

## UNDERSTANDING SANCTUARY CITIES IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

Urban refuge for “illegalized migrants” in Canada, the UK and the USA



Sanctuary cities around the world challenge the idea that the national government is the only decision-maker on migration.

### What you need to know

The term “sanctuary city” is becoming more and more recognized around the globe. Sanctuary cities are a response to those who may not have legal status in the country, or “illegalized migrants.” Yet the concept of a sanctuary city is still quite vague. Some see it as a catch-all phrase about policy and practice while others say it is a larger process or goal. Different countries also use it in distinct ways. As international migration puts more pressure on cities to develop their own visions for migrants, better understanding of how sanctuary cities work in different contexts is important.

### What is this research about?

This research explores the idea of a sanctuary city and what kinds of policies and practices are involved in the concept. It also looks at the differences between sanctuary cities in Canada and the USA as well as cities of sanctuary in the UK. The big question centres on whether such different ways to provide sanctuary are still contributing to an overall sound approach for illegalized migrants and refugees.

### How was the research carried out?

In order to better understand the concept of a sanctuary city and how it differs around the world, the researcher carried out a thorough review of literature and research on the issue. He looked at the wide variety of work done on sanctuary cities to understand what kinds of policies and practices have been involved and how it has been applied in Canada, the USA, and the UK. After collecting all the resources, he then sorted it into different aspects that seemed to define what a sanctuary city meant over different national contexts. Following his analysis, he explored implications for policy and research and proposed ideas for future study.

## What have we learned from the research?

In the USA, dozens of cities have passed sanctuary legislation to protect illegalized migrants. Some do not allow municipal police forces or city agencies to ask about status or to cooperate with federal immigration. Others provide generic municipal ID documents that do not distinguish between those with or without legal status. Although policies in sanctuary cities may reduce the fear of local authorities, they do not protect illegalized migrants from federal USA immigration authorities.

In the UK, a "city of sanctuary" primarily aims to change hostile attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers. They host networks of local businesses or religious congregations to welcome them and focus more on awareness-raising and story-telling to change perspectives rather than protecting them from national immigration.

In Canada, sanctuary cities provide illegalized migrants access to municipal services like health, shelter, recreation, and libraries. As in the USA, various sanctuary city policies have been adopted to shelter illegalized migrants from federal immigration but are often not followed by local authorities. Canadian sanctuary cities also tend to expand the idea of "belonging" in a community that focuses on everyday living rather than on the federal level that renders some migrants "illegal."

Understanding sanctuary cities in different countries showed that there are some shared aspects across borders. For instance, municipalities commit to some form of legal recognition. They try to create a more positive and human narrative about migrants and the local community. There is also a shift to think about identity as a city resident of a community where legal status is not important. Sanctuary cities challenge the idea that the national government is the only decision-maker on migration and refugee admission by recognizing all members in the community.

## How can you use this research?

This work helps to better understand the concept of sanctuary city in different countries. Being able to distinguish between different urban sanctuary practices in Europe and North America is important when working with municipalities and local policy makers. It is also vital to see the bigger picture and the shared characteristics across borders. Though the concept may be critiqued in specific contexts, the overall approach should be seen as a response to the exclusion that migrants and refugees face. Although sanctuary cities often challenge national policies and practices, they are innovative responses at the community level. They can inspire and foster other practical local approaches to larger issues.

## Who is leading this research?

Harald Bauder is a Professor of Geography & Environmental Studies and the Graduate Program Director for the Master of Arts in Immigration and Settlement Studies at Ryerson University.

## Learn more

For more on this study, read the full article titled "Sanctuary Cities: Policies and Practices in International Perspective," in *International Migration* Volume 55, Issue 2, April 2017. It is searchable and available in the Wiley Online Library: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

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