

## TIME AND RESILIENCE. EVIDENCE FROM A NEW SURVEY OF REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN ITALY<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Migration studies agree that resilience is a crucial dimension for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers; however, how resilience differs across age groups and its association with the integration process remain poorly understood. This study aims to investigate the role of time on resilience. Particularly, whether resilience differs by age and whether it is related to the length of time spent in the host country. Our analysis benefits from the ItRAS (Italian Refugees and Asylum Seekers Survey), the first nationally representative survey of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of refugee status or other forms of international protection. The survey was conducted in 2024 and included individuals who had resided in Italy for at least six months but not before 2011. We explored the interplay of time and resilience, controlling for the main individual socio-demographic characteristics. The analysis was grounded in an ordinal logit regression to explain variations in the intensity of refugees' adapting capacity (ego-resilience). Among older individuals, the probability of being highly resilient is higher than among the younger. On the contrary, there is no significant evidence of the association between the length of stay in Italy and resilience. By providing insights into the role of time in studies on resilience, this paper debunks the view of older people as more vulnerable and in need of support per se, drawing our attention to the need for an accurate vulnerability assessment that does not proceed by stereotyped macro-category.

### 1 Introduction and literature background

The literature on the opinions, experiences and behaviours of refugees in high-income countries has long been hindered by the lack of survey data. This has represented a significant limitation for research on this topic, both in terms of the range of research questions that can be explored and the comparability of study results. Researchers agree that “[b]eing a refugee exacerbates migrants' vulnerability through trauma and loss” (Abraham *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, numerous refugees demonstrate an ability to confront and adapt to hardship before, during, and after

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resettlement by mobilising internal psychological resources. This phenomenon aligns with the notion of resilience, defined as the capacity to rebound from adversities and “connotes inner strength, competence, optimism, flexibility and the ability to cope effectively when faced with adversity” (Wagnild and Collins, 2009). Migration studies increasingly recognise resilience as a key dimension in the lives of migrants and refugees (Lindert *et al.*, 2023). It plays a significant role in supporting their psychological well-being and health (Mendola and Busetta, 2025) and has recently been conceptualised not only as distinct from, but also as a counterpoint to, vulnerability, offering a crucial balance to the adversities these populations often face (Siriwardhana *et al.*, 2021).

The debate among psychologists on the conceptual definition and measurement of resilience is broad and long-standing. Resilience has been conceptualised in diverse ways, including as a trait, an outcome and a process, reflecting its complexity and varied applications (Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013). Also, in the context of migration and refugee studies, resilience is defined as the individuals' ability «to recover from chronic and acute stress» (Ungar, 2011), to «resist without breaking » (Roberto and Moleiro, 2016) or to positively adapt «despite significant adversity» (Lindert *et al.*, 2023).

Moreover, resilience is increasingly understood as shaped by interactions between migrants and their environments, reflecting an ecological perspective (Berding-Barwick and McAreavey, 2024). This view aligns with descriptions of resilience as a social and dynamic process, emphasising its circumstantial and adaptive nature (Pickren, 2014; Qamar, 2023). As an “ongoing and dynamic process of adaptation,” resilience involves constant negotiation with changing circumstances (Bottrell, 2009). The importance of social dimensions in resilience is also discussed in Qamar (2023) and Siriwardhana *et al.* (2021). Qamar (2023) proposes broadening the concept of resilience to include community dynamics, adaptability, and the accompanying psychological, cultural, economic, and political characteristics of the phenomenon. He points out that “Individuals or groups going through this experience [i.e., being refugees] learn to re-examine their lives in the new context and shape their adaptive and transformational capabilities”. Together, these perspectives highlight resilience as a complex, relational and adaptive construct that is essential for understanding the experiences of refugees and migrants in their journey of adaptation and integration.

Our knowledge of refugee resilience has only been developing in recent years. A great part of our comprehension of migrants' and refugees' resilience comes from qualitative studies. The systematic review by Lindert *et al.* (2023) identified 36 qualitative studies on refugees, most of which were conducted in high-income countries such as the USA, Australia, and Canada. The studies include participants of different ages and backgrounds and highlight the importance of factors like

faith/religion, social and family support, hope for the future, personal ingenuity, and adaptability in overcoming challenges. The study by Roberto and Moleiro (2016) explores the challenges faced by Portuguese-speaking migrants and refugees in Portugal, as well as the resources they utilise to adapt. It examines how migrants navigate cultural, legal, and socioeconomic barriers while leveraging support systems such as family and friends, community associations and cultural practices to foster integration and well-being. Alachakar's (2023) study on recently arrived Syrian refugees in the UK explores the factors that support individuals in overcoming traumatic migration experiences and in rebuilding their lives. The research identifies three main categories of resilience-enhancing factors: interpersonal factors; factors linked to religion, faith, or belief systems; and personal factors, such as hope, optimism, future orientation, moral values, and specific coping strategies. Walther *et al.* (2021) study explored psychological resilience in adult refugees in Germany, mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran. The study emphasised the importance of strength-based models to avoid pathologising refugees. They showed that younger individuals find it easier to integrate, make new connections and learn the language thanks to their greater adaptability and easier access to educational structures. The study by Berding-Barwick and McAreavey (2024) on forced migrants in the North-East of England demonstrates that time plays a crucial role in processes of personal resilience — serving as a strategic resource for some individuals, while posing a challenge or constraint for others.

Lindert *et al.* (2023) also identified 30 quantitative studies, nearly all of which were cross-sectional, except for two, highlighting that resilience can vary depending on individuals' cultural, developmental, and historical contexts. These factors may also vary by individual characteristics, such as age and gender. They show that age has been associated with resilience in at least one quantitative study and is frequently included as a control variable in many quantitative studies. The review emphasises how the different study methodologies and applied methods, particularly the various sampling techniques, limit the extent of the results and make generalisations difficult.

Among the recent quantitative studies, that by Mendola and Busetta (2025) reveals how, among adult refugees hosted in Germany, higher levels of resilience are associated with better health outcomes. This relation is both direct and mediated by perceived discrimination and by the interplay between discrimination and loneliness. Mollica *et al.* (2002) highlighted higher levels of resilience among younger refugees, hence suggesting that children and adolescents may be less susceptible to the prolonged stresses associated with displacement.

There are no studies on the time pattern of resilience among refugees. However, several studies examining the experiences of those who face hardship provide evidence that resilience is not static, while, in some cases, it declines over time due

to some contextual and individual factors. Okuyama *et al.* (2018) state that “resilience is a highly changeable component of mental health among people who have faced adversity”. Similarly, Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw (2018), in their review of resilience over time, find no conclusive results among the seven identified longitudinal studies, with some studies showing an increase over time, while others show stability or a decrease.

There are a limited number of studies that have examined the temporal dynamics of resilience among refugees and asylum seekers, most of which focus on minors (e.g., Popham *et al.*, 2022). Siriwardhana *et al.* (2015) study on forcibly displaced people in Sri Lanka shows unclear results. Comparing two points in time (with a 1-year distance), they found that the people's resilience increased. However, the authors cannot disentangle the fact that during that year, the conflict ended and a process of return migration was initiated. With a similar research design, Popham *et al.* (2022) conducted a longitudinal study of the resilience of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon, examining the dynamic interplay between resilience (measured through proxies) and risks over time. Their findings underscore the critical role of the family environment in shaping children's responses to war and displacement and illustrate how it can lead to both improvements and deteriorations in mental well-being and resilience among displaced children. The scarcity of longitudinal data continues to hinder a deeper understanding of the dynamics of resilience among refugees and forced migrants.

In this study, as elaborated in the following section, we adopt the concept of ego-resilience, emphasising individuals' capacity to adapt to external changes and also encompassing the social dimension of resilience. This study is based on the first Italian survey on refugees (ItRAS), a cross-sectional study involving more than 1,300 refugees, asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection residing in Italy in 2024.

This study aims to address two research questions:

RQ1: Does resilience vary by age, and in particular, are older individuals more resilient than younger ones?

RQ2: Does the length of stay in Italy influence the degree of resilience, and specifically, does a longer duration of residence, when combined with deprived living conditions, contribute to the erosion of resilience?

## 2 Data and methods

Data for this research were collected within the framework of the nationally relevant research project (PRIN) AVRAI, through the Italian Refugees and Asylum Seekers Survey (ItRAS), conducted between April and July 2024. The target

population comprised individuals aged 18 or above who are Beneficiaries of international protection, granted Refugee status or Asylum Seekers who have not received a definitive denial (simply refugees or BRAS hereafter). ItRAS is the first nationally representative survey of this target population, involving 1,327 individuals and it offers a unique dataset that ensures scientific validity for the analysis of resilience in the context of refugee studies. ItRAS relies on Centre sampling technique<sup>2</sup> (Baio *et al.*, 2011). Eligibility criteria required participants to have lived in Italy for a minimum of six months at the time of the interview, with arrival no earlier than 2011. The survey was designed to ensure a macro-level representativeness for the North, the Centre and the South of Italy and to avoid overrepresentation of recently arrived asylum seekers. All the cities selected for the interview belong to provinces that host a Territorial Commission responsible for granting asylum. In the end, ItRAS covered nine regions and 66 cities (mainly medium and large cities).

The questionnaire, supplied in Italian, English, French and Arabic, was administered by trained interviewers who had a migration background, belonged to the target community, or worked as cultural mediators. Cultural mediators were also involved as interpreters for respondents who spoke languages other than the four mentioned. This choice helped to ensure effective communication and cultural sensitivity.

### *2.1 Sample description*

The sample comprised individuals aged 18-82 years; however, it was generally skewed toward younger participants, with nearly 70% under 40 and fewer than 13% aged 50 or older. The mean age was 36.1 years, and the median age was 34. Women constituted 47% of the weighted sample, mainly Ukrainians.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Centre Sampling technique, all the interviewed individuals are weighted based on their centre-attendance patterns to assess the probability of a certain individual taking part in the survey. A further reweighting was undertaken using official statistics data on gender and nationality, and so the ex-post sampling weights ensure representativeness of the sample at the macro-regional level. All the descriptive statistics in this section are weighted to reflect the overall population of BRAS in Italy. For more information on the survey, please see Mendola *et al.* (2026).

**Table 1** – *Percentage distribution of the sample by sex and age*

Age classes	Male	Female	Total
Up to 30 yrs	45.5	26.5	36.6
31-39 yrs	33.2	33.0	33.1
40-49 yrs	14.9	21.0	17.8
50+yrs	6.4	19.5	12.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. obs.	702	621	1,323

*Note: Weighted percentages.*

The average time since arrival among respondents is 4.5 years, with Ukrainians at 2.9 years, Pakistanis at 4.8 years, and Nigerians at 6.2 years. In terms of legal status, 75% of participants held some form of protection (including both refugees and Ukrainian nationals with temporary protection), while 25% were asylum seekers at the time of the interview.

The survey results reveal that 63.4% of the respondents reported being able to adapt when changes occur (our measure of resilience, as explained in the next section), answering "frequently true" or "almost always true". Figure 1 shows the percentage distribution of responses. Women seem to have more adaptability than men, but this difference is not statistically significant.

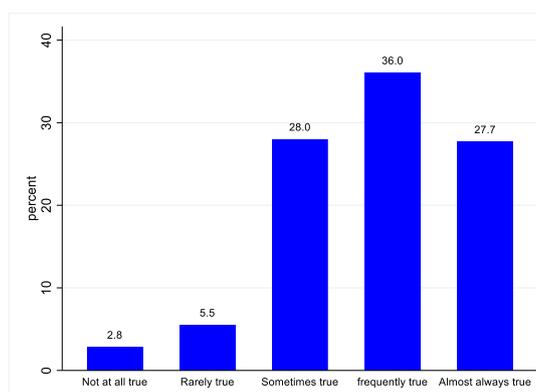
As per the distribution across the Italian territory, 51.3% resided in the Northern area, 23% in the Central area and 25.7% in the Southern area. The survey encompassed individuals from 67 nationalities, but the four most represented nationalities were Ukrainians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, and Nigerians, who together accounted for 63% of the weighted sample. Noticeably, 79.7% of respondents were enrolled in the Italian population register.

## 2.2. *Statistical model*

In this paper, we measure resilience (our response variable), focusing on the individuals' ability to adapt to changes (what Block and Block, 1980, labelled as "ego resilience"), measured through the degree of agreement with the statement "*I can adapt when changes occur*". The answers were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 5 (almost always true), see Figure 1, although, to face sparseness, we combined the first two levels into one category.

Time is measured by both the respondent's age at the time of the interview and the years since arrival in Italy, thereby capturing two distinct dimensions of the time-resilience relationship, albeit within a cross-sectional framework.

**Figure 1** – Percentage distribution of responses to the statement 'I'm able to adapt when changes occur'.



The regression analyses used an ordinal logit model, accounting for within-cluster correlation by main nationalities to correct for potential biases arising from shared experiences or backgrounds. We estimated the effect of time, controlling for individual factors such as main grouped nationalities (with at least 100 interviewed individuals), gender, low education, no employment, and degree of life satisfaction. In line with the extensive literature identifying social networks and community support as key protective factors in fostering resilience (see, for example, Mendola and Busetta, 2025, for a review), we include being married (vs. single or widowed) and the size of individuals' social support networks as covariates in the model. This last is the number of people in the refugee's household plus the total number of individuals whom respondents feel they can refer to in the event of a personal problem (Italian or non-Italian friends and number of relatives). Finally, the study by Kosyakova *et al.* (2023) showed that there is a significant and growing gender employment gap among refugees in Germany, with female refugees experiencing much lower employment rates than males over time. To control for this also in the Italian setting, we include in the model the interaction of no employment participation and sex.

Importantly, we tested the proportional odds (parallel lines) assumption for the ordered logit model. The test rejected the assumption (Brant: 50.81, P-value: 0.000). Indeed, estimating a generalized ordinal logit, it stood out that the parallel line assumption holds for almost all the covariates, including the two main explanatory variables (i.e., age and years since arrival in Italy). Among those covariates that differ across levels of the response variable, there are those related to relationships and life satisfaction, as well as some nationalities. These elements deserve further investigation going beyond the scope of this contribution. Hence, the proportional

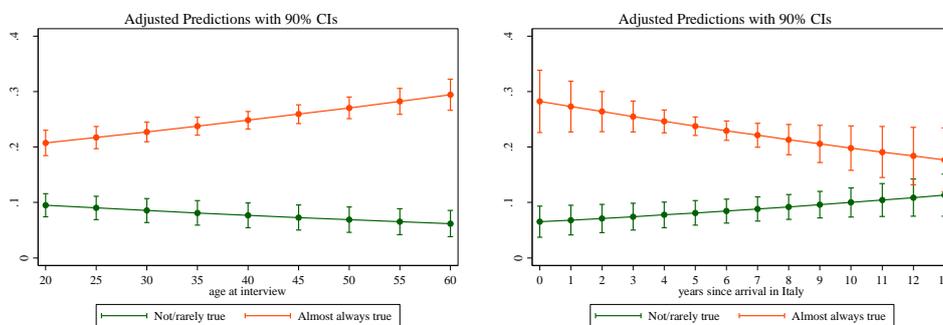
odds assumption appears to be reasonably satisfied and ordered logit results are reported for interpretability.

### 3 Model results

Regarding RQ1 (the link between age and resilience), estimates from the ordinal logit model show how the ability to adapt to changes emerges as significantly associated with age. Figure 2 (left panel) shows the probability of being resilient at the two extreme values. These marginal effects (which are essentially overlapping with those from the generalized ordinal model) provide clearer insights into the relationship between age and levels of resilience among refugees and asylum seekers in the Italian context, net of introduced covariates.

It stands out that the probability of being highly resilient is higher among older individuals, controlling also for years since arrival in Italy. In particular, individuals aged 20–29 are significantly less likely to be highly resilient compared to those aged 50–59. No age-related differences are observed among the least resilient individuals (bottom line).

**Figure 2** – Average marginal effects of age (left) and years since arrival in Italy (right) on ego resilience (90% CIs).



Note: The ordinal logit model included controls for individual characteristics and perceptions as mentioned before.

Regarding RQ2 (the relationship between length of stay in Italy and resilience), the findings indicate that a high ability to adapt to change is not significantly associated with the duration of residence in the country. As in the left panel, the right panel of Figure 2 presents the predicted probabilities by year since arrival in Italy. Among the most resilient refugees and asylum seekers, those who arrived less than five years before the interview seem to exhibit a higher probability of being highly

resilient compared to those who arrived ten or more years before, but differences are not statistically significant. Similarly, the bottom line shows no evidence of association between resilience and length of stay in Italy also among the least resilient individuals. Their low resilience is stable, whatever the duration of stay.

#### 4 Discussion

This paper contributes to the literature on refugee well-being by analysing ego-resilience among refugees and asylum seekers in Italy, using the first nationally representative survey conducted on this population, the ItRAS. As clearly acknowledged, ego-resilient individuals are intelligent, resourceful and adaptive in stressful situations and are ambitious and extraverted (Paulhus and Martin, 1987). Socialisation processes shape their lives, sustain and enhance their resilience (Block and Block, 1980). These characteristics can foster better integration and predict successful participation in the host country's social life, and this explains the relevance of resilience in the scientific debate.

We examined the role of time on resilience, considering both refugee' age at interview and the number of years since their arrival in Italy. Our findings indicate that resilience is not uniformly linked with these two different time dimensions. While age shows a statistically significant association with high levels of ego-resilience, length of stay does not. Younger individuals are significantly less likely to be highly resilient than older individuals, even after controlling for many socio-demographic factors, including years since arrival in Italy. This finding, reported for the first time for refugees in Italy, is consistent with the literature on the elderly and resilience (see the systematic review by Angevaare *et al.*, 2020). For example, the study by Gooding *et al.* (2012) in the UK suggests that this elevated resilience is attributed to the elderly's superior emotional regulation and problem-solving skills, which are viewed as a natural consequence of their accumulated experience in managing feelings and overcoming problems. Applying these insights to the refugee context, older individuals who have successfully navigated adversity to reach and settle in a new country possess a demonstrable history of prior adaptation and success. This history instils confidence and the capacity to overcome danger, strengthening their overall resilience.

Despite the ItRAS data being cross-sectional, which do not allow for causal or temporal dynamics, the observed association with age raises important questions about how refugees' psychological resources change with age. In light of these findings, there is a need for further research using longitudinal data to assess whether and how resilience diminishes over time. Nonetheless, our results provide a valuable starting point for reflection and underline the importance of timely interventions to

support mental well-being and social inclusion among refugees, especially the younger. In particular, this evidence debunks the view of older people as more vulnerable and in need of support *per se*, drawing our attention to the need for an accurate vulnerability assessment that does not proceed by stereotyped macro-categories. By focusing on refugees' strengths and capacities, this research aligns with the literature that views refugees as capable, resourceful and motivated individuals who possess agency. In particular, emphasising resilience rather than vulnerability represents a crucial paradigm shift in how we understand and support refugee populations and can guide different policy interventions.

Finally, we recognise that resilience is a multidimensional construct and that using only one or a few items cannot fully capture its complete meaning. Furthermore, resilience is a culturally sensitive construct, and individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds may interpret and respond to the same questions differently, influenced by their unique cultural frameworks. This challenge is further complicated by potential language barriers during interviews. To address these issues, interviews were conducted using a standardised questionnaire available in four main languages and administered by individuals with migration backgrounds, many of whom also served as cultural mediators. This may have smoothed the concern, but it is unlikely to have eliminated it.

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