PR4: Refugee Resettlement Trends in the Midwest

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)
This report focuses on refugee resettlement trends from FY2012-2016 for the Midwest region of the United States. Historically, the Midwest has been less of a destination for immigrants than states along either coast or the southern border [Fennelly 2012]. Outside of Illinois, all states are home to foreign-born populations below the national average. Many of these states, however, have seen significant rises in the proportion of foreign-born residents in their more recent history (especially since 1990) in large part due to state resettlement programs [Fennelly, 2008; Rehwalt, 2015].

As part of our project, we analyze resettlement on a regional scale, looking at cities listed as official resettlement sites within each of five broad regions in the continental US in terms of the absolute number of refugees approved for settlement in each site and how that figure compares to each city's overall population and foreign-born population [FBP]. The current practice is that the US federal government announces an upper limit (a "ceiling") on refugees it will accept for each fiscal year, a number that is then revised based on both local capacity and global conditions – such as new or changing migration crises or the actual number of who have been resettled in the site to that date (or as we have seen more recently, due to drastic changes in refugee policy itself).

Key Findings

- Approvals for refugee resettlement were largest in major cities of the region; however, nearby and surrounding metropolitan areas have likewise seen significant numbers approved for arrival.

- This is especially clear if we look at Minneapolis-St. Paul, Chicago and even more so within the greater Detroit area (despite no official resettlement within the city of Detroit itself).

- For many of the region’s resettlement sites, refugees comprise a significant percentage of their overall foreign-born population. While the Midwest outside of some of these larger cities has, on the whole, seen a lower rate of immigrant settlement than some other regions of the country, the trend has been shifting over the past two decades [Massey, 2008]. This is also true in terms of refugee resettlement. The Great Lakes region in particular is home to a high concentration of refugee resettlement sites.

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 town, municipality, 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, this series of reports focuses 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.

Given our broad definition of each region, the 'Midwest' report will cover resettlement in the following states: MI, MN, WI, IL, OH, NE, SD, ND, IA, and IN. Western PA, including Erie and Pittsburgh, is also included, as it was not featured in our Northeast map. We are aware that some of these states and cities may not all be considered in the same region or the region typically defined as the Midwest. States such as Missouri and Kansas, more traditionally thought of as part of the Midwest, will be featured in the following "South Central" report in an effort to analyze a more equal number of states within each report.
Observations

- Many states were still primarily focusing resettlement programs in their largest urban areas during our study period. This is exemplified by approval numbers in Minnesota (Minneapolis-St. Paul: 7,259), Illinois (Chicago: 8,612), Ohio (Columbus: 6,172) and Indiana (Indianapolis: 6,395), among others.

- While many larger cities in the region lead their respective states and region in resettlement, we also see that smaller towns and cities surrounding some of these cities were approving the resettlement of relatively large numbers of refugees, as in the case of Wheaton, IL (1,828) and Richfield, MN (1,728).

- As the state approving the most in absolute terms in the region (by a significant margin), Michigan does not officially resettle refugees in its largest city, Detroit. The Detroit metropolitan area, however, including Troy (3,789), Clinton Township (3,626) and Dearborn (2,970), had approved higher numbers combined than any other city-metropolitan area in the region.

- There is the highest concentration of resettlement sites along the Great Lakes.

Figure 4.1 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.

**Figure 4.1**

Approved Settlement Capacity by City FY2012-2016

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Figure 4.2 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**

- Metropolitan Detroit was still leading the region during our study period as a collective area when considering per capita resettlement.

- The majority of resettlement sites overall in the region were approving refugee resettlement numbers at a rate of 0.75%-2.0% of their population. This includes many of the major cities in the region such as Indianapolis (0.78%), Minneapolis (0.93%), Columbus (0.78%), and Omaha (0.77%).

- There are no sites that have approved over 6.0% of their population during this span, reflecting resettlement trends in the region as still centered around larger cities and more populated areas.
Figure 4.3 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**

- The majority of sites approved more than 5.0% of their foreign-born population as resettled refugees, speaking to the limited history of migration in the region. Chicago, as one of the traditional ‘gateway’ cities in the US, is the only large city to approve under this mark.

- Many of the towns and cities along the Great Lakes have significantly altered their foreign populations through resettlement.

- Although Chicago itself might not have affected its foreign-born populations much through resettlement, we see the suburb of Wheaton doing so during our study period. Similarly, we see the metropolitan Detroit area approved considerable numbers of refugees compared to their FBP, while Detroit itself may not have been directly affected.
A Closer Look at Midwest 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 Chicago, Minneapolis, or Detroit. 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.

Erie, PA was selected as the leading city of its size in the region for approved capacity; Moline, IL as a leader for percentage of city population; and Oshkosh, WI for percentage of foreign-born population (Huron, SD was excluded from this section since their resettlement program officially ceased in September 2016). 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**

All three sites were above the national average in both 2010 (85%) and 2015 (86.7%), and remain relatively unchanged in the five-year span. Erie saw the largest change with a 1.5% increase in graduation rates— an increase in line with the national average during this time. Oshkosh remained well above the national average in both 2010 and 2015, while Erie was just slightly above in each year.

**Poverty Rates**

With the national average of individuals living below the poverty line at 15.5% for 2015 (up from 13.8% in 2010), Moline was the only city to remain below these rates. Erie, meanwhile, was significantly above the average in both years. All three sites also saw a rise in poverty at a rate in line with the national average (+1.7%) in these five years.

**Unemployment Rates**

Erie was the only one of these sites above the national average for both 2010 (7.9%) and 2015 (8.3%). Moline’s unemployment rose 1% from 6.4% to 7.4%, but remained below the national average, while Erie’s unemployment rates were relatively static during this time, as there was only a 0.2% increase to reach 10% for 2015. Oshkosh was the only site that experienced a drop in unemployment levels (1%) in this span.

**Rental Vacancy Rates**

The ideal vacancy rate for the housing market is between 6%-7%, suggesting that the housing markets in all three cities were in decent shape by 2015 (Kasulis, 2016). Both Erie and Oshkosh experienced a drop in rental vacancy rate, bringing them just outside the optimal range of 6%-7%. Moline, on the other hand, saw nearly a 3% increase in vacancy rates, leaving it the furthest from the 6-7% range at 8.3% for 2015.
Implications & Questions

When we look at refugee resettlement nation-wide, our perspective changes considerably whether we focus on absolute numbers, percentage of the overall population, or proportion of the foreign-born population, and the same is true when we look at the city-scale across the US. Yet what is also true is that while some of the largest refugee resettling states – like Texas, California and Florida – are also home to some of the traditional immigrant-destination cities, when we look at the city scale we see that it is smaller cities in each of those states and across the country that are taking a significant and in some cases an increasing share of the approved refugee placements in the US. While the major metropolitan areas of the Midwest like Detroit, Chicago and Minneapolis still led their states and the region in absolute numbers of resettlement, smaller cities like Erie, PA [1,575] Moline, IL [975] and Oshkosh, WI [660] were also taking in fairly large numbers, and surpassed many larger cities when factoring in city and foreign-born populations.

Unlike the Northeast [and Southeast to a lesser degree], resettlement in the Midwest was still primarily focused on the main metropolitan areas during our study period as mentioned above. While Chicago and Minneapolis-St. Paul approved significantly more than any other site in their states (and region), we see suburbs of those cities like Wheaton, IL [1,828] and Richfield, MN [1,728] have approved 3.66% and 4.91% of their overall populations respectively. Michigan, meanwhile, focused its resettlement program most heavily on the Detroit metropolitan area, without approving any for the city of Detroit itself. This left smaller towns and cities like Troy [3,789], Clinton Township [3,626], and Dearborn [2,970] approving particularly high numbers of refugees, especially when considering the size of these communities. We also see a larger number of mid-sized cities [100,000-350,000 pop.] compared to other regions— Lincoln, NE, Grand Rapids, MI, Rockford IL, Dayton, OH, among others— approved significant numbers of refugees, although it was still at a lesser rate than the major Midwest cities. Many of these mid-sized cities do not have nearly as much of a history with migration as a major city like Chicago, and were bringing considerable changes to their foreign-born populations through their resettlement programs.

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 Midwest were still leading the way in absolute numbers of resettlement, while the Northeast saw 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 like Erie or Moline look like compared to cities and towns within a larger metropolitan area?

• In the future, will we see resettlement trends in the Midwest move more towards smaller cities as we are seeing in many places now, specifically in the Northeast?

Analyzing by municipality reveals more detailed patterns of resettlement within the Midwest. The largest metropolitan areas in the region were still leading their states, but there were also several smaller and mid-sized cities approving sizeable numbers of refugees. Examining how resettlement in the region compares to foreign-born populations reveals that many of these resettlement sites, excluding Chicago, were accepting notable percentages of their FBP. This is indicative of the lack of migration in many of these states historically, as much of the region’s experience with migration has occurred only in the past few decades. Refugee resettlement continued to be a driving force behind this trend in many of these states through FY2016 (Fennelly 2012).

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


