

PSCI 213: Policy Analysis

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**Funding Affordable Housing: A Policy Recommendation and Analysis of the Migrant
Crisis in Worcester, Massachusetts**

Executive Summary

This paper addresses the challenges Worcester, Massachusetts is facing because of the recent surge in migrants and asylum seekers, focusing on issues like housing shortages, educational burdens, and legal hurdles. It critiques the inadequacy of existing city and state measures such as language courses, integration programs, and sheltering services, proposing a strategic focus on enhancing affordable housing as the most effective solution. This approach will help facilitate broader integration, alleviate related challenges, and support sustainable community growth. Local policymakers and stakeholders must take decisive actions, leverage partnerships, and continuously adapt strategies to meet the evolving needs of the community, such as by focusing efforts on crafting policy to increase affordable housing which will improve living conditions and foster city-wide inclusivity and growth for migrants and natives alike.

Introduction

In recent years, Worcester, Massachusetts has become a microcosm of a global crisis: the influx of migrants and asylum seekers fleeing turmoil and seeking refuge. As the city's population shifts and grows, the challenges of integration and support become increasingly demanding. Like much of the country, the inflow of migrants is straining local resources, requiring immediate attention, amidst the city's long-standing welcoming stance towards immigrants and diverse population.

Problem Statement

The challenges faced by the city are not unique. Some are exacerbations of greater, existing problems, such as housing shortages, education strains, and inaccessibility of healthcare; others are specific to migrants, like issues of economic resources, securing employment, and social integration. Addressing these challenges requires a determination of the best distribution of the city's limited resources to provide support to migrants. The situation requires a policy response that simultaneously attends to the immediate needs of the migrant population and the city as a whole, integrates these individuals into the community in sustainable and equitable manners, and sets the city up to continue as a vibrant, diverse, and thriving community.

Background/Context

To provide some context to the current migrant situation, it is helpful to look at the nature of the issue previously, particularly about ten to fifteen years ago. From 2007 to 2012, 2,196 refugees arrived in Worcester, Massachusetts. This is more than any other locality in the state, accounting for about 26 percent of refugees arriving during that period (Fábos et al. 2014, 3). The refugee population came from 24 different countries, with the three most common being Burma, Bhutan, and Iraq, while other significant communities came from Vietnam, Ghana, and Latin America (Fábos et al. 2014, 16; Goodman et al. 2015, 11). In 2014, 54 percent of Worcester's foreign-born population – including naturalized citizens, permanent residents, students, foreign expats, as well as asylees – estimated they spoke English “less than very well” (Fábos et al. 2014, 19) Knowing these statistics and this information is useful in understanding what the migrant and refugee community looked like in the past.

It is also important to understand Worcester's stance on immigrants. The resources of Worcester – and the state overall – in addition to its favorable stance and environment for

migrant integration have made the city popular for newly arrived immigrants. Additionally, with its long history of diverse, immigrant communities, Worcester is known as an “attractive gateway city” for newcomers looking for a safe community to find support in, drawing more to the city (Fábos et al. 2014, 14). Finally, Worcester’s migrant community is further supported by Massachusetts’ designation as a sanctuary state. In 2017, a Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruling in *Lunn v Commonwealth* led to a general acceptance of the state as a sanctuary state, making it more appealing both for migrants and certain state governors interested in sending immigrants elsewhere (Boyer 2018, 1419-1423; Lannan 2022).

Currently, the City of Worcester has several initiatives in place to support migrants in the city, offered through government programs and community organization partnerships. These include language classes, employment orientation, health services, cultural events, volunteer and community engagement, housing provisions, and shelter (USCIS Guide n.d.).

The shelter system in Massachusetts has historically been capable of handling adequate levels of people in its system, though it has failed to house people long-term. Massachusetts has a Rental Assistance for Families in Transition (RAFT) program that supplements the rents for those facing eviction temporarily. During the pandemic, with federal funds, the program was expanded to create the now-defunct ERAP, the Emergency Rental Assistance Program, which provided up to \$7000 in aid a year without a program time limit on the program, preventing eviction for 75 percent of enrollees (MassGov 2024). The two programs have proven to be far more cost-effective compared to shelter services, though they are typically less popular politically (Kennedy 2024).

State aid for education is a significant part of Worcester’s annual income, almost equal to property taxes. Worcester entitles all children to education, regardless of documentation status.

About a third of those enrolled in public schools are classified as English Learners (EL), people who do not natively speak English. These students were among the worst performance scores in every metric (Worcester Research Bureau 10/23). The primary English learning (ESL) program in Worcester schools is Sheltered English Immersion (SEI), the only program funded under state law. SEI programs are operated in regular classes, built for classes with both English and Spanish speakers, and are more oriented toward those with mid-level proficiency (O'Rourke 2017; Slama et al. 2015). Programs in other states, such as Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) or 50/50 language classrooms, were discontinued in a 2002 referendum following a smear campaign.

Worcester's Migrant Crisis Today

Control of immigration falls under the jurisdiction of the federal government. It is within that realm that decisions are made on work permits, residence status, asylum grants, and visas. As such, issues like employment cannot be addressed by any locality until a migrant has received permission to remain in the US and is issued a work permit. Massachusetts was the seventh most backlogged state in February (Gross 2024), though the permit processing has since sped up. However, lack of English proficiency and rising housing prices make it difficult for migrants to find jobs and settle down, even as they work towards acclimatization (Betancourt 2024).

In recent years, migrant populations arriving in Worcester have shifted. Currently, migrants from Haiti and Venezuela are significant groups (Trogolo 2022; Turken 2022; Gross 2024). The patterns of migration have likewise been changing: unlike previous waves of migration, the majority of new arrivals arrive as a family unit, rather than singular individuals (Gramlich 2024). As of January 1, 2024, 302 migrant families were being sheltered by Worcester in a variety of accommodations, including shelters (Exec. Office for AF and Exec. Office of HLC 2024, 10). Many others are on the streets, though the State currently has a family shelter

cap of 7,500 people, a response to the overburdening resulting from the crisis (Kazakiewich and Bienick 2023; Mass.gov n.d.). Investigations are currently underway to see if hastily converted shelter hotels are intentionally overcharging for meals, but as this is not yet conclusive it will not be discussed here. Research has shown that for every thousand legal migrant workers, there is an increase of \$2 million in state and local tax revenue, highlighting the economic impact of migrants. At the same time, it has been found that the increased burden of emergency sheltering for the state has cost triple the expected budget for 2024, approximately \$1 billion. (Young 2024). As the city and state have reallocated finances to accommodate this, they have cut costs from other initiatives, raising concerns about the extent to which the state is obligated to its status as a sanctuary state.

Criteria

In thinking about what will determine the best policy, we established three criteria that will shape the framework of our analysis, and for each criterion, we outlined questions to guide our determinations. First, is effectiveness. In thinking about effectiveness, we consider what aspect of the issue the policy alternative is addressing and how successful it is in doing so. The second criterion is economic effect. With this criterion, we ask what the economic effect will be and how the solution will impact the economic situation for migrants individually, as well as the city as a whole. Our final criterion is the feasibility of the alternative. Feasibility relates to both political and administrative structures and viability. With this criterion, we ask what resistance the policy will face, what systems or structures will act as a barrier, and whether that resistance will pose too great of a barrier. Considering policy alternatives with these criteria as a framework helps to ensure the policy solution will be holistic and realistic in implementation, accounting for the inadequacies of current policy that attempt but fall short in reducing the burden of the crisis.

Policy Proposals

Affordable Housing

There is currently a housing crisis in Worcester, which disproportionately impacts low-income households. Twenty-four percent of households are considered to be extremely low income, 15 percent are very low, and another 15 percent are low-income households, adding up to 54 percent of all Worcester households who qualify for federal and state housing programs (MAPC n.d.). Therefore, we propose that Worcester must address the need for increased affordable housing in the city. We argue that while immigrants need affordable housing, they only make up a portion of those who would benefit. In implementing an equitable policy rather than one solely focused on migrants, we hope the policy will be received better by the citizens of Worcester who can see the benefits for the majority, rather than a small group. Hopefully, this would also help minimize conflicts between the migrant population and Worcester natives, as an influx of newcomers in Worcester with no changes to the availability of housing and jobs can cause conflict, creating more barriers to migrants' assimilation.

General Law Chapter 40B states that in any municipality where less than 10 percent of units are included on the Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI), a developer can build more densely than the municipal zoning bylaws would permit if at least 25 percent (or 20 percent in certain cases) of the new units are affordable (MAPC n.d.). Therefore, increasing the amount of affordable housing is possible in Worcester, especially when also considering the work of organizations such as the Worcester Community Housing Resources (WCHR). Groups like the WCHR aim to revitalize Worcester through programs for low-income families like financial coaching, lending for household repairs when households are ineligible for loans from other financial institutions, and working with other organizations to build affordable housing

(Worcester Community Housing Resources n.d.). Should the city government decide to partner with organizations like WCHR, it could alleviate some of the burdens the state budget currently spends on Emergency Assistance shelters. The government is spending a lot on shelters for unhoused people, which while fine in the short term for those who can get into a shelter, there are strict requirements for entry and an end date to their stay that severely limits who can benefit. After being in the shelter, these individuals must still find housing themselves.

By promoting policy for affordable housing, the shelters can stop acting as ‘middlemen’ for migrants and other unhoused people and instead become more beneficial to those who need them, helping to house more people in Worcester. Senator Robyn Kennedy advocated for rent assistance, which in the short term, can be incredibly beneficial to migrants as they begin to acclimate to life in Worcester (Kennedy 2024; Lee n.d.). However, with limited to no affordable housing available, achieving rental assistance will be much harder.

By organizing a larger scale movement for affordable housing, Worcester could combat multiple issues – the housing crisis, of course, helping migrants gain access to decent housing, as well as the disgruntlement of Worcester natives that is often directed towards migrants. This would help with the migrant crisis in other, indirect ways beyond supporting their right to shelter. By improving relations between Worcester natives and Worcester immigrants, the process of assimilation would become much easier. This would allow them to integrate into the community more easily and possibly provide additional support when needed, reduce xenophobia, and even job opportunities through a stronger community.

Legal Aid Services

Legal service organizations for migrants and asylum seekers are groups that provide free or low-cost legal services to those who need but cannot afford representation or aid in filing

immigration forms, appearing in court, or taking asylum interviews. Typically these groups are funded by philanthropic donations and government contracts, for instance, in November 2023, Attorney General Campbell distributed \$780,000 in grants to 13 such organizations in Massachusetts, one being Central West Justice Center, a group providing service in Worcester (Commonwealth of MA 2023). They heavily depend on lawyers, firms, and university legal clinics to provide pro bono services for staffing and expertise (Androff and Mathis 2022, 180). Often, these groups are underfunded, lacking the necessary resources, and are unable to take on the volume of case requests. For example, Central West Justice Center has to turn away over half of the requests they receive because they lack the resources (Central West Justice Center n.d.).

Immigration cases are civil cases, meaning there is no guaranteed right to representation like in criminal court. Federal law states that anyone facing removal is entitled to representation, but at no cost to the federal government (U.S. Code 8 § 1362 1996). The burden of finding representation falls on the migrants, facing barriers of cost, language, and accessibility of attorneys. The benefit of having representation cannot be underestimated. In 2015, less than forty percent of migrants facing removal had representation in court, yet represented cases were about five times more likely to succeed (Ardalan 2015, 1002-3). It is here that legal service organizations can be of assistance, providing representation to more migrants for successful case hearings, but to do so, it will require funding from government grants and contracts.

While funding legal service organizations will require an upfront investment through Worcester's budget, in the long run, the eventual benefit to Worcester will help offset these costs going forward. With greater success in court cases, not only is Worcester providing humanitarian aid, especially for helping asylum seekers win their cases, but by receiving a grant migrants will

be able to get a work permit, which in turn will generate more state and local tax revenue that can be used to fund the budget, and put money back into these organizations.

Education Services and Programs

As previously mentioned, more migrants are arriving with children than ever before. It has been well-studied that education level, especially in developmental years, directly impacts future well-being (Heckman et al. 2014, 50). EL adults have more flexible opportunities, such as Worcester Public Library (WPL n.d.) programs, and have developed and educated brains, and internal motivation, things their children may often lack. As such, our primary concern was migrant children, though adult language classes are also important and underserved. Schools are not uniquely overburdened, but language barriers threaten children's educational futures. On its own, SEI is simply not enough because it is built to be the final step to mastery, helping only those who need the least investment. Without other programs to support it, those most in need are left behind. TBE, in comparison, begins with early education mostly in the native language, and gradually increases the English course content before transitioning to SEI. The two were always built to work in tandem, not alone. Therefore, its reintroduction into the school system should be a long-term priority; in its absence, we only set students up for failure and lost years of educational development. Designing a 50/50 split is another possible cost-compromising option. As these programs are not state-supported, helping Worcester schools apply for federally funded pilot programs could be a way to solve the current issues. If proven successful, they could later be used to lobby for statewide reinstatement in a few years, creating a more sustainable solution.

While those programs need reinstatement, they alone are not sufficient. Currently, Massachusetts ESL programs mostly cater to Spanish speakers (Worcester Research Beaurau 2023), and while many migrants arriving speak Spanish, there are more Haitian speakers here

today, and overall greater diversity in migrant arrivals. The development of the ESL programs will require recruiting teachers who speak these languages. These ESL teachers' contracts can be set up on a shorter-term basis but should offer pathway programs for long-term advancement and hiring as regular classroom teachers in the same school to encourage educators to take the position. Short-term contracts will help make the programs more adaptable for future trends in prevalent migrant languages. Advancement allows a more diverse teacher cohort to phase in and retain their language expertise for future language-specific ELs.

The best-path solution would be a program similar to New York City's rapid-hiring program, specifically designed for hiring with language expertise in mind. The NYC program takes one to two years and allows the participating teachers, who are in short order, to teach while getting their certification (NYCDOE n.d.). As such a huge portion of the student body is now EL, even if TBE programs fall through it is ideal for general education: a still-learning teacher you can at least communicate with is a massive leg up then the status quo. As Worcester has established migrant communities, and some come with English proficiency, recruitment should not be too hard.

Applying the Criteria

To understand the impacts of the policy alternatives in consideration of the criteria and compare them to determine the best recommendation, the alternatives were analyzed in a matrix. This matrix analysis allows us to link the criteria and alternatives to see a broad summary of the strengths and weaknesses of each alternative. Each criterion was assessed for each option on a scale of low, medium, or high in terms of its ability or level to succeed in terms of that criterion, i.e., how effective it will be, what the level of economic impact is, and how feasible the policy is.

Table 1. Analysis of Options for Addressing the Migrant Crisis in Worcester

Policy Alternatives	Criteria			
		Effectiveness	Economic Impact	Feasibility
	Affordable Housing	High Affordable housing encourages economic growth, making more monetary resources available for addressing other challenges of the crisis, like health issues, education attainment, and career growth.	Medium to High Each dollar investment in affordable housing boosts local economies, generates more income, and increases tax revenue.	Medium There already exist some programs to increase affordable housing in Worcester, receiving funding and support.
	Legal Aid Support	Medium Providing aid in the legal process will help migrants get through the process quicker, getting work permits and establishing livelihood quicker, reducing the amount of time impacts of the crisis are felt by individuals.	Medium Approving more migrants will bring in more workers to the area. The generated income will create more revenue from taxes and economic activity for the city, but to do so this will take an upfront investment.	Low to Medium There already exists an organization receiving funding (Central West Justice Center) but they require more to support all requests. Attorney General Campbell has distributed ~\$800k in support across the state, so support and capacity exist.
	Education Services	Medium to High Providing education services can benefit children and adults, easing the transition to Worcester, making services and programs more accessible by reducing language barriers, and supporting education and job attainment for migrants.	Medium Investments in education services are costly, but funding avenues are possible through the Department of Education rather than migrant programs. The economic impact is long-term, as it will boost education and employment success over time.	Medium While financial and political support for further education funding can be difficult to secure, the nature of making overall improvements to the education system benefiting more than the migrant community, could potentially make securing support more attainable.

Final Policy Recommendation

From the application of the criteria, the policy recommendation arose. The final policy recommendation for addressing the migrant crisis in Worcester is to increase affordable housing. In considering Table 1, affordable housing provisions had the highest rating of the criteria. In terms of effectiveness in addressing the issue, offering increased affordable housing helps to address the issue of where and how to find housing for migrants, which will in turn alleviate other aspects of the crisis by increasing expendable income and the potential for economic growth for migrants, improving the financial resources for healthcare, education, and legal aid.

Increasing access to affordable housing will not only make it easier for migrants to settle in the community but it is greatly needed across the state. Each dollar invested in affordable housing boosts local economies by leveraging resources to generate income, through resident earnings and local tax revenue, supporting job creation and retention (National Low Income Housing Coalition n.d.). Research on the statewide Affordable Homes Act shows that full implementation to increase affordable housing will create four thousand new jobs in Worcester County, adding about \$414 million to the economy every year (Motamedi et al. 2024, 1, 9).

In terms of political and administrative feasibility, increasing affordable housing in Worcester seems possible. Since October 2022, the Worcester Affordable Housing Trust Fund has allocated over \$9.6 million to 8 affordable housing projects (Dunlop 2023). Given this and inclusionary zoning – requiring a minimum number of affordable units in private projects – it is clear affordable housing is already on the table in Worcester. However, given the size of the population needing affordable housing, there needs to be a greater push for affordable housing by the government and community. The WAHTF was established by the City in 2021 and has a broad range of eligible grant applicants, including government subdivisions, community development corporations, local housing authorities, community action agencies, and non-governmental organizations (City of Worcester, n.d.; Commonwealth of MA, n.d.), suggesting that should the City invest in this project, there are other available means of funding.

Conclusion

Worcester faces numerous challenges because of the influx of migrants, including housing shortages, education strains, and legal hurdles. As this paper has outlined, while the city and state have been attempting to support migrants through several policies – including language classes and community integration efforts – these initiatives alone have not sufficiently

addressed the needs of the community. The analysis of potential policies highlights the need for a targeted approach to increasing affordable housing, which emerges as the most effective, economically beneficial, and feasible option for immediate action. This approach not only meets immediate migrant needs but also fosters sustainable community growth and diversity.

Policymakers, community leaders, and stakeholders must act decisively, leveraging partnerships and funding opportunities for successful policy implementation. Looking forward, embracing these changes will benefit all Worcester residents, driving growth and innovation of the city for a thriving future. As such, continuous efforts must be made to evaluate the impact of these policies and adapt strategies as necessary to meet the evolving needs of the community.

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