

## A welcoming Northern Ireland? Understanding sentiment towards asylum seekers and refugees

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This Research Update explores how welcoming Northern Ireland is for asylum seekers and refugees. An asylum seeker is someone who has entered Northern Ireland and claims asylum from persecution in their home country. While their claim is being assessed, the person is considered as an asylum seeker. If permission to stay is granted, that person is considered as a refugee. Refugee and asylum seeker figures for Northern Ireland are not ordinarily published in a disaggregated form, and so it is difficult to know how many refugees currently reside here. However, there is an estimated number of 200-300 new asylum seekers per year from different locations (Murphy and Vieten, 2017).

There is much evidence that asylum seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland experience repeat harassment in their neighbourhoods, including arson and criminal damage, with some forced to leave their homes. The collective impact of these experiences has demonstrable negative effects on health and wellbeing (Murphy and Vieten, 2017). Racist violence and intimidation against Syrian refugees, as well as poor institutional support, received much media coverage in 2018 after it was confirmed that 1,000 people had arrived in Northern Ireland between 2016 and 2018 under the United Nations Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme.

Each year, the **Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey** asks questions about attitudes to minority ethnic communities, and similar questions have been included in the **Young Life and Times (YLT) survey** of 16 year olds. These provide valuable indicators of the vulnerability of Northern Ireland to xenophobic discourses which understate the value of diversity and migration, and emphasise self-segregation and exclusion (Michael, 2017). However, focussing on minority ethnic communities in general does not provide an accurate picture of attitudes to asylum seekers and refugees, and these warrant specific investigation. This Update examines NILT and YLT findings on attitudes to asylum seekers and refugees, explored within the international landscape of refugee reception.

### Asylum seekers

Among NILT respondents in 2005, there was narrow support (52%) for allowing asylum seekers suffering persecution in their own countries to stay in Northern Ireland (only 20% disagreed). Opinion was split over whether the government should be allowed to put asylum seekers in detention until their right to remain in the country has been decided (49% were in favour, and 42% were not). These attitudes coincided with a considerable expansion of immigration detention across the United Kingdom (McGuinness and Gower, 2018).

By 2012, attitudes had shifted slightly, with 58 per cent agreeing that asylum seekers should be allowed to stay here. A more nuanced question on detention found that almost one third agreed that asylum seekers should always or ordinarily be detained, although most of those respondents felt that exceptions should be made for vulnerable groups like children and older people (see **Table 1**). Four out of ten respondents favoured detention only when there is a strong risk of disappearance and 21 per cent disagreed with detention entirely.

### Sense of duty

Three questions focused on refugees in the 2017 NILT and YLT surveys. There was general support for the statement *I think it is our duty to provide protection to refugees who are escaping persecution in their home country*. **Figure 1** shows that similar proportions of NILT and YLT respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (62% and 60% respectively).

Attitudes varied according to a range of personal and geographic characteristics. For example, amongst NILT respondents, there was strongest support from those living in religiously-mixed areas (65%), and from those living in urban areas (67%). Attitudes also varied according to political party support: Alliance Party (93%), UUP (82%), SDLP (72%), Sinn Féin (69%) and DUP (49%). There were obvious differences by age, with

**Table 1: Attitudes towards the detention of asylum seekers (NILT, 2012)**

	%
Asylum seekers should never be held in detention centres	21
Asylum seekers should be held in detention centres only when there is a strong risk of disappearance	41
Asylum seekers should normally be held in detention centres, but exceptions should be made for vulnerable groups like children and the elderly	22
Asylum seekers should always be held in detention centres	9
Don't know	8

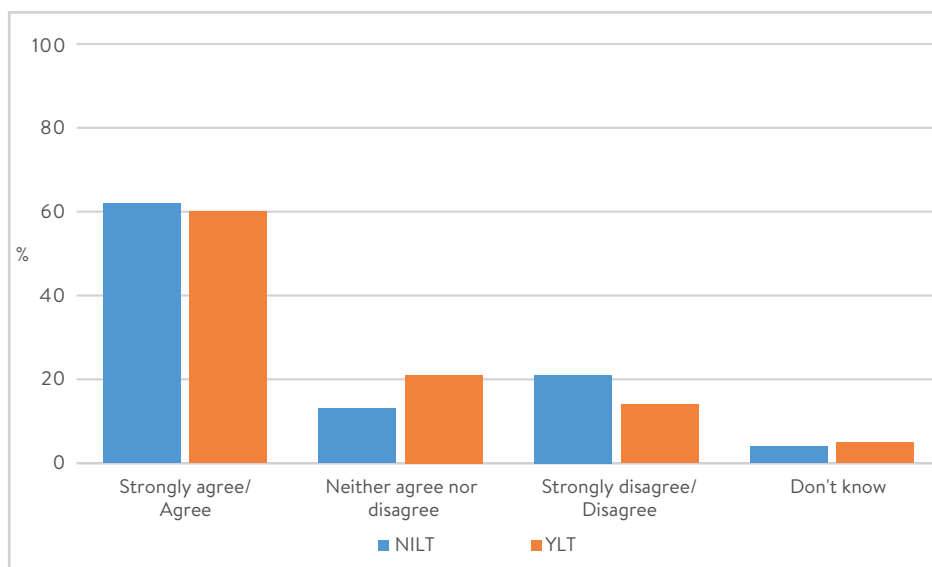
18-24 year olds being least likely to concur the statement (44%), and 55-64 year olds being most likely (70%). There was also variation according to national identity, with those identifying as Northern Irish being more likely to feel this sense of duty (73%) than those identifying as Irish (68%) or British (51%).

Among YLT participants, responses also varied according to national identity, albeit in a different pattern: Irish (71%), Northern Irish (62%) and British (40%). The type of school was also significant: those attending grammar schools were much more likely to agree (71%) than those attending integrated schools (59%), secondary schools (52%) or Further Education (FE) colleges (37%). There was an association with family financial background: 69 per cent of those

describing their family as 'well-off' supported the statement, compared to 59 per cent of those from 'average' and 54 per cent of those from 'not well-off' backgrounds. Responses varied by religious affiliation, with Protestant respondents being least likely to agree (50%), compared with Catholics (69%) and those with no religion (59%).

Attitudes to immigration were strongly associated with thinking that we have a duty to protect refugees. Most NILT respondents who believed that immigration should be increased felt this obligation (88%), whilst only 31 per cent of those who favoured a decrease in immigration felt this. Respondents who said that they felt favourable to people from ethnic minority communities largely concurred with the statement

**Figure 1: I think it is our duty to provide protection to refugees who are escaping persecution in their home country (NILT and YLT, 2017)**



(68%), as against 10 per cent of those who were not favourable. Respondents self-reporting prejudice against people from minority ethnic communities were less likely to support this statement (42%) than those saying that they were not prejudiced (68%). These patterns were also evident among YLT participants.

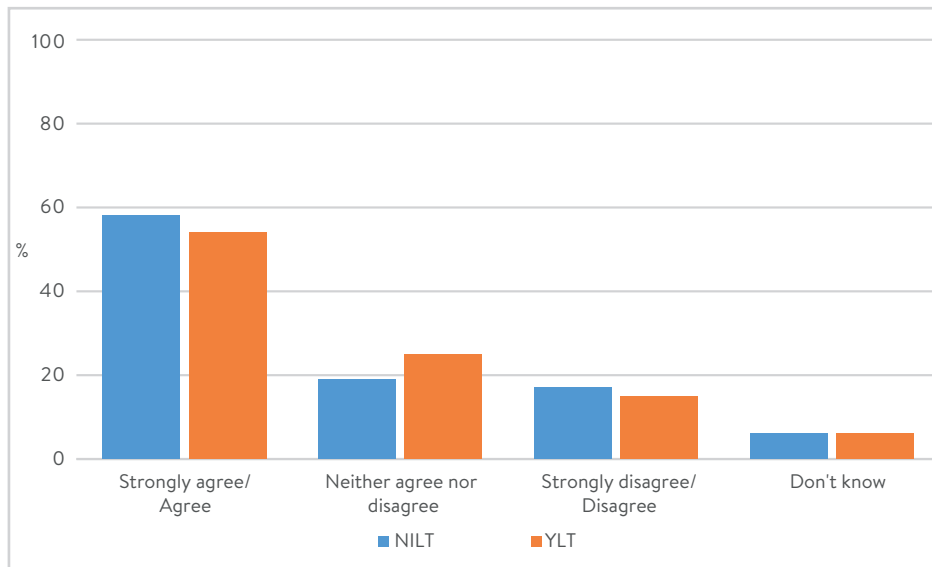
### **A welcome for Syrians**

When asked to think about 'the current situation of people from Syria', more than half of NILT respondents (58%) indicated some level of agreement to allowing people from Syria to come to Northern Ireland. One in five neither agreed nor disagreed, and a similar proportion disagreed nor strongly disagreed. **Figure 2** shows that the overall level of agreement overall among YLT respondents was similar (54%).

Amongst NILT respondents, there was stronger support among Nationalists (65%) compared to Unionists (47%), urban dwellers (62%) compared with those living in rural areas (50%). Again, there was variation according to political party support: Alliance (91%), SDLP (69%), Sinn Féin (65%), UUP (61%) and DUP (44%). There was no variation in attitudes according to age of respondents.

YLT responses varied by school type: those attending grammar schools were most likely to agree that Syrians should be allowed to come here (64%). In contrast, only 36 per cent those attending FE colleges thought this. Respondents from 'well-off' backgrounds were most supportive of the statement, compared to those from 'average' or 'not well-off' backgrounds (63%, 54% and 45% respectively). Religious affiliation was also significantly linked to responses, with Protestant respondents being least likely to agree (41%), compared

**Figure 2: Agreement that people from Syria should be allowed to come to Northern Ireland (NILT and YLT, 2017)**



with Catholics (63%) and those with no religion (54%).

Matching the patterns highlighted earlier, the NILT data showed variation in acceptance of people from Syria into Northern Ireland according to attitudes to immigration, self-reported prejudice against people from minority ethnic communities, and being favourable to people from minority ethnic communities. For example, nearly nine in ten (88%) of those who support increased immigration were supportive, compared with 23 per cent of those who favour cutting immigration levels. Similar patterns were also evident among YLT respondents. In addition, higher levels of support were visible among 16-year olds who socialise with people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

### A welcoming society?

Respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement *Northern Ireland is a society that welcomes refugees escaping persecution in their home country*. This provides a measure of the respondent's perception of how welcoming Northern Ireland is for refugees. Approximately one half of NILT respondents agreed or strongly

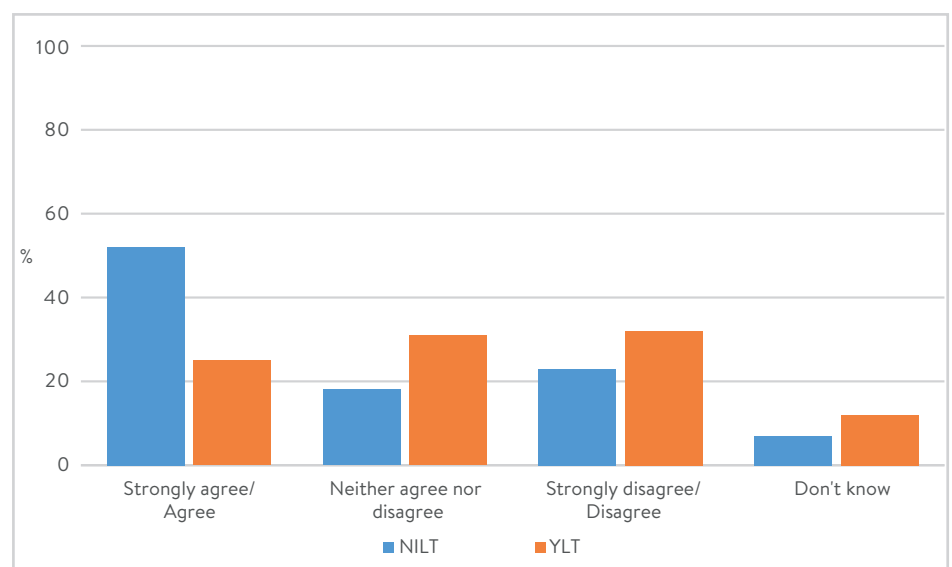
agreed with this statement (52%). **Figure 3** indicates that a smaller proportion of YLT respondents, compared with NILT respondents, perceived Northern Ireland as welcoming to refugees – only 25 per cent thought this.

Among NILT respondents, responses varied across groups. For example, those aged 18-24 were least likely to view Northern Ireland as welcoming (44%). Notably, however, 16 per cent of this age group were unsure how to respond to this question. Alliance Party supporters were least likely to

support the statement (45%), with UUP supporters being most likely (66%). For DUP, SDLP and Sinn Féin supporters the figures were 51%, 53% and 59% respectively. Amongst YLT respondents, there are greater differences between those in different school types than between those with different national identities. While there is no more than an 7 percentage point difference between those identifying as Irish (29%), British (23%) or Northern Irish (22%), there is a 16 percentage point difference between those attending integrated schools (37%) and grammar schools (21%), with secondary and FE colleges in between (31% and 25%).

In both NILT and YLT, responses varied according to attitudes to immigration, and being favourable to people from minority ethnic communities. Looking at NILT respondents, three quarters (67%) of those who supported increased immigration felt that Northern Ireland is a welcoming society for refugees, compared with 41 per cent of those favouring a reduction in immigration. Furthermore, more than half of respondents feeling favourable to people from minority ethnic communities (57%) perceived Northern Ireland as welcoming to refugees, compared with 14 per cent of those feeling unfavourable. Self-

**Figure 3: Northern Ireland is a society that welcomes refugees escaping persecution in their home country (NILT and YLT, 2017)**



reported prejudice against people of minority ethnic communities is also linked to perceptions of welcome, with half of those saying that they are not prejudiced (55%) supporting the statement compared with 40 per cent of those who self-report prejudice.

## Discussion

The overall picture from the NILT and YLT data is one of support for refugees generally, and for Syrian refugees. Importantly, there is a strong link between support for refugees and views on immigration, favourable attitudes to minorities, and self-reported prejudice.

Older age is widely correlated with greater support for refugees in international surveys (Steele and Abdelaaty, 2018). However, the NILT and YLT survey data shows that in Northern Ireland there is strong support from sixteen year olds, although not from the 18-24 year olds taking part in NILT.

The question of whether Northern Ireland is welcoming to refugees procured a lower level of agreement amongst all groups than the question of duty to protect refugees or support for Syrians. Beliefs about Northern Ireland as a welcoming society are highly related to the respondents' own beliefs about whether refugees should be allowed into Northern Ireland, suggesting that many respondents rely on their own opinions to imagine Northern Irish society as a whole.

The YLT data shows positive association with family financial background and support for refugees, in line with international research, although perception of economic security is more important than objective circumstances. Groups which perceive themselves as losing economic security may have negative attitudes to immigration and to refugees as a result (Steele and Abdelaaty, 2018).

Although attitudes to Syrian refugees can be indicative of levels of anti-refugee sentiment generally, they are not a direct substitute. Syrian refugees arriving through the United Nations scheme arrive in Northern Ireland with refugee status, rather than seeking asylum. Media coverage of the numbers fleeing Syria during the conflict has produced much public awareness and elicited more public sympathy for this group than others fleeing conflict such as those from Somalia. Yet only DUP supporters in the NILT survey and Protestant sixteen year olds in the YLT survey showed lower support for Syrian refugees than for refugees generally. This is consistent with higher suspicion of Muslims amongst these groups as we saw in 2015 (Michael, 2017), and underscores the complexity of public attitudes.

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The Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) and Young Life and Times (YLT) surveys are carried out annually and document public opinion on a wide range of social issues. NILT and YLT are joint projects of the two Northern Ireland universities and provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks. For more information, visit the survey websites at [www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) and [www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt)

### Key points

- In 2017, 62% of NILT respondents and 60% of YLT respondents felt that it is our duty to provide protection to refugees who are escaping persecution in their home country.
- 58% of NILT and 54% of YLT respondents felt that people from Syria should be allowed to come to Northern Ireland.
- Half of NILT respondents thought that Northern Ireland is a society that welcomes refugees escaping persecution in their home country. Only 25% of YLT respondents thought this.
- Respondents who support increased immigration, and those who are more favourable towards people from minority ethnic groups are more likely to be supportive of refugees.

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