

Sponsorship and Public Narratives on Refugees

Evidence, Limits, and
Future Directions

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Global Refugee
Sponsorship Initiative

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Public attitudes toward and narratives about refugees and refugee policies are central to establishing, sustaining, and scaling sponsorship programs. Across the evidence reviewed, the relationship between public attitudes and sponsorship is two-way: attitudes and narratives shape how refugees are received, and sponsorship can in turn strengthen local welcome, civic capacity, institutional learning, and more reciprocal understandings of integration. Therefore, sponsorship is framed not only as a support mechanism for refugees but also as an intervention that may reshape how host communities think, talk, organize, and act around refugees. Sponsorship is shown to create community-level change, resulting in positive local attitudes and relationship-building. The strongest evidence concerns local and relational change, whereas evidence that sponsorship shifts wider public attitudes or national narratives remains limited.

This meta-synthesis consolidates the existing evidence on the impact of sponsorship on public attitudes and narratives surrounding refugees and refugee policies. The final sample includes 46 sources that met the core inclusion criteria: evaluation-oriented or academic-style research, including original empirical work, with substantive relevance to public attitudes and narratives in relation to sponsorship.

The evidence covers both attitudes toward refugees and refugee policy and the ways sponsorship may shape host-community reception, local relationships, and wider narratives. It is broad enough to identify recurring patterns across different programs and settings, but it is uneven in strength. The evidence is strongest for public-opinion snapshots and for local, relational, and community-level effects, and weaker for claims that sponsorship changes wider public attitudes or national narratives in a durable way. The literature is also concentrated mainly in Canada and Europe and relies heavily on qualitative, local, and program-specific studies, so findings on broader population-level effects should be interpreted with caution.

Research Approach

This review uses an iterative, computer-assisted synthesis approach that combines AI-supported analysis with human validation. ChatGPT was used to generate structured syntheses of full-text documents, capturing each study's focus, methodology, empirical evidence, findings related to public attitudes and narratives, and research gaps. Researchers then reviewed and validated outputs against the original texts and made corrections where needed, regarding interpretation of the text, methodological classification, or substantive claims made in the text. Validated source summaries were subsequently analyzed and compared across the full set of studies to

identify recurring themes, areas of convergence and divergence, and cross-study patterns. This approach was used to accelerate comparative synthesis while retaining human judgement, source verification, and final interpretive responsibility throughout.

Research Findings

The evidence most strongly supports the conclusion that sponsorship produces positive local and relational effects, including stronger welcome, belonging, social inclusion, and host-community openness. These effects are most evident where sponsorship creates sustained, meaningful contact between refugees and receiving communities, and in some cases, they extend to civic capacity-building, institutional learning regarding refugee welcome, and more reciprocal understandings of integration.

However, the review also shows that public attitudes toward refugees are often selective and conditional rather than uniformly positive. Support frequently depends on perceptions of deservingness, fairness, order, and whether refugees are seen as likely to belong, integrate, or fit dominant social norms, with some refugee groups receiving more sympathy than others. This may suggest that positive attitudes are often fragile and do not necessarily translate into broader or more durable narrative change. The strongest consistent cross-study pattern is not unconditional solidarity, but rather the coexistence of welcome and anxiety.

The evidence is much weaker on whether sponsorship changes wider public attitudes or national narratives at scale, and the existing evidence base remains primarily concentrated in Canada. While some studies suggest that sponsorship can strengthen solidarity and community cohesion, these findings are mainly based on local qualitative evidence rather than longitudinal or comparative research. Overall, the literature provides stronger and more direct evidence for local community-level change than for broad population-level transformation in public attitudes and narratives. While some studies discuss wider narrative or public attitude change, this evidence is limited and mixed, and there is relatively little direct causal or longitudinal research showing that sponsorship produces durable change at that scale.

The review also cautions against overly celebratory interpretations of sponsorship. Positive outcomes are not automatic: they depend on program design, institutional support, and the quality of relationships, and sponsorship can also reproduce paternalism, conditional welcome, or privatized responsibility for refugee support. The evidence suggests sponsorship is associated with more positive local and policy attitudes and is more publicly acceptable when it is understood and framed as an orderly movement, governable, community-based, program-style pathway. A further caveat is that current studies often cannot fully separate the effect of sponsorship itself from pre-existing sympathy and pro-refugee orientation. However, few public attitudes studies do include non-participants or hosts coming from across the political spectrum.

Recommendations for Future Research

The review highlights several priorities for future research. Greater emphasis is needed on host-community effects as a distinct area of inquiry, including the conditions under which sponsorship shapes community attitudes, institutional learning, civic capacity, and local understandings of integration. More comparative work across countries, programs, and sponsorship models is also recommended, both because the current evidence base is geographically concentrated and because it remains unclear which sponsorship features are most effective in fostering positive attitudes and narratives.

At the same time, the field would benefit from more direct, systematic, and longitudinal evidence on public attitudes and narratives. Many current conclusions are based on indirect perspectives, so future studies are encouraged to better capture both broader public views and refugees' own experiences of reception and belonging. Further attention is also needed to variation across refugee groups and contexts, including intersectional dimensions, and to underdeveloped areas such as media and digital narratives, and the negative or unintended consequences of sponsorship. Together, these gaps indicate that future research would benefit from focusing not only on whether sponsorship can support positive local change, but also on how such effects can be measured more rigorously, assessed across settings, and understood in relation to wider public and policy environments.

INTRODUCTION

As sponsorship programs rely heavily on public support, examining public attitudes and narratives is essential to understanding how these programs are received, sustained, and potentially scaled. The evidence base reviewed in this report focuses both on public attitudes toward refugees and refugee policies, and on the ways sponsorship may itself shape attitudes, relationships, and narratives in receiving communities. Public attitudes and narratives therefore appear in the literature in two ways: as conditions that can enable or constrain sponsorship, and as possible outcomes of sponsorship when programs create sustained contact, local learning, and community involvement. The latter group of studies looks outward from refugee outcomes to community-level change.

The evidence base supports a careful conclusion: sponsorship can contribute to more positive local attitudes and narratives, but the literature provides weaker evidence that it produces broad, durable, or population-level narrative change. This review therefore brings together the existing evidence to clarify where findings are strongest, where they remain limited, and what future research is needed to understand when, how, and at what scale sponsorship can shape public attitudes and narratives.

Sample and Approach

This review employed multiple inclusion criteria to filter an initial group of 61 sources down to a final sample of 46 items for inclusion. Our inclusion criteria were:

- 1) Items previously coded in NVivo with public attitudes and narratives
- 2) Items coded as academic-style research¹ or evaluative assessments
- 3) Items published after 2015
- 4) Items that are relevant²

The sources were analyzed through an AI-assisted analysis combined with careful human review. First, the full texts were read and summarized in ChatGPT using a consistent structure that captured each study's main focus, methods, findings, evidence on public attitudes and narratives, and any research gaps. Researchers then checked these summaries against the original documents and corrected them where needed, including any issues of interpretation, method classification, or factual accuracy. Once the summaries had been validated, they were compared across all studies to identify common themes, key differences, and broader patterns

1 Academic-style research includes text that is published in scholarly journals or by academic publishers and presses, or written and presented by scholars at academic events, or an evidence-based document published as a report and with a clear methodology.

2 Sources were included based on an initial AI-assisted relevance screening process, followed by human verification, to ensure substantial relevance to public attitudes and narratives.

in the evidence. This approach helped speed up the review process while ensuring that researchers remained responsible for checking sources, interpreting the evidence, and making the final judgments.

Type and Quality of Empirical Evidence

The evidence base of public attitudes and narratives literature is mixed and uneven, with clear strengths in some areas, such as descriptive public attitude snapshots, with moderate strength in areas such as local, relational, and community-level outcomes, and major limitations in others, such as causal claims about sponsorship changing narratives.

There is strong evidence base on snapshots of public attitudes on sponsorship provided by national quantitative survey studies³, large-scale qualitative program evaluations⁴, and interview studies⁵. Moderate evidence base on local, relational effects supports cautious conclusions about welcome, support, reciprocity, and social inclusion at the community level.⁶

The weaker evidence base concerns broad claims that sponsorship changes national public narratives or political consciousness in a durable, large-scale way. These claims are raised in literature reviews, conceptual pieces, policy analyses, or interpretive chapters and are not evidenced by direct tests of public opinion change. There is relatively little direct causal evidence showing that sponsorship itself changes wider public attitudes over time. Even where texts report positive sponsor/community effects⁷, these impacts are usually attributed to qualitative accounts, local case studies, or evaluations rather than longitudinal or comparative designs. Such studies suggest positive community or sponsor effects, but these do not amount to a strong cross-national causal evidence base. Existing evidence on changes in public attitudes and narratives is concentrated in Canada, with fewer studies focusing on other countries (such as the UK, US, Ireland, France, Germany, and Hungary).

Research State of Play

The current state of research on sponsorship and public attitudes is substantial enough to identify recurring patterns, but it remains uneven in coverage, method, and evidentiary strength. Most of the literature comes from Canada and Europe and is concentrated in recent program evaluations, qualitative studies, interviews, and public-opinion snapshots, with fewer comparative or long-term studies across settings.

The existing research is better at showing how sponsorship relates to local welcome, host-community responses, and immediate relational change than at demonstrating wider shifts in national narratives or durable population-level attitude change. The literature is therefore most persuasive when identifying recurring local patterns and mechanisms, particularly through

3 More in Common (2017); Afonso et al. (2024); Van Wolleghe (2025)

4 Share Network (2023a, 2023b); Tissot et al. (2024)

5 D'Avino (2025); Haugen (2019); Lam (2021)

6 Share Network (2023b); D'Avino (2025); Haugen (2019); McKee et al. (2019)

7 D'Avino (2025); Haugen (2019); Haugen et al. (2020); Hyndman et al. (2021); McKee et al. (2019); Share Network (2023a, 2023b); Tissot et al. (2024)

qualitative and program-based research, and less conclusive when making broader claims about scale, generalisability, or long-term public transformation.

The current evidence base also calls for caution in interpreting positive effects. It is strongest in showing that sponsorship and other program-based pathways can generate more positive local and policy attitudes when they are framed and understood as orderly, governable, and community-based, but it is less well equipped to assess what sponsorship does under major humanitarian shock conditions, where attitudinal environments are different and more volatile. In addition, many of the studies documenting positive local attitudes focus on sponsors, volunteers, or already supportive communities, meaning that the literature cannot always distinguish attitudinal change produced by sponsorship from selection into sponsorship by people who were already comparatively pro-refugee, even if some wider public-attitude studies do include non-participants and politically diverse respondents.⁸

The introduction identified the main patterns of the literature and what it can support confidently. Following this section, the report presents key findings divided into three themes, and then distinguishes between immediate and longer-term effects to demonstrate that local and place-based changes are more consistently documented than broader or more durable public-attitude change. Next, the report synthesizes the positive effects of sponsorship and sets out the limits, barriers, and program implications. The final section identifies gaps and areas for further research.

8 See Phillimore et al. (2026); Tryl & Surmon (2023)

FROM LOCAL WELCOME TO WIDER NARRATIVE CHANGE

Main Findings

Studies often measured public attitudes by host community welcome, acceptance, hospitableness, and community openness toward refugees. These studies explored whether communities were welcoming and accepting refugees, and whether refugees felt welcomed and experienced belonging through community contact.⁹ Some studies prioritized measuring public support for refugee admission, resettlement, asylum policies, and solidarity practices.

Studies on narratives recurrently examined narratives of deservingness, threat, burden, and “good” versus “bad” refugees. These studies were interested in whether sponsored refugees were seen as “deserving,” “genuine,” or especially acceptable compared with other migrants or refugee groups.¹⁰ Another narrative theme was concerned with whether refugees were perceived as able to integrate, whether host communities saw them as culturally compatible, and whether “Canadian,” “British,” or “German” norms were expected of them.¹¹

The findings regarding public attitudes and narratives can be categorized across three themes based on the type of relationship they are looking at:

1) Public attitude snapshots measuring attitudes toward refugees and refugee policies

Studies measuring public attitudes show that attitudes often hinge on deservingness, integration, fairness, and order rather than simple pro- and anti- refugee binaries. These studies often measure public attitudes at a population level.

A strong cross-study theme is that support or welcome is often selective and conditional rather than universal. The evidence repeatedly suggests that positive attitudes toward refugees are frequently conditional. Across both empirical and interpretive texts, support for refugees is repeatedly shown to depend on who the refugees are, how they are framed, and how orderly

9 Haugen (2019, pp. 54-59); McKee et al. (2019, pp. 75-77); Share Network (2023a, pp. 4, 10-14); Tissot et al. (2024, pp. 4-5, 10-11); Van Selm (2020, pp. 185-197); Share Network (2023b, pp. 19-22); Altinay et al. (2023, pp. 6-9); D’Avino (2025, pp. 915-925); Grzymała-Kazłowska & Hynie (2024, pp. 8-10, 12-13)

10 More in Common (2017, pp. 12-15); Crossley (2023, pp. 1-6); Hryciuk-Ziółkowska et al. (2024, pp. 5-6); Banulescu-Bogdan (2022, pp. 1-3, 11-14); Hynie (2018, pp. 3-6)

11 This theme is central in More in Common (2017, pp. 7, 12-14); Haugen et al. (2020, pp. 560-574); Lam (2021, pp. 263-265); Kettle (2018, pp. 145-157); Banulescu-Bogdan (2022, pp. 1-4)

or fair their arrival is perceived to be.¹² Several studies found that public support for refugee sponsorship is often stronger than broader support for immigration or refugee admission in the abstract.¹³ Canadians were somewhat more supportive of refugee resettlement than spontaneous asylum applications.¹⁴ In Hungary, solidarity toward displaced Ukrainians was broad, but acceptance still varied by subgroup, with weaker acceptance toward some groups than others.¹⁵ Several non-survey studies also point to selective deservingness narratives, especially the distinction between “good” resettled refugees and more suspect or less worthy asylum seekers.¹⁶

Some studies also argue that positive attitudes or solidarity are often difficult to sustain or broaden. In some cases, compassion was specific, temporary, and hard to generalize.¹⁷ In addition, several studies show broad support for the abstract principle of refuge alongside concern about integration, welfare use, cultural fit, or system abuse.¹⁸

An often discussed but not empirically demonstrated argument is that media and political discourse matter substantially. Studies repeatedly indicate that welcoming or hostile attitudes do not emerge in isolation. Positive media coverage, social media, humanitarian discourse, political discourse, and meanings associated with a specific war causing displacement all have an impact on welcoming or hostile attitudes toward refuge or refugees.¹⁹

Studies found that public awareness of sponsorship was limited and uneven in the UK, with Homes for Ukraine much more widely recognized than Community Sponsorship and Communities for Afghans.²⁰

2) Impact and role of public attitudes and narratives on sponsorship experience and outcomes

Several studies found that sponsor or host-community attitudes shape integration outcomes.²¹ One of the clearest recurrent findings is that positive local contact and supportive host relationships are associated with better social and relational outcomes. This pattern is fairly consistent across the studies that examine local reception directly.²² For instance, in the Canadian context, sponsor orientations toward newcomers differed substantially and affected how “becoming Canadian” was enacted.²³ In France, volunteer collectives, churches, schools,

12 The strongest examples are in Crossley (2023, pp. 1-6); More in Common (2017, pp. 12-15); Hryciuk-Ziółkowska et al. (2024, pp. 5-6); Afonso et al. (2024, pp. 3415, 3427); Banulescu-Bogdan (2022, pp. 1-3); Hynie (2018, pp. 3-6)

13 More in Common (2025a); More in Common (2025b); Phillimore et al. (2026)

14 Van Wolleghem (2025, pp. 136-137, 147)

15 Zakariás et al. (2023, pp. 14-15)

16 Ogg (2025, pp. 15-16, 28-29); Strazzari (2020, pp. 116-117); Hynie et al. (2019, p. 97)

17 Hryciuk-Ziółkowska et al. (2024, pp. 3-5) also suggest sharp shifts over time, with support for sponsorship lower in 2024 than in 2022 in Poland. Studies on the UK Homes for Ukraine and Canada's Syria program similarly suggest that sympathy may be targeted to particular groups rather than universalized (Banulescu-Bogdan 2022, pp. 1-3; Crossley 2023, pp. 1-6; Hynie 2018, pp. 3-6).

18 This pattern is especially clear in More in Common (2017, pp. 7, 14); Afonso et al. (2024, pp. 3415-3418, 3427); Hryciuk-Ziółkowska et al. (2024, pp. 5-6); Banulescu-Bogdan (2022, pp. 1-3)

19 Nasri (2020, pp. 143-146); Coffin-Karlin (2020, pp. 154-166); Zakariás et al. (2023, pp. 15-16); Grzymała-Kazłowska & Hynie (2024, pp. 8-10)

20 Phillimore et al. (2025); Phillimore et al. (2026, p.3, 6-10)

21 Haugen et al. (2020, pp. 560-574); Lam (2021, pp. 263-265); Share Network (2023a, p. 4); Tissot et al. (2024, pp. 4-5)

22 Altinay et al. (2023, pp. 6-9); D'Avino (2025, pp. 915-925)

23 Haugen et al. (2020, pp. 560-574)

and rural communities helped connect sponsored people to the host society and were associated with inclusion and tolerance, though not uniformly.²⁴

These studies show how public narratives shape who is welcomed and on what terms. They consistently show that welcome is narrated through national identity, morality, tolerance, deservingness, and difference. These narratives often remain selective or hierarchical.²⁵ A study on the UK also found that uneven public awareness of sponsorship shaped which sponsorship models are visible, understood, and likely to attract wider engagement.²⁶

3) Impact and role of sponsorship on public attitudes and narratives

The impact of sponsorship on host communities, sponsors, or volunteers is another recurrent theme and forms the third type of evidence base. Several sponsorship-specific studies measured whether sponsors or local communities became more aware, cohesive, culturally open, or civically engaged,²⁷ while others looked at media and political discourses as shapers of attitudes and narratives.²⁸ The evidence base on this theme remains concentrated in Canada, suggesting that the findings might be limited to contexts where programs are well-established, long-standing, operate at scale, and are widely recognized by the public. Other studies focus on the UK, the US, and several European countries.

The main finding of this theme is that sponsorship and close community involvement are often associated with positive local attitudes and relationship-building. Sponsorship programs can strengthen local welcome, belonging, and host-community openness. At the local level, several studies support the idea that sponsorship or hosting can create community ties, emotional support, and inclusion.²⁹ In these studies, community ties, volunteer support, or peer support were linked to stronger belonging, local friendships, cultural openness, and cohesion.³⁰ Some studies found that sponsorship can shift how refugee reception is framed politically and socially. In the UK, framing refugee admission through community sponsorship increased support and reduced opposition, especially among more socially conservative groups.³¹ In the US, similarly, sponsorship served as a frame that made refugee reception more acceptable by linking it to control, contribution, community, and compassion.³² But studies also found that those effects depend heavily on program design, housing, language support, and sponsor orientation. For instance, improved transport, access to services, pre-arrival contact and information, built-in peer contact, formal complaint mechanisms, improved housing security, and strengthened translation and language supports were central to whether welcome translated into stable belonging and positive local and relational outcomes.³³

24 Share Network (2023b, pp. 19-22)

25 Hynie (2018); Ritchie (2018); Kettle (2018); Van Selm (2020); Lam (2021); Crossley (2023); McNally (2024)

26 Phillimore et al. (2025)

27 This is especially visible in McKee et al. (2019, pp. 75-77); Share Network (2023a, p. 4); Tissot et al. (2024, pp. 4-5); Haugen (2019, pp. 56-57); Haugen et al. (2020, pp. 560-576)

28 Nasri (2020, pp. 143-146); Coffin-Karlin (2020, pp. 154-166); Zakariás et al. (2023, pp. 15-16); Hyndman et al. (2021, pp. 3-4, 10-12)

29 Share Network (2023b, pp. 19-22); D'Avino (2025, pp. 915-925); Hyndman et al. (2021, pp. 10-12)

30 Haugen (2019, pp. 54-59); McKee et al. (2019, pp. 75-77); Share Network (2023a, p. 4); Tissot et al. (2024, pp. 4-5)

31 Tryl & Surmon (2023)

32 More in Common (2025b, pp.22-23)

33 Haugen (2019, pp. 56-57, 62); Share Network (2023a, pp. 4, 10-14); Tissot et al. (2024, pp. 4-5); Haugen et al. (2020, p. 574); McKee et al. (2019, p. 76)

Some of the more recurrent findings within this theme include changes in public attitudes through contact with refugee groups, in some cases because contact was mediated through sponsors. Sponsorship also helped build civic transformation and local capacity-building, at times being experienced as socially and morally educative. Host community change was not only emotional or attitudinal but also procedural, as institutions gained knowledge about refugee needs, adjusted routines, and became better prepared for future arrivals. By creating more multi-directional interaction between refugees and host communities, sponsorship also transformed the understanding of integration into a reciprocal or multi-directional process, rather than a one-sided task that refugees undertake alone.

Across this theme, the strongest shared conclusion is that host-community change tends to happen through repeated, localized, relational contact rather than through abstract pro-refugee sentiment alone. Communities often learn about refugees' lives, what practical support refugees need in local settings, how to relate across cultural and social differences, and host communities' own capacities and what they can do collectively when sponsorship creates practical cooperation, shared events, volunteering, school contact, and everyday neighbourly interaction.

The next strongest conclusion is that these changes can extend beyond personal attitudes to include civic identity, organisational capacity, and institutional practice. But the evidence is also clear that these effects are not automatic or universal. They are usually documented in specific localities, often through qualitative interviews, and they can be limited by weak contact, racism, transport barriers, lack of wider public awareness, or local isolation. Therefore, the findings on the impact of sponsorship on host communities should not be overgeneralized. The underlying studies are mostly local and program-specific rather than large comparative tests of attitude change.

Several studies complicate the celebratory accounts of sponsorship. They demonstrate that sponsorship can depoliticize structural problems and normalize privatized responsibility,³⁴ and despite its warm public image, sponsorship may involve paternalism, domination, and infantilization.³⁵

Overall, sponsorship seems to have stronger evidence for local or community effects than for broad national narrative change. Where the question is whether sponsorship shifts wider public opinion or national narratives, the evidence is weaker. Therefore, local relational effects are better supported than broad population-level narrative transformation.

Immediate vs Long-Term Effects

This section differentiates between immediate and longer-term effects in order to clarify the temporal reach of the evidence reviewed. It aims to show more clearly what kinds of change the literature documents, and over what time horizon.

34 Elcioglu (2023)

35 Lim (2019)

Immediate effects

Sponsorship produced immediate reported feelings of welcome, belonging, and openness in host communities and among sponsored refugees, especially in rural Canada, Ireland, Germany, and youth-led sponsorship settings.³⁶ Direct early contact through sponsorship, hosting, churches, schools, and local collectives quickly normalized refugees' presence and improved acceptance in the receiving community.³⁷ Additionally, sponsors and volunteers could quickly become more culturally open and more aware of refugee issues through direct participation in sponsorship activities.³⁸ Positive host hospitableness produced immediate relational effects by increasing social inclusion and reducing loneliness among refugees hosted by locals.³⁹

Positive media attention and policy framing produced immediate effects leading to rapid increases in public sympathy and sponsorship interest⁴⁰ and at times shaping public narratives by casting some refugees as especially deserving and others as less welcome.⁴¹ This was also the case in moments of crisis, when humanitarian and welcoming public discourse generated high immediate solidarity toward displaced people.⁴² On the other hand, social media can also generate immediate negative narrative effects by amplifying polarized, Islamophobic, conspiratorial, or othering representations alongside welcoming messages.⁴³

Sponsor attitudes and understandings of integration had immediate effects on integration because they influence how refugees were received and how "successful integration" was measured, especially where sponsors took paternalistic rather than mutualistic approaches.⁴⁴ Paternalistic attitudes can work against "productive intercultural contact," while mutualistic approaches are more likely to support diversity, lessen prejudice, and build stronger multicultural relationships.⁴⁵ The mutualistic approach treated refugees as equals, saw decision-making as a conversation, and accepted that sponsors did not know the one "best" way to integrate.⁴⁶ These studies show that integration is a shared process of adjustment,⁴⁷ a two-way process requiring changes not just from newcomers but also from institutions, communities, and social attitudes.⁴⁸ A cross-study pattern is one where relationships were more reciprocal and communities more responsive. These studies more often reported belonging, welcome, cohesion, and positive local openness; where attitudes were conditional or exclusionary, the evidence pointed to weaker welcome and more fragile narrative change.

36 Haugen (2019, pp. 54-59); Share Network (2023a, p. 4); Tissot et al. (2024, pp. 4-5); McKee et al. (2019, pp. 75-77)

37 Share Network (2023b, pp. 19-22)

38 Share Network (2023a, p. 4); McKee et al. (2019, pp. 75-77)

39 Altinay et al. (2023, pp. 6-9)

40 Nasri (2020, pp. 143-146); Coffin-Karlin (2020, pp. 154-155)

41 Crossley (2023, pp. 1-6)

42 Zakariás et al. (2023, pp. 14-16); Grzymała-Kazłowska & Hynie (2024, pp. 8-10)

43 Coffin-Karlin (2020, pp. 164-166)

44 Haugen et al. (2020, pp. 560-574); Lim (2019, pp. 311-318); Elcioglu (2023, pp. 103-110); Heins & Unrau (2018, pp. 230-235); D'Avino (2025, pp. 915-925); McKee et al. (2019, p. 76); Lam (2021); McKee et al. (2019); Share Network (2023a); Tissot et al. (2024)

45 Haugen et al. (2020, pp. 572-573)

46 Haugen et al. (2020, pp. 569-570)

47 Haugen et al. (2020, pp. 569-570)

48 McKee et al. (2019, p. 76)

Long-term effects

The evidence for long-term change in wider national public attitudes is much weaker, and therefore findings regarding long-term effects are more conditional. One multi-country study explicitly finds that sponsorship has generally not achieved the broad narrative transformation hoped for because schemes remain too small or stagnant.⁴⁹ At the same time, others found that, in some settings, sponsorship contributed to more sustained senses of belonging and “feeling at home,” suggesting longer-term positive narrative effects when community support remained strong.⁵⁰ Sponsorship can support longer-term positive relational outcomes by fostering enduring emotional support, reciprocity, confidence, and broader community engagement beyond initial settlement.⁵¹

Program-specific qualitative studies show that repeated sponsor and volunteer engagement could help build more welcoming local cultures and stronger community cohesion over time.⁵² In the long-term, sponsorship can become a routinized “community practice” that helps sustain pro-refugee commitment, extends social networks, and shapes local narratives of solidarity and belonging.⁵³ Sponsorship could shape longer-term public narratives about who belongs in the nation by influencing whether refugees were treated as future members, passive recipients, or conditional outsiders.⁵⁴

Positive public attitudes were often difficult to sustain over time, with support weakening when migration became politicized, securitized, or linked to perceived unfairness or burden.⁵⁵ Studies also show that positive public welcome may weaken over time if housing, employment, or support pressures increase, suggesting that early solidarity does not automatically endure.⁵⁶

Some longer-term narrative effects may be historically significant, as the Vietnamese boat people case is described as having changed how refugee crises were understood in Canada and as contributing to a broader multicultural national identity.⁵⁷ Broader national narratives could incorporate refugee welcome as part of collective identity, as seen in Canada’s humanitarian self-image and public visibility of Syrian sponsorship.⁵⁸

Long-term narrative change remained limited, where welcome stayed selective, group-specific, or conditional rather than extending across refugee populations more generally.⁵⁹ Long-term sponsorship engagement can also have negative narrative consequences, since sponsors may come to treat structural refugee issues as private responsibilities rather than public policy problems, reinforcing depoliticized understandings of refugee support.⁶⁰

49 Ogg (2025, pp. 16-20, 28-29)’s study looks at the UK, Ireland, and Australia.

50 Haugen (2019, pp. 54-59); Share Network (2023a, p. 4)

51 D’Avino (2025, pp. 919-925)

52 Share Network (2023a, p. 4); Tissot et al. (2024, pp. 4-5); McKee et al. (2019, pp. 75-77)

53 Hyndman et al. (2021, pp. 7-12)

54 Haugen et al. (2020, pp. 560-576); Hynie (2018, pp. 3-6)

55 Banulescu-Bogdan (2022, pp. 1-3); Hryciuk-Ziółkowska et al. (2024, pp. 3-5)

56 Grzymała-Kazłowska & Hynie (2024, pp. 10-13)

57 Tran (2015, p. 76)

58 Environics Institute (2018, pp. 3, 6-7); Hynie (2018, pp. 3-6)

59 Crossley (2023, pp. 1-6); Banulescu-Bogdan (2022, pp. 1-4); Hryciuk-Ziółkowska et al. (2024, pp. 5-6)

60 Elcioglu (2023, pp. 103-110)

PROGRAM DESIGN IMPLICATIONS: STRENGTHS, LIMITS, AND BARRIERS

This section synthesizes the report's practical implications by examining both the positive effects of sponsorship and the limits that shape or constrain those effects. It aims to identify where sponsorship appears most effective as a mechanism of welcome, relationship-building, and host-community change, while also highlighting the barriers, risks, and program conditions that affect whether such outcomes are inclusive, durable, and transferable across settings.

Positive Effects of Sponsorship

Impact of sponsorship on community goes beyond the volunteers that are involved.

Contact with refugees through sponsorship can have an impact on public attitudes, creating community ties, increasing cultural openness, awareness of refugee issues, and positive local attitudes, such as confidence in the community's capability to welcome refugees again in the future.⁶¹

Sponsorship positively impacts local capacity-building and civic capabilities.

Communities become more capable, organized, and more willing to act collectively after participating in sponsorship. This impact partly depends on local social organisation, as rural places often mobilize a broader range of local actors than urban ones. Moreover, sponsorship resulted in institutional learning changing how schools, community groups, and service providers work with refugees and sponsorship groups.

Sponsorship can act as a host-community intervention as well as a refugee-support mechanism.

Sponsorship can shape not only refugee integration but also the outlook, practices, and self-understanding of the receiving community. The central claim is not just that hosts "help" refugees. It is that sustained contact with refugees, and the work of organising sponsorship, can change how local people interpret refugees, how local institutions behave, and how

61 For instance, see McKee et al. (2019, p. 81): "Local committee members and alumni are having an impact on their community by voting in elections and volunteering in newcomer programs. They also work to influence their professional and social networks to be more aware and knowledgeable of refugee issues and needs."

communities imagine themselves. The evidence for this is strongest in qualitative studies from the UK, Ireland, Italy, and Canada, though it remains mostly local and interpretive rather than causal or large-scale.

Limits and Barriers

Across the qualitative and program-evaluation studies, the most consistent challenge is that welcome is often conditional, uneven, and difficult to sustain rather than stable or universal. Even where sponsorship generates positive local relationships, these effects can remain limited to specific places, groups, or moments, and may weaken when support is shaped by deservingness, cultural compatibility, fairness concerns, housing and service pressures, or wider politicization of migration. The evidence also suggests that positive local change does not automatically spread beyond the immediate sponsor circle or translate into broader public-attitude change.

A second recurring challenge is that positive outcomes are highly dependent on program design and relationship quality. Qualitative studies repeatedly show weaker outcomes where contact is limited or unequal, where racism, local isolation, poor transport, weak service access, or lack of wider public awareness restrict inclusion, or where sponsor attitudes become paternalistic and position refugees as passive recipients who must adapt to host expectations. Several studies also caution that sponsorship can shift attention away from structural problems and normalize privatized responsibility for refugee support. These studies suggest that what consistently goes wrong is not simply a lack of goodwill, but the failure to convert goodwill into sustained, reciprocal, and well-supported inclusion.

Move beyond deservingness-based narratives.

Positive attitudes are often extended only to refugees seen as especially deserving, culturally compatible, or politically sympathetic, rather than to refugees more generally. This makes narrative change fragile and group-specific rather than broad-based. Selective deservingness narratives divide refugees into “good” and “bad” categories. Refugee advocacy and sponsorship messaging is recommended to avoid relying only on exceptional, sympathetic, or group-specific cases. More durable narrative change is likely to come from framing protection and inclusion as consistent principles rather than selective acts of compassion. Policy and media framing that separates deserving from undeserving refugees is encouraged to be avoided as well.⁶²

Address integration concerns directly and practically.

Support for refugee protection coexisted with concern about whether refugees would integrate, share values, or belong in the host society. Programs and messaging would benefit from showing how inclusion is supported through language access, local relationships, and institutions, rather than assuming attitudes improve on their own. Practical evidence of successful integration appears more useful than abstract reassurance.

62 Van Wolleghem (2025, pp. 136-147); Ogg (2025, pp. 15-16, 28-29); Zakariás et al. (2023, pp. 14-15); Strazzari (2020, pp. 116-117); Hynie et al. (2019, pp. 97-98)

Reinforce fairness and clarity in support systems.

In the broader public opinion studies, public attitudes weakened when refugees were linked to welfare use, unfairness, or pressure on local resources. Clear communication about how support is organized, shared, and sustained may reduce perceptions of disorder or unfair burden. Strong program design also helps prevent administrative problems from feeding negative narratives. In addition, perceived double standards and unequal support for different refugee groups can undermine inclusive local attitudes. Reducing visible inequalities in support, communicating fairness more clearly, broader host-community engagement, and transparent support practices are recommended.⁶³

Support positive media messaging and non-paternalistic public communication.

Media can mobilize support, but it can also intensify othering, Islamophobia, anti-refugee memes, and selective hostility depending on the broader political context. The evidence suggests that positive media messaging, careful storytelling, and visibility strategies can help sustain support, especially when they avoid reducing refugees to victims or threats.⁶⁴

Create more opportunities for direct, sustained, community-based contact.

Contact between refugees and host communities did not automatically improve attitudes, especially when it was limited, unequal, or unsupported. Positive effects were strongest where relationships were sustained and meaningful.⁶⁵

Promote reciprocal and well-supported sponsorship and train sponsors to address power imbalances.

Sponsorship can infantilize refugees, reproduce conditional welcome by positioning refugees as passive recipients who should adapt, be grateful, or fit sponsor expectations.⁶⁶ The strongest direct recommendations are to clarify sponsor responsibilities, provide compulsory training, strengthen mediation, and ensure confidential NGO support for refugees.⁶⁷ More reciprocal sponsorship relationships were associated with more positive and inclusive narratives.

Balance refugee experiences and public perceptions in the analysis of public attitudes and narratives.

Several studies showed that communities could describe themselves as welcoming while refugees still experienced exclusion, racism, or conditional acceptance. This gap can hide problems and slow real narrative change. Programs may consider assessing welcome based on refugees' reported experiences, not only host perceptions. In addition, public attitudes may be underreported. Studies looking at public attitudes through refugee experiences state that refugees may underreport negative experiences about their communities as they do not want to reveal such experiences about the community.⁶⁸

63 Share Network (2023b, pp. 22-24)

64 Nasri (2020, pp. 143-146); Coffin-Karlin (2020, pp. 154-166); Zakariás et al. (2023, pp. 15-16); Hyndman et al. (2021, pp. 3-4)

65 Share Network (2023b, pp. 19-22); D'Avino (2025, pp. 915-925); Altinay et al. (2023, pp. 6-9)

66 Lim (2019, pp. 311-318)

67 Lim (2019, pp. 317-318)

68 See in Haugen (2019, p. 58): "However, some refugees may have been reluctant to disclose anything negative about their communities."

Pair sponsorship with stronger public infrastructure.

Sponsorship can depoliticize refugee issues by shifting attention from structural problems to private problem-solving. Civic solidarity should not substitute for adequate state responsibility, and systemic barriers should not be made more visible.⁶⁹

Move from short-term emergency responses to long-term planning and support.

Several studies argue that early solidarity may weaken when housing, employment, or welfare pressures rise, or when programs rely too heavily on temporary momentum. These studies recommend stable, comprehensive planning and sustained community practice rather than relying only on temporary enthusiasm or limited sponsorship periods.⁷⁰

Strengthen coordination, sustainability, and scale where possible, while keeping expectations realistic.

Small-scale and fragmented sponsorship schemes are unlikely to change national attitudes on their own. Broader narrative effects are more likely when sponsorship is embedded in long-term community practice, stronger CSO networks, and supportive public discourse rather than treated as a stand-alone solution.⁷¹

Implications for Program Design

Sponsorship can foster community ties, cultural openness, and cohesion, but these outcomes are more likely where program design supports the conditions that allow them to develop. Therefore, there are specific program design implications and recommendations with regard to creating positive local and wider community outcomes.

Design beyond first-contact enthusiasm and take into account the fragility and conditionality of welcome.

Programs would gain from including mechanisms for sustaining support after the initial phase of arrival, since solidarity does not automatically endure. Program design could be improved by taking account of the fragility and conditionality of welcome. Since support is often shaped by deservingness, fairness, and integration concerns, programs would benefit from not relying on initial goodwill alone or on exceptional narratives about particular refugee groups. Instead, they may consider building in longer-term community engagement, transparent communication, and practical supports that help sustain confidence in refugee inclusion over time. Moreover, it would be valuable for programs to track whether welcome is sustained, not only whether it is initially expressed. They could assess change over time, including whether sponsor enthusiasm, community openness, and refugees' own experiences of welcome remain stable.

69 Elcioglu (2023); Zakariás et al. (2023, pp. 16-17)

70 Grzymała-Kazłowska & Hynie (2024, pp. 12-13); Hyndman et al. (2021, pp. 11-12)

71 Ogg (2025, pp. 23, 25-29); Hyndman et al. (2021, pp. 7-12)

Design programs with the gap between stronger local evidence and weaker national-level evidence in mind.

Sponsorship appears most effective as a mechanism of local welcome, relationship-building, and community learning, but these effects should not be assumed to scale automatically into wider public-attitude change. Where wider effects are desired, programs are recommended to build deliberate bridges between local practice and wider public visibility and may need explicit public-awareness and institutional-engagement components. The evidence base suggests that effects are stronger where schools, community organizations, service providers, churches, and local actors are involved, because this helps move change beyond a small sponsor circle. Therefore, programs can be designed to embed sponsorship in broader local institutions and networks. In addition, programs can include structured peer or community contact in the program model. This is especially applicable to complementary pathways, such as education that is based on sponsorship.

Design programs to actively guard against unequal power relations and the offloading of public responsibilities onto private actors.

The evidence base repeatedly notes risks of paternalism, infantilization, domination, depoliticization, and privatized responsibility, especially when sponsors are positioned as the primary interpreters of what “successful integration” should look like and refugees are positioned as passive recipients. It also shows that more mutualistic and reciprocal relationships are associated with more positive local outcomes. Programs are therefore encouraged to strengthen refugee agency, clarify sponsors’ roles and boundaries, provide multilingual support, independent mediation and complaint mechanisms, and ensure that sponsorship complements rather than substitutes for public infrastructure and state responsibility. Access to external NGO or institutional support can also serve as safeguards against sponsor overreach. It would be beneficial for programs to treat sponsor training as a core design feature targeting unconscious bias, stereotypes, and sponsors’ roles in shaping integration, and supporting more pre-arrival contact to encourage mutualistic rather than paternalistic relationships. It would be valuable for sponsors to be trained not only in logistics but also in power, reciprocity, and role boundaries. Programs are encouraged to make refugee agency an explicit design principle and create room for shared decision-making and reciprocal relationships to prevent treating refugees as passive recipients of care and designing one-way charity and compliance-based models of success.

Build sponsorship around practical settlement infrastructure, including transport, services, housing, and language access, not just volunteer goodwill.

Positive attitudes are difficult to sustain when the material foundations of inclusion are weak. The evidence base shows that positive public support and local openness can weaken when housing and support pressures rise, and that whether welcome translates into stable belonging depends heavily on practical conditions such as housing security, services, transport, and support infrastructure. Therefore, housing design is recommended to be treated as central to program success. Other examples of essential material and institutional supports for sustainable welcome and positive attitudes include transport and service access, multilingual support, mediation, and complaint mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

This review finds that sponsorship can make a meaningful contribution to public attitudes and narratives, but that its strongest demonstrated effects are local, relational, and context-dependent rather than broad, durable, or population-wide. The evidence demonstrates sponsorship's capacity to strengthen welcome, belonging, civic capacity, and more reciprocal understandings of integration in particular settings, while also showing that these outcomes are not automatic and can coexist with conditionality, paternalism, and fragile forms of public support. These findings point to both the promise and the limits of the current evidence base. They also underscore the need for a more developed research agenda that can test these effects more directly, compare them across contexts, and clarify the conditions under which sponsorship can contribute to more inclusive and lasting shifts in public attitudes and narratives. Accordingly, this review highlights a number of priorities for future research.

Research would benefit from placing greater emphasis on **host-community effects as a distinct area of inquiry**. Existing studies suggest that sponsorship can shape community attitudes, institutional practices, civic capacity, and local understandings of integration, but these effects are mostly documented through local qualitative work and remain under-tested across contexts. Future research may therefore consider identifying which program features, institutional supports, and forms of sustained community contact are most likely to generate these effects, and developing clearer ways of measuring them over time and across settings. This would help move the field from showing that host-community effects can occur to identifying how they can be intentionally fostered, supported, and assessed in policy and program design, and to research that is instructionally useful for policymakers, program designers, and other actors seeking to activate these effects proactively.

Furthermore, it would be valuable for future studies to explore **which methodological approaches are best suited to measuring public attitudes**.⁷² Several studies identify mixed-methods designs as the best overall strategy, which combines population surveys with interviews, local case studies, and discourse analysis, because surveys are strongest for measuring breadth, while qualitative and community-based methods are stronger for explaining how sponsorship changes attitudes in relationships and local settings.⁷³ This would address a key gap across the sample: sponsorship studies often show promising local effects,

72 Following are some methods used or recommended by studies in this sample: representative public-opinion surveys, survey experiments, qualitative interviews in different community contexts or comparative qualitative interviews in specific sponsorship settings, comparative community case studies, measures that combine attitudes with actual helping practices, longitudinal surveys before and after sponsorship exposure, contact and proximity measures, sponsor orientation measures, refugee-experience measures of perceived welcome, and media and discourse analysis.

73 Van Wolleghe (2025, pp. 131–147); Share Network (2023b, pp. 19–22); D'Avino (2025, pp. 915–925)

while public-opinion studies measure broader attitudes, but few studies directly connect the two through longitudinal and comparative designs. Some studies also suggest that public attitudes should not be measured only as simple support or opposition. Studies may also consider measuring awareness, scheme understanding, perceived fairness, resource concerns, deservingness, contribution expectations, trust in program management, contact with sponsors/refugees, and willingness to participate.

A related research question is **whether the scale of sponsorship is sufficient to produce detectable population-level effects** at all. The current review suggests caution here: broader national effects remain less established, and small-scale or fragmented schemes may be unlikely to shift public attitudes on their own. Larger or more historically prominent cases, including Canada, may offer more plausible contexts for studying such effects, but this remains a question for further research rather than a conclusion established by the present evidence base.

A further priority is the development of **comparative research across countries, programs, and sponsorship models**. The current evidence base is fragmented and concentrated mainly in Canada and Europe, limiting understanding of which features of sponsorship are most effective in fostering positive attitudes and narratives, and under what conditions those effects are likely to occur.

Future studies are also advised to address the **indirect nature of much of the current evidence on public attitudes**. Many conclusions are drawn primarily from the perspectives of sponsors, volunteers, staff, or refugees rather than from direct measurement of broader public views, indicating the need for designs that capture both host-community perspectives and refugees' experiences of reception and belonging more systematically.

The review also points to the need for more research on **variation across refugee groups, crisis contexts, and intersectional experiences**. Existing work is relatively strong on selective solidarity and deservingness, but it is narrower in showing whether these patterns hold across different refugee populations or how attitudes and narratives are shaped by factors such as disability and other intersecting forms of difference.

Further research is needed on the **role of media and digital narratives** in shaping public attitudes to refugees and sponsorship. The current review shows that media coverage, social media, humanitarian discourse, and political framing are frequently discussed as important influences on welcome, sympathy, hostility, and deservingness, but these effects are not yet studied systematically enough to support strong conclusions. Future work could therefore examine more directly how media environments shape public responses to sponsorship and whether some forms of framing are more likely than others to sustain inclusive attitudes over time.

Further research could also benefit from considering the **negative or unintended effects of sponsorship** with regard to public attitudes and narratives. The report notes that these outcomes remain underdeveloped in the literature even though several studies raise concerns about depoliticization, privatized responsibility, paternalism, domination, infantilization, and

conditional forms of welcome. Future research could be enhanced by examining these risks more systematically, including when sponsorship may reinforce exclusionary narratives or shift structural responsibilities away from public institutions and onto private actors. These dynamics are not yet studied with the same consistency as positive welcome and solidarity outcomes.

Finally, future research is recommended to prioritize **direct and longitudinal study of how sponsorship affects public attitudes and narratives over time**. While the current evidence shows meaningful local and relational effects, there is still limited direct evidence on whether these effects endure, spread beyond immediate participants, or contribute to broader changes in public opinion or national narratives.

These recommendations suggest that the next stage of research would benefit from moving beyond asking whether sponsorship can have positive effects on public attitudes and narratives, and focusing more clearly on when, how, for whom, and at what scale those effects occur. Stronger comparative, direct, and longitudinal research would help the field distinguish between promising local change, broader public transformation, and effects that remain conditional or short-lived. It would also provide more practical guidance for policymakers, program designers, and practitioners seeking to support forms of sponsorship that foster inclusive host-community outcomes while avoiding unintended harms. In that sense, the future of this research agenda lies not only in strengthening the evidence base, but in making it more useful for understanding how sponsorship can be designed, supported, and evaluated as both a refugee-support mechanism and a potential driver of wider social change.

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