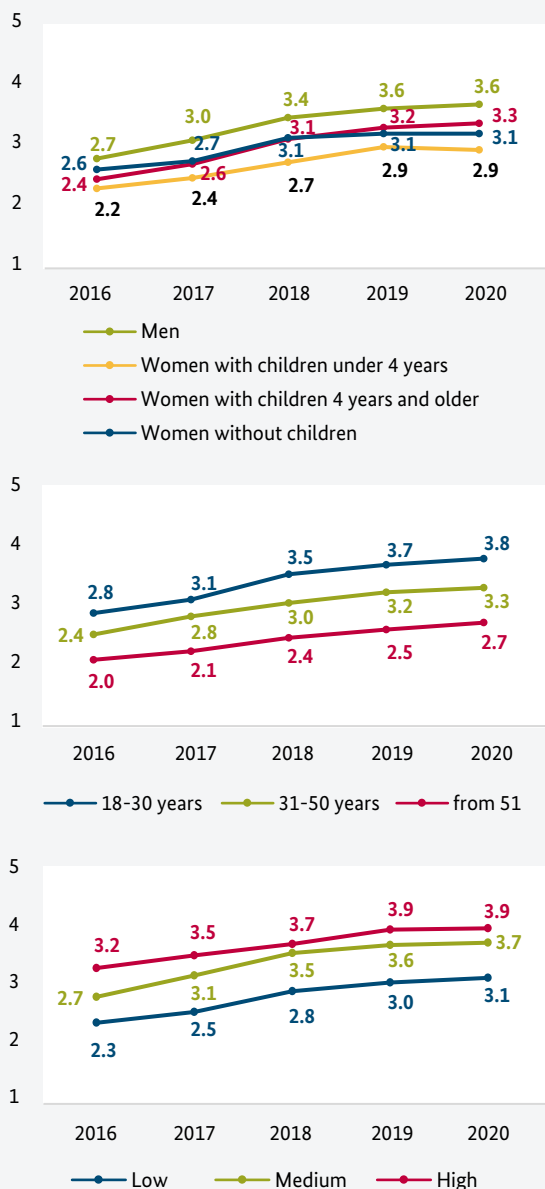
language skills on average in 2020 than women, regardless of the number of children women have.⁸ In addition, women with small children reported lower German language skills than women with older children. In 2020, refugees with a lower level of education reported lower German language skills than refugees with an medium or higher

level of education.⁹ Moreover, refugees with a medium level of education reported lower German language skills in 2020 than refugees with a high level of education. Younger refugees (18 to 30 years) assessed their German language skills on average in 2020 better than middle-aged

⁸ Similar to previous years, this report distinguishes between four subgroups in terms of family situation: a) men, b) women living with at least one child under four in the household (young children), c) women living with children aged 4 to 18 in the household (older children), d) women without children in the household.

⁹ In terms of educational background three groups are distinguished on the basis of the highest educational attainment: a) low (ISCED score between 0 and 1, corresponding to maximum primary education), b) medium (ISCED score between 2 and 4, corresponding to maximum secondary education) and c) high (ISCED score between 5 and 8, corresponding to tertiary education).

Figure 2: Development of German language skills from 2016 to 2020 by family situation, educational background and age (mean values)



Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2016-2020, data weighted.

respondents (31 to 50 years) and older refugees (51 years and older). In addition, middle-aged refugees reported better German language skills on average in 2020 than older refugees.

In order to test whether the factors for German language acquisition already known from previous years are also suitable for determining individual language levels among refugees in 2020, a linear regression was calculated. The results of the regression are consistent with results from previous years (de Paiva Lareiro et al. 2020; Niehues et

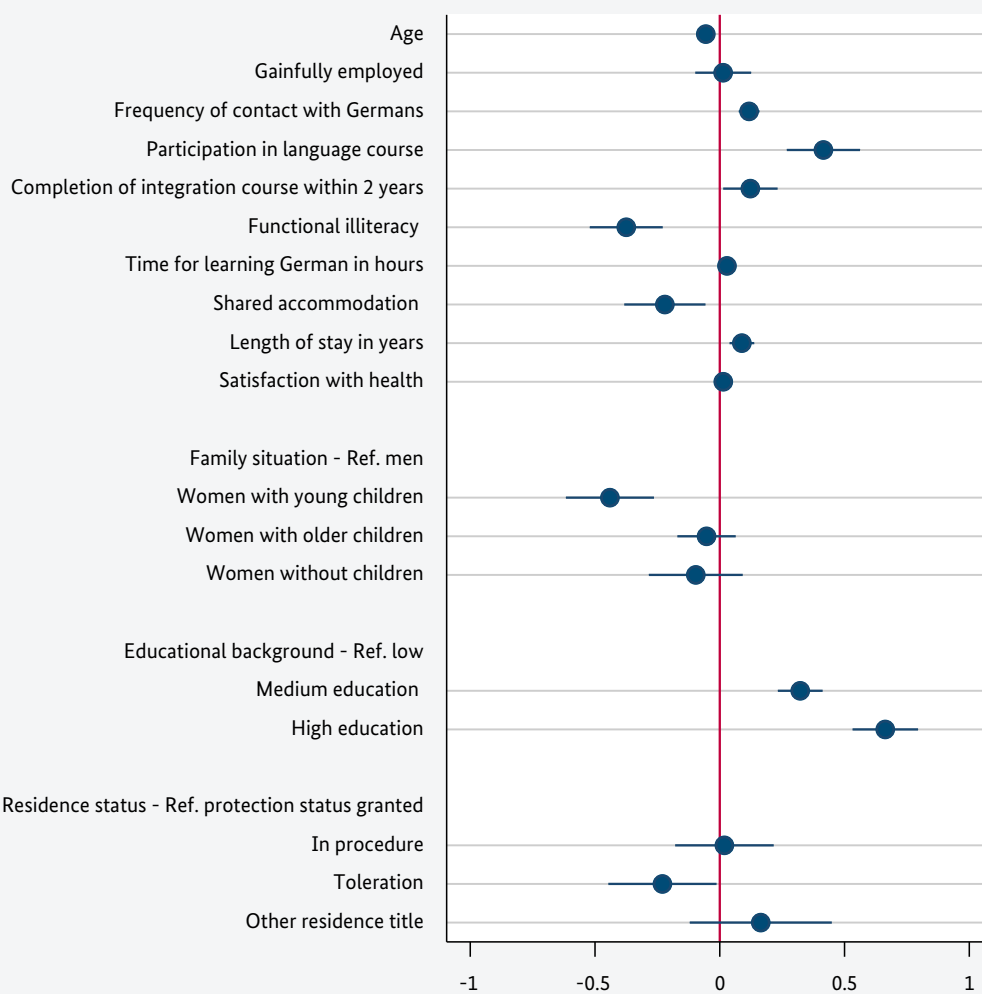
al. 2021). Figure 3 shows that in 2020, women with small children, older people, less educated people, refugees with less contact with Germans, refugees without German language courses, refugees in shared accommodations, refugees with a tolerated stay and with a shorter duration of stay still reported lower German language skills. The same applies to refugees who were illiterate when they entered the country. In 2020 no correlation could be found with employment or satisfaction with their own health.

In contrast to previous years, and in addition to the general participation in a language course, the study also investigated the relationship between the completion of an integration course¹⁰ within two years after arrival in Germany and self-assessed German language skills. The results show that such a timely completion of an integration course after arrival in Germany is positively related to self-assessed German language skills - independent of attending other language courses and the duration of stay. Further analyses of integration course attendance show that the proportion of people who attended or completed an integration course also increased from 2019 to 2020 compared to the previous year (attendance: +5 percentage points; completion: +6 percentage points).¹¹ Thus, many refugees also succeeded in attending or completing an integration course in the pandemic year 2020.

Overall, the analyses on German language acquisition thus show that the proportion of refugees with “good” to “very good” German language skills has increased over the survey years. Looking at the mean values, the self-assessed German language skills improved on average across all respondents every year from 2016 to 2020, still there is a clear flattening of the learning curve. As in the years prior to the pandemic, in 2020 there are still differences in self-assessed German language skills between subgroups and the correlations identified so far still apply. The results illustrate that in 2020, women with small children, older and less educated refugees still assess their German language skills lower. For the first time, the 2020 data showed that respondents who completed an integration course within two years of arrival reported better German language skills in 2020 than those who did not. This speaks in favour of a timely start and completion of an integration course after arrival in Germany.

¹⁰ In these analyses, an integration course is considered to have been completed if the respondent indicated the time of completion of the course, regardless of whether the respondent has successfully completed the course with a language certificate.

¹¹ By 2020, a total of 75 percent (men: 76 percent; women: 71 percent) of the respondents had started an integration course and 61 percent (men: 65 percent; women: 54 percent) had completed one.

Figure 3: Relationships between selected factors and self-assessed German language skills in 2020

Note: Linear regression analysis ($R^2 = 0.43$). The dots indicate the respective value of the coefficients, the lines stand for the corresponding 95% confidence interval. Characteristics for which a significant correlation with self-assessed German language skills could be calculated do not cross the red line (p -value < 0.05). Points to the left of the red line show a negative correlation, i.e. language skills are decreasing; points to the right of the red line show a positive correlation, i.e. language skills are increasing.

Functional illiteracy was measured at the time of arrival; participation in language course measures whether one has ever participated in a language course (incl. integration course) by 2020; controlled for country of origin.

Legend: Women with small children rate their German language skills lower than men in 2020.

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2016-2020, data weighted, $n = 2,894$.

Development of worries among refugees

When analysing the life situation of refugees, the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey also deals with the question of the extent to which this is characterised by worries about one's own situation. When a person experiences anxiety, he or she is afraid that a certain good could be threatened or that a certain condition could be imminent (e.g. a corona infection) (Stöber 1995). Especially in life situations with increased uncertainty, such as shortly after the arrival in Germany, when the asylum procedure has not yet been completed, when it is unclear how quickly one can learn the local language, or how quickly one can find a job in Germany, it is quite

possible that worries are heightened in certain areas of life. Previous analyses have already shown that the refugees from 2016 to 2018 were more concerned about their economic situation than people with a different or no migrant background in Germany (de Paiva Lareiro et al. 2020). Also this concern was more pronounced when refugees were unemployed.

Since asylum procedures are more and more completed over time and respondents are increasingly settled as well as gained access to the labour market, it can be assumed that concerns among refugees decrease on average over time. This should especially be the case if refugees have been granted protection status. If asylum procedures have not yet been completed or

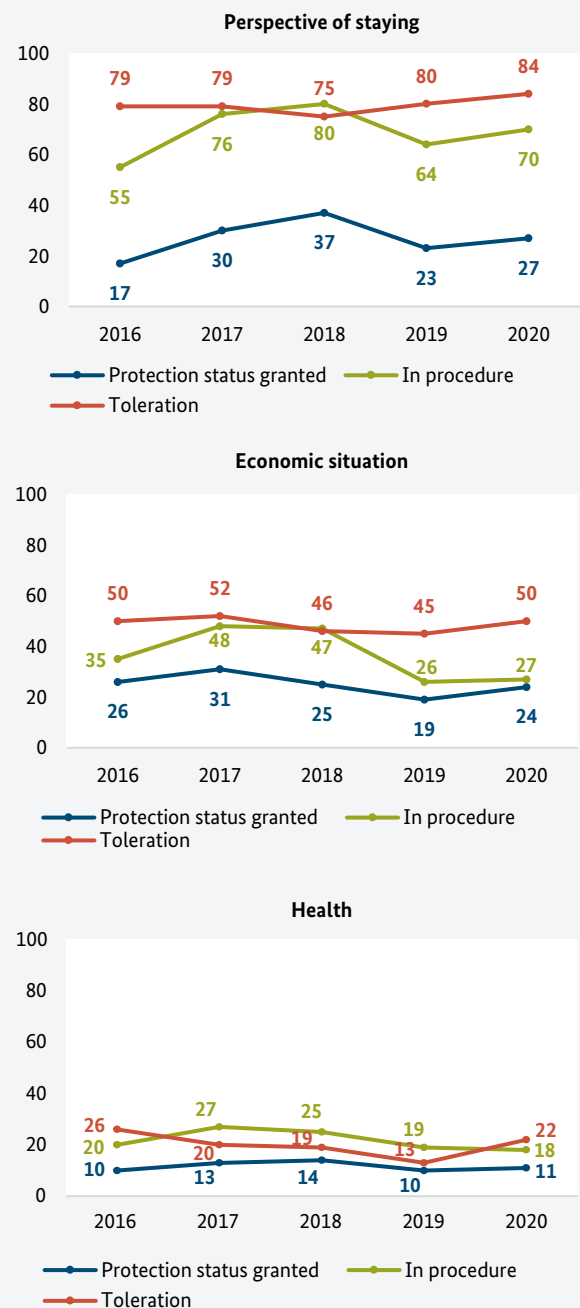
if there is a toleration order (e. e. Duldung) it can be assumed that concerns will remain comparatively high over the years. Moreover, in the course of the uncertainties caused by the Covid 19 pandemic, concerns may have increased again among all respondents from 2019 to 2020 (Brücker et al. al. 2021). As there is as yet no knowledge of how concerns in key areas of life such as the economic situation and the prospects of staying developed during the Covid 19 pandemic, this is examined in more detail below. In addition, the development of worries about one's own health is examined since these also may have increased due to the Covid 19 pandemic. Since we expect that the intensity of worries is linked to the respective residence status, the analyses are differentiated alongside the protection status.¹²

In the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, concerns have been traced since 2016 on the basis of a 3-point scale (Infobox 2) with regard to the prospects of staying in Germany, ones own economic situation and ones own health. Particularly when people state that they “worry a lot” about a certain area, it can be assumed that this has a negative impact on their general or psychological well-being, which in turn may represent a hurdle to a successful integration process (Entringer et al. 2021). For this reason, the following analyses focus on this response category.

Lowest percentage of strongly worried persons among refugees with recognised protection status

If one follows the changes in the proportion of persons who stated that they “worried a lot” about their prospects of staying, their own economic situation or their own health, differentiated according to residence status, over the period from 2016 to 2019, it becomes clear that among refugees with a recognised protection status, the proportion of people who worried a lot is gener-

Figure 4: Development of shares of strongly worried refugees from 2016 to 2020 (in percent)



Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2016-2020, data weighted.

¹² It should be noted that the majority of respondents have had a recognised protection status since 2017. This continues into 2020, so that in 2020, 76 percent of the respondents had have a protection status, 8 percent had not yet completed the asylum procedure and 11 percent had received a toleration order (i.e. Duldung). Only 4 percent of the respondents had another residence title in 2020. Due to the small number of these cases, this group is not considered in the analyses.

ally the lowest in all areas.¹³ The differences are most pronounced with regard to the prospects of staying: in 2020, 27 percent of those recognised, followed by 70 percent with an undecided procedure and 84 percent of refugees with a tolerated status, stated that they were “worried a lot” about their prospects of staying in Germany. When asked about their worries about their own economic situation, 24 percent of recognised refugees, 27 percent with an undecided procedure and 50 percent of tolerated refugees stated in 2020 that they were “worried a lot”. In 2020, strong health concerns were significantly lower among all three groups - just as in the years before the pandemic. Thus, in 2020, 11 percent of those who are recognised, 18 percent of those with an undecided procedure and 22 percent of those with a tolerated status were strongly concerned about their own health. The greater insecurity associated with a tolerated status or unresolved residence status thus also seems to be reflected in increased worries. In addition, in the respective years, the proportion of people who are strongly worried about their prospects of staying is higher than those who are worried about their economic situation and, above all, their own health. A possible explanation for lower worries about one’s own health might be the young age structure of the refugee population (Niehues et al. 2021). It should be noted, however, that even in 2020 one out of ten refugees with recognised protection status worried a lot about their health.

Share of highly worried respondents largely stable from 2019 to 2020

When looking at the progression of worries over time, it is also noticeable that there are no statistically significant differences for respondents with a toleration status compared to the previous year. Thus, it can be assumed that the proportion of highly worried persons among tolerated refugees has remained stable over time in all areas. Among respondents with an granted protection status, the proportion of highly concerned persons initially increased statistically significantly, depending on the area, by 13 to 3 percentage points

from 2016 to 2017¹⁴, yet remained at a high level from 2017 to 2018, and then decreased again statistically significantly varying by area by 14 to 4 percentage points from 2018 to 2019. There is one exception: the proportion of persons who worried a lot about their own economic situation among refugees with a protection status already decreased statistically significantly by 6 percentage points from 2017 to 2018. These trends among recognised refugees suggest that their worries initially increased during the first period after arrival in Germany, when there were still many unanswered questions, but then decreased until 2019 as their arrival and settling in Germany progressed. Interestingly, similar developments can also be observed among persons with an ongoing procedure. Among those, the proportion of people who worried a lot initially increased, depending on the area, by a statistically significant 21 to 7 percentage points from 2016 to 2017, remained largely stable from 2017 to 2018 and decreased again by a varying statistically significant 21 to 4 percentage points from 2018 to 2019. Unfortunately, in the area of health-related worries, there was no statistically significant decrease from 2018 to 2019 among persons with an ongoing procedure. This means that even among persons with an ongoing procedure, there is a decrease in the number of persons who worried a lot from 2018 to 2019 - similar to the situation among persons with a granted protection status.

If we then look at how worries among refugees have changed between 2019 and 2020, and thus also in the wake of the Covid 19 pandemic, we see that the changes between the survey years range between 1 and 6 percentage points. In particular, the increases of 6 percentage points in the area of worries about the prospects of staying among persons without completed asylum procedures and of 5 percentage points in the area of their own economic situation among tolerated persons suggest that the proportion of persons who are worried a lot for these groups and topics increased during the pandemic. However, when tested for statistical significance, these increases - as well as the other changes from 2019 to 2020 across all topics and groups - are not statistically significant. Overall, the data shows that the proportion of persons who “worried a lot” in all areas remained largely unchanged

¹³ Only in the area of health there are three exceptions: For example, the proportion of people who worried a lot about their health among recognised refugees in 2018 and 2019 does not differ statistically significantly from the proportion among persons with a tolerated status, and in 2020 it does not differ statistically significantly from persons with an undecided procedure. That means, that in 2018 and 2019 the proportion of people who worried a lot about their own health is the same for persons with an granted protection status as for persons with a tolerated status and in 2020 the same as for persons with an ongoing procedure.

¹⁴ With regard to the increases from 2016 to 2017, it should be noted that the populations of 2016 and 2017 differ due to a refreshment for the 2017 survey year. In the course of the refreshment for the 2017 survey, refugees who entered Germany between February 2016 and December 2016 were also interviewed for the first time. It is possible that concerns were particularly pronounced in this group, so that the increase in strongly worried refugees across all respondents would not be due to individual increases, but due to a different group composition.

from 2019 to 2020, regardless of residence status, and no statistically significant differences can be found (Figure 4). However, there is an exception among respondents with a toleration status: In this group of persons, the proportion of strongly worried people about their own health increased by 9 percentage points from 2019 to 2020, which is statistically significant. The predominant non-significance illustrates that strong concerns in these areas did not decrease further during the Covid 19 pandemic, but did not increase either. One possible explanation might be the small number of cases in these groups of people for 2019 and 2020. If the sample size is small and the information provided by the respondents is more scattered, even larger deviations may not be statistically significant, so that the deviations found cannot be mapped onto the population as a whole. Another reason for the lack of differences from 2019 to 2020 could be that the applied 3-point scale is not sensitive enough to reflect changes during the Covid 19 pandemic. In addition, it is possible that the changes brought about by the Covid 19 pandemic and the associated uncertainties have slowed down the positive trend of decreasing strong concerns among refugees.

Overall, the impression is that strong worries are less pronounced among recognised refugees than among refugees with a tolerated status or whose procedure has not yet been completed. The proportion of people who worried a lot has remained largely stable over the years among people with a toleration status.

Moreover, during the Covid 19 pandemic, the trend of decreasing strong worries among recognised refugees has slowed down. Interestingly, a similar trend can also be observed among refugees with an ongoing procedure. As in the years prior to the pandemic, refugees in 2020 were most often strongly worried about their residence issues, followed by their economic status. Their own health played a subordinate role. In light of the rather high proportion of strongly worried persons in different areas and the possibility that refugees are strongly worried in several areas at the same time, plus the possible negative effects on their integration processes, the development of worries should be examined further and, if necessary, needs for support should be identified. This applies in particular to persons with a tolerated status.

Development of life satisfaction among refugees

How satisfied people are with their lives is an important indicator of their general well-being (Veenhofen 2008). We know from studies on people without a migration background that general life satisfaction is quite stable over the life course (Fujita/Diener 2005). Deviations are mostly due to “critical” events such as sudden unemployment, loss of a person, marriage or the birth of a child. Since these “critical” events are usually not concentrated in one year across all respondents, but are distributed among the respondents over the years, usually no changes in average life satisfaction over time can be detected. Existing analyses indicate that refugees were on average quite satisfied with their life in Germany in the years from 2016 to 2018, that the satisfaction values did not change statistically significantly between these years, and that the average life satisfaction in these years did not change over time. Thus, in Germany in these years the average life satisfaction of refugees were slightly lower than the one of people with a different or no migration background (de Paiva Lareiro et al. 2020).

As the entire population is affected by the Covid 19 pandemic, it is possible that previously quite stable life satisfaction levels may have changed from 2019 to 2020. Due to the restrictions in the wake of the Covid 19 pandemic and possibly individual concerns about one’s own health or the health of close relatives, it can be expected that the general life satisfaction of the majority of the population, and thus also of the group of refugees, will have deteriorated from 2019 to 2020.

Analyses of a complementary Covid 19 study conducted from July to August 2020 showed that - contrary to expectations - refugees were directly after the end of the first “lockdown” on average more satisfied with their lives in 2020 than in the years before the Covid 19 pandemic. On an 11-point-scale from 0 to 10, the mean score for refugees was 7.08 points (Infobox 2). When asked how satisfied they expect to be with their lives in a year’s time, they were quite optimistic and gave an average score of 8.15 points in the complementary Covid 19 supplementary study. However, the complementary Covid 19 study only included part of the actual sample of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees and fell into a phase of relative relaxation of the Covid 19 measures. Moreover, at the time of the survey it was not yet foreseeable that the pandemic would continue for a longer period of time.

To get a more reliable picture of how the satisfaction scores have developed over the years and also in the course of the second “lockdown” the data from the regular surveys from 2016 to 2020 are investigated.

Refugees are on average more satisfied with their lives in 2020 than in 2019

If one looks at the development of general life satisfaction among refugees over the period from 2016 to 2019, hardly any changes can be observed (Figure 5). From 2016 to 2019, the mean value of general life satisfaction ranged between 6.86 and 6.91 points and did not change statistically significantly from 2016 to 2019. This is in line with findings by de Paiva Lareiro et al (2020). However, a significant increase occurs from 2019 to 2020: In 2020, the average life satisfaction score for refugees was 7.47 points and increased by half a point (0.56 points) compared to the previous year. Comparing the satisfaction scores of 2019 and 2020 intra-individually, 27 percent of respondents were more satisfied, 56 percent were equally satisfied and 17 percent were less satisfied with their lives than in 2020.¹⁵

This increase is all the more remarkable because among people without a migration background, the general life satisfaction between 2019 and the first “lockdown” at the beginning of 2020 remained unchanged, but by the second “lockdown” in January/February 2021 it had decreased by 0.2 points (Entringer/Kröger 2021).¹⁶ Considering that life satisfaction levels were very stable on average in pre-pandemic years, changes of 0.2 points for people without a migration background or of 0.56 points for refugees mean noticeable differences. One reason for the opposing developments among refugees and people

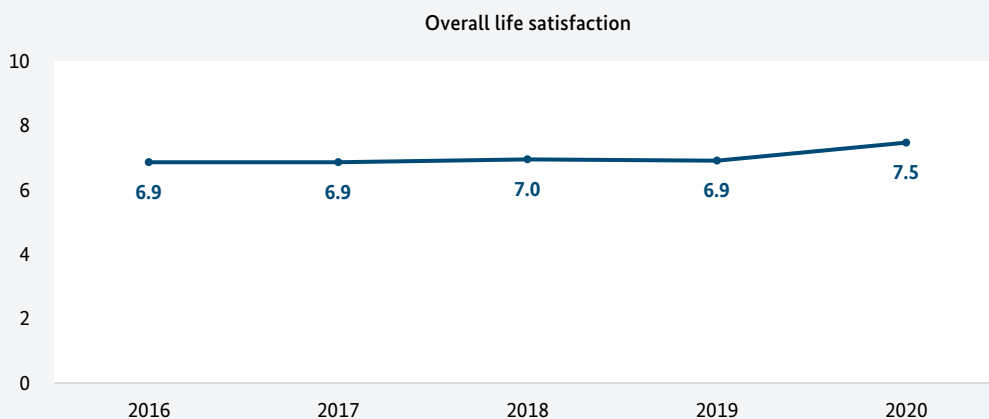
without a migration background could be the different measuring times of the data. It is possible that the general life satisfaction of refugees also decreased again in the further course of the second “lockdown” in spring 2021.

Another explanation could be that refugees evaluate the Corona pandemic differently than people who grew up in Germany. Compared to other experiences such as escape, war or persecution, which refugees have often only recently had to cope with, a pandemic that initially made itself felt for large parts of the population primarily through restrictions in mobility, work and leisure behaviour, may be less frightening than for people who have not been exposed to such traumatic events in their lives so far. It is also possible that refugees have been less affected by the contact restrictions because their networks in Germany have often been family-based (Siegert 2019) and they have already had experience with communication at a distance through an international network of friends and family. Furthermore, it should be noted that among people without a migrant background and a low income life satisfaction also increased from 2019 to 2020, but decreased among high-income individuals (Entringer et al. 2020). This highlights that satisfaction levels can change in the face of the critical event of the Covid 19 pandemic, but that changes can vary depending on life situations and frame of reference.

¹⁵ For the categorisation of this indicator, see Infobox 2.

¹⁶ For these analyses, data from the SOEP Core Survey for people without a migration background were used together with data from the SOEP-CoV study. The SOEP-CoV study is conducted jointly by Bielefeld University and SOEP. From April to June 2020 as well as from January to February 2021, selected SOEP households were interviewed by telephone (see Entringer/Kröger 2021).

Figure 5: Development of general life satisfaction from 2016 to 2020 (mean values)



Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2016-2020, data weighted.

Changes in satisfaction scores are related to multiple factors

In order to find out which refugees were more satisfied or less satisfied with their lives in 2020 than in the previous year 2019, a logistic regression with marginal effects was calculated. These reflect the respective average probability of belonging to the group of people who were either less satisfied, equally satisfied or more satisfied with their lives in 2020 than in the previous year due to a specific characteristic (e.g. employment) - if all other factors in the model are kept constant. The following socio-demographic, escape-specific and health factors were taken into account in the model: Age, educational background, employment, family situation, length of stay, German language skills, type of accommodation, residence status, country of origin and self-assessed health status.¹⁷

The results highlight the importance of the health status, employment status, language skills, family situation and residence status for the changes in life satisfaction during the pandemic year 2020 (Table 1). In particular, self-assessed health status seems to play an important role in these changes. If respondents rated their health better, the probability of an increase in life satisfaction increased; if respondents rated their health worse, the probability of a decrease in satisfaction increased. The correlation of employment status with changes in life satisfaction was less pronounced. If refugees were not employed, the likelihood of a decrease increased, but if refugees were employed, only the likelihood of belonging to the group without changes increased. This suggests that employment per se was not sufficient for life satisfaction to improve during the 2020 pandemic year. It is also surprising that refugees with better German language skills showed a lower probability of increased general life satisfaction.

A possible explanation is that this group was better able to follow the pandemic and its effects and that this more in information lowered or left their life satisfaction unchanged. Similar mechanisms could be at work for people without a migration background, whose life satisfaction initially remained unchanged in the first “lockdown” and then decreased in the second “lockdown”. Overall, the results of the logistic regression provide initial insights into which groups of refugees experienced individual changes in life satisfaction in the course of the pandemic. The results further show that life satisfaction among refugees increased on average during the first year of the Covid 19 pandemic, but this does not apply equally to all refugees. What exactly the reasons and underlying mechanisms are for the changes in life satisfaction should be the subject of future analyses with further survey years. Data from future years can also provide information on whether the life satisfaction scores of refugees and people with a different or non-migrant background have become more similar and whether the life satisfaction scores of refugees have not decreased on average as the pandemic progressed.

¹⁷ In order to be able to depict the current life situation under pandemic conditions, data from the survey year 2020 were used for the explanatory variables. Since the measurement dates between the dependent variable and the explanatory variables overlap, no chronological sequence between the variables can be established. The results are therefore not to be interpreted causally, but merely show correlations.

Table 1: Relationships between selected factors and the change in life satisfaction scores from 2019 to 2020 (average effect in percentage points)

	Probability		
	Decrease	No change	Increase
Family situation (Ref. men)			
Women with small children	0.39	-0.83	0.44
Women with older children	-5.42*	2.43	2.99
Women without children	-6.01	9.53*	-3.52
Age	-0.10	-0.04	0.14
Gainful employment (ref. non-employed)	-6.61*	9.33*	-2.72
Education (Ref. low)			
Medium education	-1.24	2.25	-1.01
High education	-4.11	5.06	-0.95
Health status	-2.79*	0.04	2.74*
German language skills	-0.04	3.68	-3.64*
Shared accommodation (Ref. private accommodation)	2.37	-2.38	0.01
Length of stay in years	0.30	-0.30	0.01
Residence status (Ref. recognised protection status)			
In procedure	2.20	-9.72	7.52
Toleration	14.16*	-11.39	-2.76
Other residence status	13.02	-15.35	2.33
Average values of the dependent variable	18.75	53.66	27.59

Note: Multinomial logistic regression. *= p-value < 0.05. Health status self-assessed on a 5-point scale; controlled for country of origin.

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees 2016–2020, data weighted, n = 2,947.

Example: Refugees who are employed are 9.33 percentage points more likely than refugees who are not employed - all other factors being equal - to belong to the group with unchanged satisfaction scores compared to the previous year.

Summary and conclusion

In this brief analysis, the IAB-SOEP-BAMF Survey of Refugees was used to examine how German language skills, worries and general life satisfaction have developed from 2016 to 2020. Changes from 2019 to 2020, i.e. during the first year of the Covid 19 pandemic, were given special consideration.

In principle, the German language skills of refugees increased from year to year. In 2020, for the first time, more than half of the refugees surveyed (52 percent) stated that they had “good” to “very good” German language skills. Focussing on the mean value, the increases in German skills are more pronounced from 2016 to 2018 - i.e. relatively shortly after arrival in Germany - and begin to be less pronounced from 2018 onwards.

The increase in German language skills from 2019 to 2020 is no longer statistically significant. The flattening of the learning curve over time may have several reasons. It is possible that during the pandemic further improvement of German language skills among refugees has slowed down due to paused or interrupted language courses, the switch to digital teaching, contact restrictions or job loss. Additionally, it is possible that with longer residency in Germany and more advanced German language skills, the learning curve has flattened. A flattening of the learning curve would be in line with previous research findings on second language acquisition. Data from future waves of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees will be able to shed more light on whether the slowed down increase in German language skills is primarily a pandemic effect or of a permanent nature. As in previous analyses, in 2020 there are still differences in self-assessed

German language skills between subgroups (Niehues et al. 2021; de Paiva Lareiro et al. 2020). In 2020, particularly, women with small children, older and less educated refugees reported lower German language skills. The data from 2020 also shows for the first time that a timely start and completion of an integration course after arrival in Germany facilitates the acquisition of German language skills. With regard to their prospects of staying, their own economic situation and health, many refugees with a recognised protection status worried “a lot” especially shortly after arriving in Germany, i.e. from 2016 to 2018. However, from 2018 to 2019 these strong worries decreased in parallel with a longer and more solidified stay. Interestingly, a similar trend can be observed for refugees with an ongoing procedure. In contrast, the situation for refugees with a tolerated status is different. Among these, the proportion of highly worried refugees remained largely unchanged at a comparatively high level over the years from 2016 to 2019. In the course of the Covid 19 pandemic, we expected that the proportion of strongly worried refugees would increase from 2019 to 2020. However, this increase did not occur - with the exception of tolerated refugees in relation to their health. The proportion of highly worried respondents remained stable, irrespective of their residence status. This implies that during the Covid 19 pandemic among recognised refugees the decrease in strongly worried persons slowed down. The same seems to be true for refugees with an ongoing procedure. Only among the particularly vulnerable group of persons with a tolerated status was the Covid 19 pandemic accompanied by an increase in health concerns.

While the life satisfaction of refugees did not change on average from 2016 to 2019, it increased significantly on average from 2019 to 2020. This increase over the course of the first Covid 19 pandemic year is surprising and could indicate that refugees were able to cope relatively well - at least in part - with the initial effects of the pandemic. It should be noted, however, that the life satisfaction did not increase equally among all refugees from 2019 to 2020. The intra-individual comparison shows that in 2020, 27 percent of respondents were more satisfied, 56 percent were similarly satisfied and 17 percent were less satisfied with their lives than in the previous year. Initial analyses to examine which factors are related to these changes point to the importance of health condition, employment status, language skills, family situation and residence status. More in-depth analyses, also based on future data, are necessary to better understand the reasons for the changes in the life satisfaction of refugees.

Overall, the analyses of the development of German language skills, worries and life satisfaction of refugees from 2020 show that refugees have coped relatively well with the first phase of the Covid 19 pandemic (see also Entringer et al. 2021). Although the positive developments of previous years have stagnated or flattened out, there have been no decreases in German language skills or only isolated increases in strong worries. On average, there is even an increase in life satisfaction. With the help of data from future waves of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees it will be possible to further investigate how the life satisfaction of refugees develops during the pandemic and whether there are similar drops in life satisfaction as already known from the population without a migrant background.

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AUTHOR:**Wenke Niehues**

is a researcher at the Research Centre Migration, Integration and Asylum of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, Nuremberg.

Wenke.Niehues@bamf.bund.de

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