PR3: Refugee Resettlement Trends in the Southeast

REPORT

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Refugee Resettlement in Small Cities Reports

**RRSC-PR1 (2017):**
Approved Resettlement Trends in the US

**RRSC-PR2 (2017):**
Region 1 Resettlement (Northeast)

**RRSC-PR3 (2018):**
Region 2 Resettlement (Southeast)

**RRSC-PR4 (2018):**
Region 3 Resettlement (Midwest)

**RRSC-PR5 (2018):**
Region 4 Resettlement (South Central)

**RRSC-PR6 (2018):**
Region 5 Resettlement (West)
INTRODUCTION

This report focuses on refugee resettlement trends from FY2012-2016 for the Southeast region of the United States. This region has a long history of welcoming refugees, especially from Southeast Asia, Vietnam, and other regions. The current report looks more closely at several selected resettlement sites in order to explore what resettlement looks like on the ground. This report focuses on refugee resettlement trends from FY2012-2016 for the Southeast region of the United States.

Key Findings

- Unlike in the Northeastern part of the country, many of the largest metropolitan centers in the Southeast are still leaders in resettlement within the region, as seen in cases like Miami, Atlanta, and Nashville.
- Overall, for most resettlement sites in the Southeast region, a fairly significant percentage of their overall foreign-born population arrives as refugees. This can be related to the fact that many traditional 'gateway' cities in the area do not have as many refugees resettled as many other cities. Unlike New York City or Chicago, metropolitan areas in the Southeast have only recently emerged as destinations for immigrants.
- There are very different spatial patterns evident within various states in the region. For example, North Carolina and Virginia have a fairly even distribution of resettlement across the state through a high number of sites. In Georgia, however, much of its resettlement is consolidated within the Atlanta area. The only site outside of this is Savannah, which has approved less than 4.0% of the state's total capacity.

The Context of Resettlement in the US

- More than 230 sites were approved as official resettlement locations across the US during our study period.
- Approximately 75,000 refugees were approved for resettlement each year across the US in the first four years of this study:
  - FY2012: 78,765
  - FY2013: 73,963
  - FY2014: 74,751
  - FY2015: 76,912
- The US increased planned resettlements to 85,000 in FY 2016 in response to the global migration crisis affecting North and Sub-Saharan Africa as well as the Middle East as sending countries and the European continent as receiving countries.
- The main refugee populations resettled in the US during FY2012-2016 came from Burma, Iraq, Bhutan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Somalia and Ukraine.

The total amounts noted here are the numbers of refugees approved to resettle by the federal government in cooperation with the resettlement agencies. It should be noted that the actual resettlement sites where refugees end up may differ from the sites noted in our study. This is because the official resettlement site is most often listed as the same as the address of the local resettlement agency. This office location may be somewhat different from the towns, municipalities or metropolitan regions where the bulk of refugees are actually initially placed. There is also the issue of specific neighborhoods within towns and cities where refugee resettlement is most heavily concentrated, making it more difficult to see how resettlement numbers compare to broader municipal statistics, especially in larger urban areas. These challenges in many ways limit our ability to provide a complete analysis of the effects of resettlement at a smaller scale and are important to keep in mind when using this data.

While the first report of this series focused on state resettlement at a national scale, the remaining reports, including this one, focus more on city-level resettlement with a particular emphasis on five different regions – broadly grouped as states in the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, South Central, and West. Within each of these regions, we take a closer look at several selected resettlement sites in order to explore what resettlement looks like on the ground. We have chosen to look at several specific sets of outcomes in each of these sites in categories that are particularly important for integration over the period 2010-2015 (which overlaps with our study period) in order to start asking what the successes and challenges of resettlement may have been during this time. In this particular report, we focus on employment, education, housing and poverty rates and have created some preliminary visualizations of the data. All maps and analysis are based on information collected via the Worldwide Refugee Processing System (WRAPS), data made available through the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration of the US Department of State. We offer these reports as a means of analyzing resettlement patterns and trends from the national, state and local level in light of the increasing controversies and politicization of resettlement over the past number of years.
Figure 3.1 shows the approved settlement capacity of each city over the fiscal years 2012-2016. Settlement capacity is established by the state on a year-to-year basis, and does not necessarily represent the actual number of refugees placed in each state. The approved capacity is often several times higher than the number of people who are actually resettled in a given year, since extensive screening and approvals mean delays and sometimes denial of specific cases in each site. In a few cases a higher number of refugees – as many as 10% more than initially approved – were eventually resettled in the state.

Observations

• Several states exhibit different approaches to resettlement. For example, placements in Georgia are consolidated in one area, while North Carolina and Virginia placements are fairly evenly distributed throughout the state.

• Although the state of Alabama has only approved 739 refugees through five years, seeing only one resettlement site in Mobile changes the way we think about resettlement in the state, and the effects resettlement may have on the receiving community.

• The largest metropolitan areas in the region are still leading their states in resettlement i.e. Nashville, TN, Miami, FL, Atlanta, GA, Charlotte, NC etc.

• While Miami leads in Florida, other larger cities in the state (Jacksonville, Tampa, Orlando) have also been taking in significant numbers.
Figure 3.2 shows approved settlement capacity in FY2012-2016 as a percentage of city population in the 2010 census and 2013 American Community Survey (ACS). Although some of the larger cities and metropolitan areas approve the highest absolute number of refugees, some smaller cities emerge as leaders in resettlement if you consider the population of each site.

**Observations**

- States like Virginia and North Carolina again show fairly even distribution when factoring in city population.

- Stone Mountain, GA is the only site approving more than 60% of their population in the region.

- Many of the leaders in absolute numbers in their states fall behind when considering city population. For example, Miami, FL, Atlanta, GA, Charlotte, NC and Louisville, KY no longer lead their states despite approving significantly more than their counterparts. Instead we see Miami Springs, FL, Stone Mountain, GA, New Bern, NC and Bowling Green, KY leading the way.

- The southwest corner of the region, including Alabama, Louisiana, and Arkansas do not exhibit much change between the approved capacity in absolute terms and how it compares to population, with all sites remaining in the bottom two categories.
Figure 3.3 shows refugee resettlement as a percentage of each city’s overall foreign-born population (FBP). Foreign-born population records anyone who is not a US citizen at birth, including those who become US citizens through naturalization. Refugees are eligible to naturalize five years after their arrival. All FBP data comes from the 2013 American Community Survey (ACS).

**Observations**

- Several states, including KY, VA, and TN, have approved greater than 5.0% of their FBP in all of the state’s resettlement sites.

- In several cities, approved admissions over the five-year study period have been relatively low in absolute numbers, yet refugees still constitute a significant percentage of the foreign-born population. Alexandria, LA (190 approved/5 years, refugees = 18.54%/FBP), Mobile, AL (739 approved/5 years, refugees = 10.99%/FBP), Charleston, WV, (158 approved/5 years, refugees = 11.27%/FBP) and Columbus, SC (830 approves/5 years, refugees = 12.28%/FBP). This suggests that these communities have very little history with migrant communities in their cities and the refugee influx is thus disproportionately impactful.

- Conversely, there are only three cities in the region (Biloxi, MS, Winston-Salem, NC, Metairie, LA) that have approved less than 1% of their foreign-born population during this span, which may be surprising given the more recent history of the region as a major hub for Latino labor migration.
A Closer Look at Southeast Resettlement

Here, we look at some demographics of three resettlement sites in the region. These cities were chosen based on three criteria that each site needed to have: 1) Be among the leaders in one of the three previous data visualizations (approved capacity, percentage of population, and percentage of FBP) 2) Have a population of less than 100,000 3) Not fall within the metropolitan area of a large city such as Atlanta, Miami, Nashville etc. As described in the introduction, one challenge to our study is that the sites listed on the WRAPS database are linked to the office locations of the resettlement agencies in the area, and not necessarily the location where the majority of actual placements of refugees take place.

Bowling Green, KY was selected as the leading city of its size in the region for approved capacity, New Bern, NC as a leader for percentage of city population, and Owensboro, KY for percentage of foreign-born population. We look in particular at several socio-economic indicators – education, poverty, unemployment, and rental vacancy rates from the 2010 census and 2015 ACS data – to examine more closely how some of the sites where refugees have been placed have evolved over the FY2012-2016 period. We do not wish to suggest a direct causal relationship between refugee placements and socio-economic indicators; rather, we are interested in understanding the broader environment into which refugees are being settled. What is the housing and employment situation in each of these towns and is it improving? What do poverty and education look like in each site?

### Education Rates

In 2010, the only site above the national average (85%) of the same year was New Bern, which now has the lowest high school graduation rates of these three cities in 2015 (83.8%). With the national average for 2015 at 86.7%, however, each city falls short of this average, with Owensboro leading the way at 85.5%.

### Poverty Rates

With the national average of individuals living below the poverty line at 15.5% for 2015, all three sites remain well above this, with Owensboro having the lowest poverty rate at 19.8%. The only site to experience a drop in poverty rates during this time was New Bern, where it dropped from 24.1% in 2010 to 19.9% by 2015. Bowling Green, which has the highest poverty rates of these cities, showed a slight increase between 2010 and 2015, leaving it significantly above the other two sites and the national average at 28.1%.

### Unemployment Rates

Bowling Green is the only city to have a drop in unemployment from 2010 to 2015 (1% decrease). New Bern experienced the biggest change (1.5% increase) to remain well above the other two cities. Although Owensboro had a slight increase in unemployment, they are the only one of these three cities to stay below the national average in both 2010 (7.9%) and 2015 (8.3%).

### Rental Vacancy Rates

The ideal vacancy rate for the housing market is between 6%-7%, suggesting that the housing markets in all three cities have improved from 2010 (Kasulis, 2016). Owensboro experienced the most significant change, dropping from 11.3% to 6.8%, while Bowling Green saw a decrease of 3.5% to leave it with a rental vacancy rate of 6.5% in 2015. New Bern is the only city to see an increase in rental vacancy during this time, but their 7.2% rate for 2015 puts them right around the optimal range for the housing market.
When looking at the more local, city-scale of refugee resettlement in the US, several other questions thus come to mind:

- On what basis have smaller cities been chosen as refugee destinations? What is the policy or outcome goal behind such decisions? How does job and housing availability factor into deciding where refugees are placed within each state?

- Are there the necessary resources and social support programs in these smaller cities to help foster successful integration?

- What reasons might there be for the US resettlement system not to place refugees in larger, more traditional immigrant-destination metropolitan areas?

- What factors might "pull" refugees to smaller cities?

- What kinds of impacts have the increases in the share of overall or foreign-born populations suggested by refugee placements caused for the communities that welcome them? Have new community dynamics, tensions or opportunities emerged?

- Why is it that major cities in the Southeast are still leading the way in absolute numbers of resettlement, while the Northeast is seeing cities such as Syracuse and Buffalo receiving more than traditional 'gateway' cities like New York and Boston?

- What does the resettlement of a similar-sized group of refugees in a small city look like compared to a larger metropolitan area?

- How does focusing a state's resettlement program in one particular area rather than more evenly across the state affect the experiences of both receiving communities and refugees? Which approach works best?

Analyzing by municipality reveals more detailed patterns of resettlement within the Southeast. The largest metropolitan areas in the region are still leading their states, but there are also several smaller and mid-sized cities that are taking in sizeable numbers of refugees. Analyzing resettlement in the region through how it compares to foreign-born populations reveals that many of these resettlement sites are taking in fairly large percentages of the FBP. This speaks to the lack of migration in many of these states historically, as there are fewer "gateway" cities compared to the Northeast.

While Georgia (14,823) and North Carolina (13,667) approved similar numbers over these five years, their differing approaches to resettlement alters how cities around the state are affected. For example, Georgia consolidates nearly all of its resettlement in the Atlanta area, which means that there is perhaps a greater impact or change within these communities, but less overall impact when looking at the state as a whole. This also means there is a greater consolidation of resources, which may bring with it certain advantages and disadvantages. North Carolina, on the other hand, has nine resettlement sites, with five different cities approving over 2,000 refugees in each. This relatively even distribution changes resettlement impacts on receiving communities and the coordination of services. Although it may not be possible to draw a conclusion as to which approach works best, analyzing the effectiveness of different programs at a municipal level could be a focus of further study.

While it is impossible to directly correlate changes in rental vacancy, education, poverty, and unemployment rates to refugee resettlement between 2010 and 2015, analyzing such figures is useful in learning what kind of spaces refugees are moving into, and perhaps providing some insight into why resettlement offices are placing refugees in these sorts of areas and how this has affected, or not affected, the local community and economy.

References