The Local and Near-Term Impacts Immigration on Neighborhoods: Early Insights from the NYC Buslift*

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Abstract

This paper investigates the multifaceted effects of the influx of immigrants into New York City, initiated by "Operation Lone Star", which bused migrants from Texas border towns to select cities beginning in April 2022. NYC has received the largest inflow with over 150,000 migrants having arrived to date. I first characterize this episode in terms of speed, composition, and geographic dispersion of immigrants across the city's 5 boroughs. I then assess the impact on near-term, neighborhood-level outcomes, including zoned-school enrollments, crime, and mobility (via housing sales and change-of-address requests). I leverage a quasi-experimental design created by NYC's unique "Right to Shelter" law, which requires the provision of temporary housing for those in need. Lacking pre-existing living arrangements, immigrants were placed into homeless shelters across the five boroughs. Using detailed geospatial records, I compare changes in outcomes in neighborhoods situated closer and farther away from homeless shelters. Various administrative datasets from the NYC Open Data portal afford analysis of public school enrollments, crime rates, voter behavior, and mobility patterns with granular geographic precision and temporal depth. This work contributes to elucidating the effects of immigration by studying very near-term responses (e.g. within days, weeks, and months) of local communities to exogenous inflows of immigration.

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1 Introduction

How receiving countries absorb large and unanticipated waves of immigrants remains an important and contested issue. Much work has focused on estimating the effects on labor market outcomes of natives, including wages and employment, by comparing cities or regions that experienced large inflows to those that do not. Additionally, while these studies typically estimate "short-run" wage impacts, available data usually affords analysis of outcomes measured in years since the influx. This study examines the near-term impacts (i.e. within days, weeks, and months) of very recent and ongoing immigrant inflows into New York City that began in April 2022. Different from existing work, this paper assesses very local effects of immigration by examining changes in neighborhood-level outcomes such as enrollment in zoned-schools, crime, voter behavior, and mobility.

Since April 2022, NYC has received over 150,000 immigrants – primarily unauthorized asylum-seekers. As city officials continue to grapple with the ongoing influx, little is known about this recent wave of immigrants. This paper begins by characterizing this immigration episode in terms of speed, composition, and geographic distribution across NYC's five boroughs. Against the backdrop of a growing plethora of tabloid-like articles decrying the "migrant crisis", this paper presents the first systematic and empirical analysis elucidating facts and features about the incoming migrant population.

I then examine the economic impacts on local neighborhoods and communities by exploiting a quasi-experiment created by NYC's unique "Right to Shelter" law, which requires the city to provide temporary housing to any individual in need of shelter. Without pre-existing living arrangements, immigrants were placed into homeless shelters across the five boroughs. Using detailed geospatial records, I compare changes in outcomes in neighborhoods situated closer and farther away from homeless shelters.

This work contributes to elucidating the effects of immigration by studying very near-term responses (e.g. within days, weeks, and months) of local communities to exogenous inflows of immigration. Additionally, while labor market outcomes have remained a predominant focus, I shed light on less-understood but equally important outcomes for neighborhoods and local communities receiving inflows of immigrants. In particular I obtain various administrative datasets from the NYC Open Data portal that afford analysis of public school enrollments, crime rates, voter behavior, and mobility patterns with granular geographic precision and temporal depth. Unique from existing studies, I am able to estimate very short-run responses (i.e. over days, weeks, and months) to immigration which are otherwise undetected in yearly data. Additionally, bringing attention to very local neighborhood level responses captures potential adjustments that occur within cities and states that traditional studies miss.

2 Background of the Buslift

Facing large waves of border-crossings in early 2022, Texas' Governer Abbott enacted a broad set of policies to deal with the migrant influx named "Operation Lone Star". One facet of this plan involved busing migrants from border towns in Texas (e.g. Del Rio, Brownsville, etc.) to various cities across the United States. Early sights were set on Washington D.C. and New York City in order to redistribute the burden of unauthorized immigration to the "doorsteps" of policymakers in the nation's capitol and to so-called "Sanctuary Cities" that openly welcome migrants.

The first bus arrived in Washington D.C. on April 13, 2022, and in New York City on August 22nd, 2022. Among the various cities chosen as bus destinations–which also included Chicago, Denver, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles–NYC has received the largest number of asylum-seekers, with over 150,000 having arrived to date.

New migrants arriving in NYC had little connection to existing migrants networks, as evidenced by the large number of individuals that had no living arrangements upon arrival. New York's "Right to Shelter" law mandates that city officials provide temporary housing for anyone in need. Hence, migrants to NYC were primarily placed in homeless shelters across the city. This situation stands in stark contrast to traditional migrant flows into areas and locations with large pre-existing migrant networks that facilitate in the absorption of migrants into residential areas, communities, schools, and the labor market.

Recent migrant inflows can be observed through the daily counts of individuals in shelters, maintained by the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). PAnel (a) of Figure 1 shows the daily total number of individuals in DHS shelters from 2018 through the November 2023. The dashed vertical line demarcates April 13, 2022, when the first bus arrived in Washington D.C.

Interestingly, the data reveal that the influx began after this date, and not the date when buses began heading to NYC (August 22nd, 2022). Given Washington D.C.s proximity to NYC it is likely that the initial waves of migrants to the nation's capitol ended up continuing their journey to NYC, possibly due to NYC's right-to-shelter law, it's large pre-existing immigrant population, or other factors. Inflows accelerated quickly, growing the total individuals in NYC shelters to nearly 90,000 as of November 2023. The average daily inflow since April 13, 2022 stands at roughly 75 new migrants per day, with peak periods seeing up to 500 migrants per day.

Panel (b) of Figure 1 demonstrates that the large influx of immigrants in shelters mainly comprised of families with young children. The vast majority of the growth in the shelter population was attributable to adults and children in families. Further, the largest group by count is young children.

Figure 2 further elucidates the composition of migrants. Panel (a) and (b) shows the number of adults and children, respectively, by age group. The data reveal that the influx was primarily due to families with very young children under 13, with the largest count being those under 5 years old. Correspondingly, the increase in adults (parents) appear to be come from roughly 18-44 year olds. Finally, panel (c) provides further evidence that these increases were due to migrants, and not some other shock that increased shelter usage. Data by race/ethnicity show that almost the entire increase in the shelter population was due to individuals of Hispanic origin.

To motivate the exploration of effects on local schooling, Figure **??** shows school attendance and placements rates into permanent housing for the shelter population. Panel (a) shows that the large influx of migrant families with young children saw a remarkably high school attendance rate–upwards of 80%. Hence, the influx of migrant children, in addition to showing up in communities and neighborhoods where these shelters were located, likely also enrolled in local schools. Panel (b) demonstrates that placement rates of families into permanent housing were extremely low (under 3%) and fell with the migrant influx. Hence, this gives reasonable confidence that migrant families remained in the shelters to which they were placed, and were not redistributed to different communities.

3 Empirical Strategy

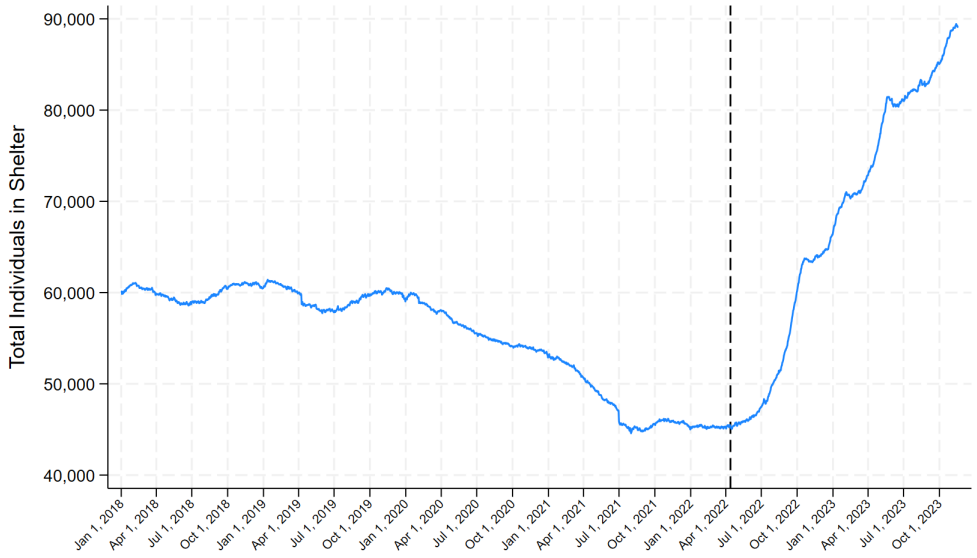
I use the placement of migrants to homeless shelters across NYC as a quasi-experiment to assess local outcomes. To fix ideas, the ensuing discussion focuses on local school enrollment, but other outcomes follow a similar design. Using detailed geospatial records, I compare changes in enrollment (by race) in schools situated closer and farther away from homeless shelters. I initially focus on elementary school enrollment due to (1) the age distribution of child migrants as shown earlier and (2) most elementary students attend schools to which their residence is zoned for. This difference-in-difference design exploits geographic variation in both shelters and school zones, as each shelter address is linked to a particular school.

Figure 4 provides maps of NYC, with the five boroughs shaded in different colors[1] and elementary school zones outlined. Panel (a) shows the location of homeless shelters while Panel (b) shows the locations of all elementary schools. Panel (c) joins these two maps, giving a sense of the geographic variation used. Schools close to shelters (marked with "S" in black) are compared to those farther away).

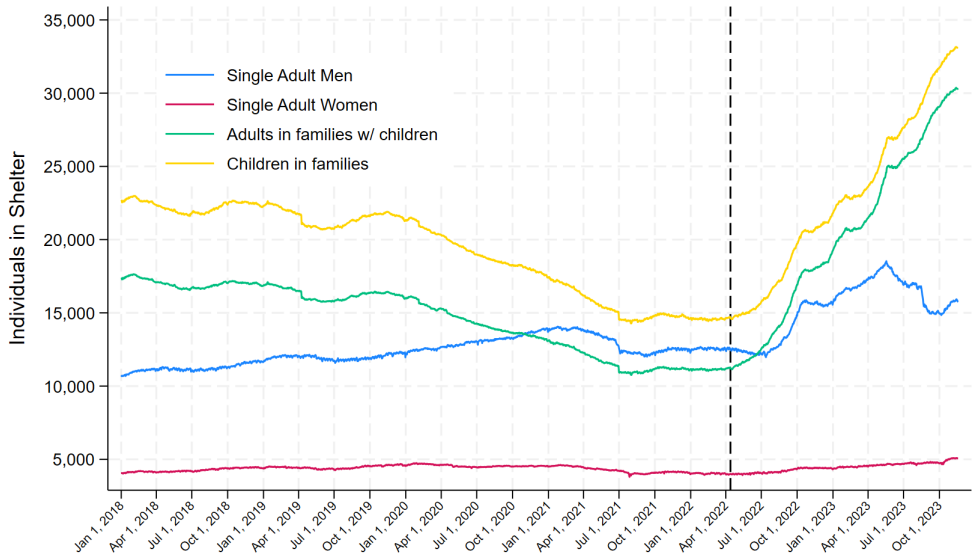
Outcomes assessed will be enrollments by race by academic year, and will reveal how individuals and families respond to the near term. Given that elementary school admissions were decided by February/March of 2022, changes in enrollment decisions of particular students would reflect extremely short term decision making of families in response to immigration.

[1] Queens (Blue), Brooklyn (Green), Manhattan (Yellow), the Bronx (Orange), Staten Island (Purple).

Figure 1: Daily Total Individuals in Shelter, 2018-2023



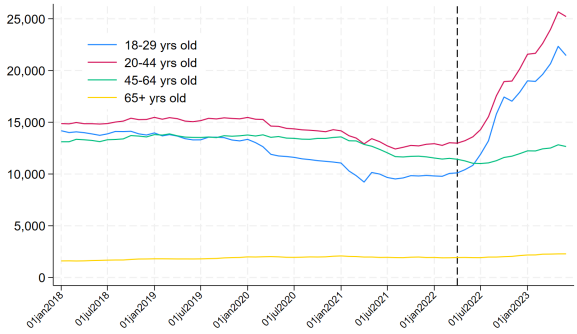
(a) Individuals in Shelter



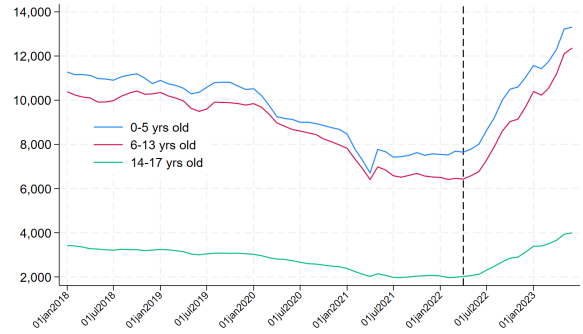
(b) Individuals in Shelter, by Group

Note: Figure shows the number of individuals in shelters under the DHS daily logs from NYC Open Data.

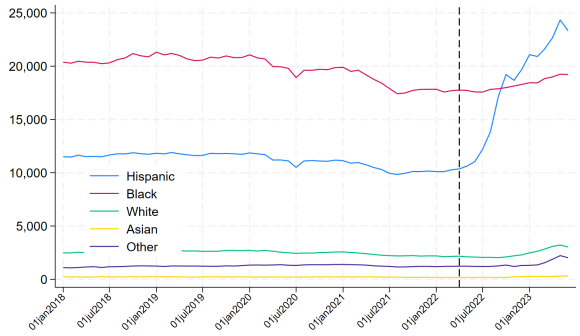
Figure 2: Composition of Shelter Population, 2018-2023



(a) Adults by age



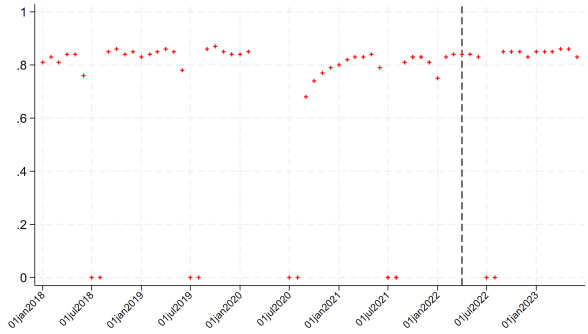
(b) Children by age



(c) Individuals by race/ethnicity

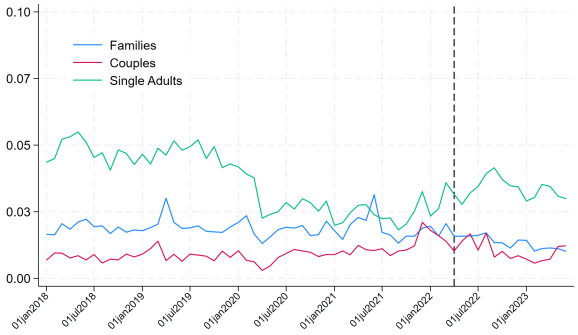
Note: Figure shows the composition of the shelter population from DHS Daily Average Census, available from NYC Open Data.

Figure 3: School Attendance and Placement Rates of Shelter Population, 2018-2023



(a) School Attendance

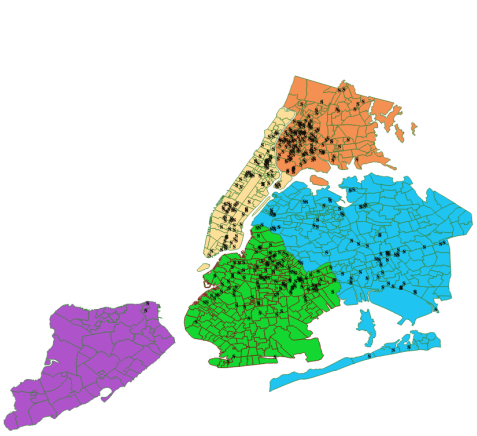
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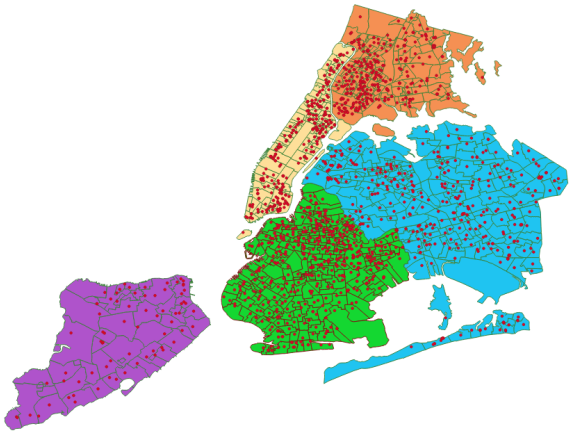
(b) Placement in Temporary Housing

Note: Figure shows school attendance rates and placement rates of shelter population from open data nyc

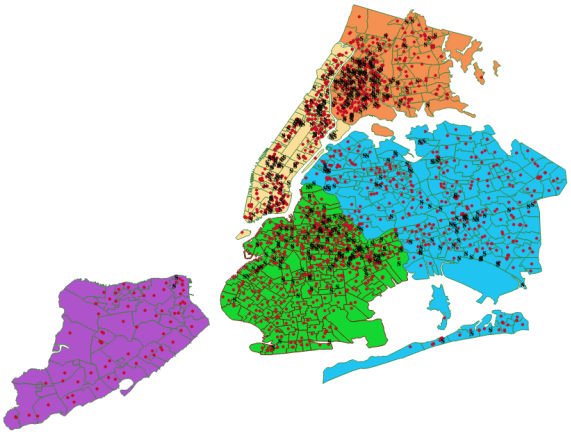
Figure 4: Geographic Locations of Shelters, 2018-2023



(a) Homeless Shelters



(b) Elementary Schools



(c) Joined Locations of Shelters and Schools

Note: Figure shows maps of homeless shelters and elementary schools across NYC. Data on homeless shelters is available from DHS directory of shelters, while elementary school locations are available from the Elementary School Admissions Guide from 2020-21, downloaded from NYC Open Data.

References