Refugee Resettlement in Small Cities

Key Findings

This update reports on the key findings of a 5-year study on refugee resettlement in the United States.
This study was conducted between 2014-2019

Refugees are designated by the U.S. Federal government as immigrants who have been allowed to enter the U.S. to escape dangerous conditions in their countries of origin. Recent years have witnessed the movement of refugees to places different from “gateway” cities such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco where they traditionally settled. In this project over a five-year period (2014-2019), our team of researchers set out to study the resettlement experience of refugees in small cities in the US, beginning in New England and eventually expanding the study to other sites across the country. There were three main questions we set out to explore:

1) Why are refugees being placed in these smaller cities?
2) What happens to them in these places?
3) What happens to the communities that receive new arrivals?

We built on the work of other researchers and tried to answer questions that are at the heart of debates regarding immigration across the country. What are the economic impacts of new arrivals, how do refugees adjust to new lives, how do their children do in school, and how do the cities that receive them adjust to unfamiliar faces? These are important questions not only for researchers, but also for urban planners and civic leaders, for policymakers, and for residents in these communities.

Our project involved multiple methods, locations and examples. We interviewed over 300 stakeholders – politicians, refugees, resettlement workers, community leaders, social service providers, civic officials and many others besides them. We conducted state-wide opinion polls and looked at socio-economic data for over 200 resettlement locations across the US. We visited small cities in the South, Midwest, Northeast, Southwest, and Northwest, to see how the influx of new arrivals looked in very different places. We visited refugee-heavy neighborhoods to catalog the effect of change at the local level. We spoke with many people who were both in favor of and opposed to refugee resettlement to better understand their perspectives. We interviewed refugees shortly after their arrival to see what it was that they hoped would be the outcome of their resettlement – and then asked them again each year what had actually happened.
Key Findings & Project Outcomes

We learned many lessons as a result of our research and are working closely with a number of organizations and groups to make our findings as widely available as possible. We hope that our work provides balanced and nuanced evidence for data-driven policymaking and information that helps to improve the lives of refugees, the communities that they are settled into, and the nation as a whole. There are a few particular outcomes we would like to highlight here:

**Small City Resettlement**

For smaller cities outside of the traditional ‘gateway’ destinations (like New York, Chicago or San Francisco) that immigrants have always come to, refugees represent an important source of new arrivals. In many of the cities we studied and visited – especially in rural regions, in so-called rustbelt areas, or places with aging populations – refugees are an important source of labor, skills, and diversity. For many towns grappling with declining tax bases and the loss of population (through aging or outmigration of youth, for example), refugees are often seen as a ‘lifeline’ to renewed growth.

**Annual Approved Capacity for USRAP Resettlement Sites by City Population Size FY2012–2016**

- Small City: 50,000 - 150,000
- Mid City: 150,000 - 500,000
- Large City: 500,000 - 1.5 million

*All populations are based on the 2010 census city population estimates

**In Particular...**

the mismatch between refugee skills (including advanced skills in fields of healthcare and engineering) and initial job placements (especially in low-wage manufacturing, agriculture and domestic labor) is a potential waste of human capital.
Key Findings & Project Outcomes

Who should be most responsible for helping refugees adjust to life in Vermont?

From 2015-2016, there was waning emphasis among our respondents on the federal government as primarily responsible for resettlement, and more toward the roles played by local governments, communities, and non-profits.

What do you believe is the most important factor in successful integration of refugees into Vermont?

This question was added to the Vermonter Poll for four years between 2015 and 2018. This chart does not include the open ended responses collected.

Year by Year Comparison 2015 - 2019

Long-Term Outlook

More resources dedicated to long-term integration rather than short-term adjustment has the potential for greater success. Successful immigration outcomes, in the estimation of this study, need to be viewed and planned for in the 5-10 year rather than the 1-2 year range.

For smaller communities this includes more investment by federal and state governments into education and housing opportunities. Employment services and healthcare access are already important aspects of resettlement programs but along with education and housing, access to adequate transportation is a key determinant of successful outcomes.

Finally, we found refugee newcomers to be amongst the most enthusiastic and patriotic of new immigrant arrivals within the small cities we studied. There were high levels of civic participation – volunteering for community events, participating in recreational activities, getting involved with their childrens’ education, studying English diligently, and showing an eagerness to vote once eligible – in every community that we studied. Refugee resettlement would thus seem to be an ideal program for welcoming active and vibrant new citizens to the country.