PR5: Refugee Resettlement Trends in the South-Central US

REPORT

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Refugee Resettlement in Small Cities Reports

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INTRODUCTION

This report focuses on refugee resettlement trends from FY2012-2016 for the South-Central region of the United States. Within this particular region, there are some contrasting histories of migration. For example, Texas has a long history of immigration, particularly since 1970, when its immigrant population increased more than 400% over the following two decades and continued to rise through our study period (Bouvier & Martin, 1995; White et al., 2015). Missouri’s experience with migration, on the other hand, has come in more recent decades, especially since 1990 (Fennelly, 2012). All of the states featured in this region, however, have in common that the majority of their immigrant population comes from Latin America, although Texas also has a sizeable Asian population (American Immigration Council, 2017). Each state’s unique history with migration is important to consider when analyzing the effects of refugee resettlement in these areas.

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 has been that the US federal government announces an upper limit (a “ceiling”) on refugee admissions 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

• Overall, there were noticeably fewer resettlement sites compared to the previous regions we have examined, and these sites are not as densely clustered as in other areas of the country such as the Great Lakes and the metropolitan areas surrounding cities such as Washington D.C., Boston, and Miami.

• The percentage of refugees approved for each of these sites versus the overall city population were generally low, suggesting that resettlement in this region was more focused on larger urban areas than smaller sites.

• The percentage of approved refugee arrivals versus the foreign-born population of each city was relatively small as the only site approving greater than 15% was St. Louis.

• Texas was the only state in the region to have more than 4 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 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, 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 South-Central report will cover resettlement in the following states: OK, TX, AR, MO, KS, CO, and NM. We are aware that some of these states and cities may not all be considered in the same region. States such as Missouri and Kansas, traditionally thought of as in the Midwest, are featured in the following “South-Central” report in an effort to analyze a more equal number of states within each report. It is also important to note some of the significant changes that occurred in this region as across the country in terms of refugee policy. During our study period, Texas was the single largest state for approved refugee arrivals; yet in 2016 Governor Greg Abbott withdrew the state from the USRAP (Ura, 2016). This does not mean that refugees no longer come to Texas but rather that their resettlement is directed by the resettlement agencies without any state coordination.
Figure 5.1 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

• Texas is the lead state in resettlement for the region, with its program focused on larger urban centers such as Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, and Austin.

• This follows a trend whereby in each of the states within this region, the leading resettlement sites are the major cities. Examples include Albuquerque, NM (1,510), Dallas (8,868)-Fort Worth, TX (7,717), Houston, TX (13,023), Denver, CO (8,341), Wichita, KS (1,220), and St. Louis, MO (3,901).

• Arkansas’ program operated solely through Springdale, and approved fewer than 100 refugees between FY2012 and FY2016. Fayetteville, AR was one of a handful of new sites that came online for the USRAP in 2016, as result of lobbying by local activists to welcome refugees in response to the Syrian crisis. The local agency in Fayetteville plans to continue resettlement in face of growing pushback at both the federal and state level [Froelich, 2016]. New Mexico, like Arkansas, also only had one resettlement site in Albuquerque, although it approved over 1,500 new arrivals.

• We do not yet see similar patterns as we saw in other US regions—where the major cities may still be leading the way in resettlement, but the surrounding metropolitan areas and other small cities were also approving significant numbers of refugees. Instead, resettlement in the South-Central region has generally been confined to larger cities.
Figure 5.2 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 when considering the overall population of each site.

**Observations**

- No sites in the region approved more than 2.0% of their population as refugee arrivals, reflecting the concentration of resettlement on more densely populated areas.

- No small cities emerged as leaders when factoring in city population as they did in several instances across other regions (such as Springfield, MA, New Bern, NC, or Richfield, MN). Even the mid-sized and large cities in the South-Central region approved greater percentages of their population than small cities like Springdale, AR (0.13%) and Garden City, KS (0.69%), the only two sites in the region with populations under 100,000.
Figure 5.3 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 major cities approved significant percentages of their FBP, such as Kansas City, MO (8.03%), St. Louis, MO (18.24%) and Denver, CO (8.54%).

- There were not any small cities that emerged as leaders in approving percentages of their FBP as we see in other regions. This speaks to both the nature of resettlement in the region, as there are only two sites with fewer than 100,000 people, and the history of Latino migration in many of these states, especially Texas (American Immigration Council, 2017).

- Despite their close proximity and similar approval rates over this span, within Texas, Dallas (8,868) and Fort Worth (7,717) had nearly a 3% difference as resettlement compares to their FBP, with Fort Worth at 5.78% and Dallas at 2.97%.

- High absolute numbers in Texas cities did not correlate to high percentages of their FBP, reflecting the large pre-existing migrant communities in many of these cities. This is in contrast to a city like St. Louis, which lead the region in percentage of FBP despite approving significantly less than several Texas cities.
A Closer Look at South-Central Resettlement

In the previous regions, we looked 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 FBPI) 2) have a population of less than 100,000 3) not fall within the metropolitan area of a large city such as Dallas, Houston, or Denver. For the South-Central region, however, it was not possible to choose three cities based on these criteria, given the lack of small cities involved with resettlement in this region. As stated above, the only sites with a population less than 100,000 are Garden City, KS and Springdale, AR. For this reason, we have changed our criteria for this specific region to encompass cities with a population of less than 125,000 rather than 100,000. This led to the selection of Abilene, TX as the leading city of its size in the region for approved capacity; Greeley, CO as a leader for percentage of city population; and Columbia, MO for percentage of foreign-born population. 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.

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**

Columbia was the only one of these sites above the national average for 2010 (85%) and 2015 (86.7%). Both Abilene and Greeley were nearly identical in their graduation rates between 2015 and 2010, with each at 81.4% for 2010, and Abilene at 83.5% and Greeley at 83.6% for 2015. Columbia saw a similar change in graduation rates during this time, increasing from 92.6% to 94.5%. All three of these cities increased at a rate higher than the national average.

**Poverty Rates**

With the national average of individuals living below the poverty line at 15.5% for 2015 (up from 13.8% in 2010), all three of these sites were above the average in both years. Greeley was the only site that saw a drop in poverty rates, while Abilene and Columbia saw rises in poverty in line with the national average (1.7%).

**Unemployment Rates**

Greeley was the only one of these sites above the national average for both 2010 (7.9%) and 2015 (8.3%), while the other two sites were below the national average for each year. Columbia, however, was the only one of these cities to lower its unemployment rate from 2010 to 4.8% in 2015, nearly 4% lower than the national average.

**Rental Vacancy Rates**

As the ideal rental vacancy rate for the housing market is between 6%-7%, none of these cities found themselves within this range in 2010 or 2015 (Kasulis, 2016). By this standard, Abilene’s housing market was in the best shape in 2015, while Greeley was just outside this range at 5.1%. Columbia saw the biggest change between 2010-2015, as its rental vacancy rate fell from a healthy 7.4% to 2.8%.
Implications & Questions

When we look at refugee resettlement nation-wide, our perspective changes considerably whether we focus on absolute numbers, the percentage of the overall population, or the 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 like Houston, Denver, and St. Louis still lead their states in absolute terms, smaller cities like Abilene, TX (925); Greeley, CO (775) and Columbia, MO (747) were also taking in fairly large numbers, although they still do not surpass the larger cities when factoring in city and foreign-born populations as seen in other regions.

Unlike the Northeast (and Southeast to a lesser degree), resettlement in this region was still very much focused on the main metropolitan areas during our period of study as mentioned above. The Midwest had similar patterns of resettlement revolve around its larger cities, but the metropolitan areas around these Midwest cities were also seeing notable approval rates for refugees. In the South-Central region, however, resettlement appears to be more confined to large cities than in the Midwest. Lewisville, TX, as a suburb of Dallas, was the only site listed in a metropolitan area but had only approved 75 refugees over five years, compared to 8,868 approved in Dallas. The lack of metropolitan resettlement could also be seen around other cities across the region such as Wichita, KS (1,220), Houston, TX (13,023), Austin, TX (4,557), Albuquerque, NM (1,510) and St. Louis, MO (3,901), where these cities were the only listed resettlement site in the metropolitan area.

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?
- Why 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 South-Central US were still leading the way in absolute numbers of refugees, while the Northeast saw cities such as Syracuse and Buffalo receiving more than traditional ‘gateway’ cities like New York and Boston?
- Why is it that major cities in the South-Central US were leading the way in resettlement when factoring in city population and foreign-born population, whereas in other regions we see small cities emerge as leaders in these categories?
- What does the resettlement of a similar-sized group of refugees in a small city like Abilene, TX or Greeley, CO look like compared to cities and towns within a larger metropolitan area?
- In the future, will we see resettlement trends in the South-Central US 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 South-Central United States. Texas, the nation’s second largest resettlement program, focused its program almost entirely on its major cities like Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, Austin and San Antonio. Some smaller and mid-sized Texas cities like Amarillo (2,569) and Abilene (925) approved a sizable number but did not compare to the major cities mentioned above. This trend was also noticeable in other states, where the largest cities are generally the ones receiving the majority of refugees: Denver leads Colorado; New Mexico’s sole resettlement site is in Albuquerque; Kansas City and St. Louis lead Missouri; Wichita leads Kansas; and Oklahoma City leads Oklahoma. In all of these states, there was not much resettlement outside of these main cities. This was in contrast with the Northeast and Midwest regions previously analyzed, where there were, at the very least, several examples of small cities emerging as leaders in resettlement, whether it be in absolute terms, as a percentage of city population, or as a percentage of foreign-born population.

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


