THE HUMAN DIMENSION; HOW THE LATEST IMMIGRANTS COPE WITH THEIR NEW WORLD, AND HOW WE DEAL WITH THEM, WILL DETERMINE THEIR IMPACT ON U.S. SOCIETY

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

December 17, 1995, Sunday, FIVE STAR LIFT Edition

Section: WAR PAGE; Pg. 1B

Length: 2878 words

Byline: Philip Dine Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

Body

WHERE, Fuad Kadiric wondered, should he turn?

A sturdy jaw and brown leather jacket lent an air of bravado, but this 41-year-old from Bosnia was foundering on several fronts. His job at a metal factory had ended abruptly after seven months because he took off a Muslim holy day, though he'd agreed to work a makeup day.

His son, Denis, was fired with him for the same reason. The 17-year-old had begun work a few weeks earlier, after quitting the ninth grade when he was stabbed by a young ***immigrant*** from another country.

Kadiric had no idea where to turn for representation, for someone to speak for him. ***How*** should he ***deal with*** the employer, the school, the police?

The anger was welling up again, the type he'd pushed away after the dream house he built in Sarajevo was destroyed in the war.

He used to be able to share his feelings Saturday nights at the Bosnian Club in a warehouse on South Vandeventer Avenue. But then the doors closed most weekends, partly a result of divisions within a rapidly growing population still reeling from the war.

Immigrants and refugees here are grappling with personal and family struggles, facing social and ethnic tensions or searching for a voice.

Meanwhile, the national debate on immigration rages - over whether the influx should be curtailed and at what level, ***how*** to keep out illegal ***immigrants***, what services to restrict, ***how*** to compute the economic balance sheet.

But the discussion neglects a key ***dimension***: the ***human*** side of immigration.

Whatever policy decisions are made in Washington, millions of ***new immigrants*** and refugees are in this country and more are on their way. In the St. Louis area, ***they*** number 80,000 and are expected to top 100,000 before the turn of the century.

How ***they*** adapt to the situation ***they*** find and ***cope*** with what ***they*** left behind, and ***how*** local communities and institutions respond to ***them***, ***will*** in large measure condition their ***impact*** on their host ***society***.

"Obviously these people are here, so what do we do?" asks Linda Sharpe-Taylor of Provident Counseling, which has begun to work with newcomers in greatest need. An Emotional Gantlet

Gedlu Metaferia, director of the Ethiopian Community Association of Missouri, knew the family he was helping to adjust to life here was in trouble once the wife learned she had rights.

"He wants her to treat him like a king, bring him dinner," Metaferia confided in ***late*** May in his basement office at a South Side church. "She is not 100 percent right either. She just says - 'This is America.' "

Without resources to hire a social worker familiar with the local system, Metaferia translated literature into Amharic, brought over legal brochures, engaged a traditional priest.

"We are crossing our fingers," said his assistant, Yenework Musse. And the two kept counseling as ***they*** knew best.

But on a Saturday night in ***late*** August, the couple'***s*** 5-year-old daughter let police into the dreary Hickory Street housing unit. Officers found the mother'***s*** body under a bloody blanket in the basement, her throat slashed with a kitchen knife. The father hung from a rope tied to a stair railing.

At the funeral of Melishew Terefe, 26, and her husband, Negussie Tsege, 34, Metaferia pleaded for women from Africa and elsewhere to be more open about the taboo topic of domestic violence.

Now, Metaferia says, "I see another tragedy coming, even as I talk to you. It may not happen, but this is what I suspect because of the conflict, because he beats her."

The murder-suicide sparked Sharpe-Taylor'***s*** counseling agency to set up English courses for Ethiopian and Somali women who stay at home - many in the same housing development - to help ease a severe isolation she says fosters and conceals domestic problems.

The tragic end to this case was highly unusual, the conflicts that drove it less so. Daily around St. Louis, teachers and ministers, nurses and counselors see various aspects of the adjustment struggle played out on individual, family and group levels.

The ***New*** American Program at Jewish Hospital cares for 1,000 Russians or Bosnians a year. Many are trying to ***cope*** with the traumatic events that prompted ***them*** to flee or with the gap between what ***they*** had and their status here.

"We've seen a lot of depression, especially among the elderly of all nationalities," says director Barbara Bogomolov. "Those in their 50s are also a vulnerable population; ***they*** often had a position of respect and never are going to get back to where ***they*** were."

Families rendered fragile by what ***they***'ve been through or simply wrestling with the altered values encountered here try to hang together.

William Chignoli, an Argentinian-trained psychiatrist who worked with Hispanics in Miami, has found here a nearly invisible Hispanic population with many of the ***new*** arrivals - often Mexicans fleeing hostility in other states - isolated and forced to work out problems alone.

"The first two years," he says, "are a very troubled, terrible time," with high rates of separation.

When people could most use the group support of their countrymen, those from oppressive regimes suspect one another.

"Everyone'***s*** looking over everyone'***s*** shoulder," says Father Dimitrie Vincent, whose south St. Louis church serves Romanians and Albanians. "***They***'re not there for each other."

Adjustment hits adults hardest - ***they*** have the most abrupt transition to make in the least time - but children feel the consequences.

At Soldan High School, Sheila Phillips urges her foreign students to open up - but not too much. "It's too volative," she says. "The feelings ***they*** have to express are not appropriate to a classroom setting."

Looking out at her students - from Vietnam and Somalia, India and Iraq and Afghanistan - she estimates a quarter of their families "crack under the pressure" of adapting, making an already-tough transition perilous for the children.

Psychologist Leigh Barry of Children's Hospital sees youngsters who have been compelled by language or ***new*** social skills to interpret for parents at a doctor's or marriage counselor's office or negotiate with a landlord. This places ***them*** in untenable situations as ***they*** hear things ***they*** shouldn't.

The children often act out their anxiety at school in what "looks like just an undisciplined kid," she says. Social Tensions Simmer

Marvin Batey, president of the Metropolitan Business League in St. Louis, plans to ask city aldermen to limit the "intrusion" of ***immigrant*** shopkeepers and restaurateurs into north St. Louis.

Batey wants an ordinance requiring anyone who starts a business to live in the same ward as the enterprise.

"In the black communities, it's open shop," he says, "so we must close our borders."

The business league is a small player here, but Batey's sentiments reflect mounting hostility by some struggling urban residents against those felt to be taking business or jobs. For their part, some ***immigrant*** entrepreneurs have formed pejorative stereotypes of the blacks ***they*** serve, in a relationship characterized chiefly by distance.

More broadly, such views are one flashpoint of the social or ethnic tension that accompanies expanding immigration into St. Louis.

In some schools, especially at the middle and high school levels, ***immigrant*** youngsters complain of frequent run-ins and taunting aimed at ***them***, often citing their alleged reliance on public aid. Some say that disruptive classroom behavior by American minorities prevents ***them*** from learning.

In a few subsidized housing developments, East Africans from Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia have been concentrated in what some who work with refugees call an effort to improve the environment by putting in people with strong family values who oppose drugs. This has created resentment among some longtime city residents who wonder why the foreigners seem to get in quickly, though housing managers say ***they*** go strictly by the lists.

Many newcomers feel vulnerable to street violence, even targeted. Police have had little success combating such crime or even building trust, partly because immigration has not been high-profile enough to force changes in the department's recruiting requirements.

Despite some tensions between ***immigrants*** and blacks, the area has seen virtually no ethnically driven violence. Bob Ubriaco of Crestwood, who writes about immigration to the Midwest, worries more about a possible nativist reaction. He speaks of a "real potential for conflict, as these groups become more and more visible, and economic competition becomes more vicious." Search For A Voice

The Catholic Hispanic Center, on the grounds of St. Francis de Sales Church at Gravois and Iowa, closed in September after 17 years.

The move is linked to a burgeoning debate among Hispanics here about ***how*** to find a voice in a metropolitan area largely unaware of their presence.

Being heard here is difficult, ***immigrants*** in general say, given the heterogeneity of the flow into St. Louis. And public issues long have been framed solely in black and white.

Sister Alicia Alvarado arrived three years ago to run the Hispanic center and to tend to the pastoral and social needs of Hispanics. But she quickly noticed broad gaps in leadership and representation among a scattered and struggling population.

Things had been much clearer at her last post in Cleveland, with a large Hispanic population concentrated in well-defined neighborhoods, mainly Puerto Ricans sharing a similar perspective.

Alvarado left the job at the Hispanic center to work with the Archdiocese on integrating ***immigrants*** into existing religious organizations. She fears Mexicans and other Latinos here risk being marginalized if ***they*** separate themselves, because ***they*** lack the size and unity to have their own equal institutions.

Various Hispanic groups here promote cultural events, she finds, but not common social or political goals that bridge nationalities.

"This area is a very young, fertile ground for the Hispanics," she says. "But we've got to find a voice."

Chignoli, who counsels Hispanics, saw growing numbers of poor Mexicans and an inability to communicate. In November he started a Spanish-language monthly to discuss such issues as a lack of immunization among children, domestic violence and the need to put aside divisions.

"The people don't have a sense of political participation," he says. "Their goal is to work hard and go back home, so ***they*** ignore the problems. But the reality is ***they*** ***will*** stay here." Shape Of St. Louis

Immigration here is relatively small, though now growing. It'***s*** diverse, with many small-to-mid-sized groups, none dominant enough to command attention. And it'***s*** geographically dispersed, lacking ethnic enclaves.

This configuration helps make things seem calm because immigration is less evident and acrimony curbed, but it poses challenges for newcomers and those who work with ***them***.

St. Louis doesn't offer ***immigrants*** the luxury of initially functioning within a familiar language and culture. This may help people integrate more fully in the long term, because ***they*** have less choice about learning ***new*** ways, but it makes the initial transition more abrupt.

A State Department official involved in refugee placement cites a "debate about survive or thrive" - whether newcomers should be placed in a comfortable setting where ***they*** can blend in and survive, or put in a riskier situation, such as a St. Louis, where ***they*** might thrive.

For those who provide services to ***immigrants***, too, St. Louis is a challenge. ***Dealing with*** ***immigrants*** effectively, whether in classrooms or health care facilities, requires knowledge of their specific cultures and problems - far easier where one or two nationalities dominate.

That'***s*** because "cultural competence," not merely sensitivity, is key. Without it, a hospital social worker here mistakenly takes a child from a mother he suspects of abuse for what simply is traditional treatment for a fever. Or a teacher points his finger at a Bosnian youngster who panics, thinking he'***s*** marked for death.

In addition, the lack of major immigration from a few countries has led to a paucity of bilingual and bicultural professionals setting up shop over the years to meet the needs of newcomers from their homeland.

Only recently has the area reached a critical mass prompting ***new*** arrivals to put down roots. In the 1970s and early 1980s, as immigration to the ***United States*** picked up after a lengthy lull, many who came to St. Louis soon left for areas with more ***immigrants***, services and jobs.

The earlier departures have a continuing effect, because initial waves emigrating from a country tend to be the most urbanized, educated and mobile. Those who follow often are more rural, with fewer job or language skills, though ***they*** usually find their paths eased by the pioneers.

In St. Louis, many of the first wave of Vietnamese from the mid-1970s, for instance, immediately left for California. As a result, the Vietnamese fishermen or farmers who came in the wave of the ***late*** 1980s had less help.

Such a vacuum has spurred the development of some innovative private programs to ***deal with*** adjustment problems - the ***New*** American Program for Russians and Bosnians, the Vietnamese clinic.

But it has led to gaps in ***dealing with*** personal or family adjustment issues, especially among smaller groups of ***immigrants*** or refugees.

"There'***s*** a huge population out there that'***s*** just dangling," says Bogomolov, whose ***New*** American Program has had to quickly expand to take on people from 15 other language groups. "Just A Debate"

Immigration to St. Louis and its ***impact*** here, long disguised by its diversity and dispersal, is reaching a point where its own momentum ***will*** cause it to grow more rapidly and become more noticeable, experts agree.

The area ***will*** likely see a continuation of the factors that in recent years have led immigration to increase faster here than nationally: the pull of a favorable job market and low costs, coupled with the push of hostility and shrinking services elsewhere.

Refugee resettlement, sparked largely by the State Department'***s*** having judged St. Louis a favorable site, means government policy ***will*** feed the flow beyond the individual decisions thousands of ***immigrants*** make.

The reaching of a critical mass is suggested by the emerging ***immigrant*** business district along South Grand Boulevard and the growing residential cluster in that area. And that itself ***will*** act as a drawing card.

Once a flow is established to a given place, immigration often assumes a dynamic of its own, with relatives and friends joining those already there and businesses following specific labor pools, in turn spurring more movement.

So the personal and family adjustment struggles ***will*** only become more numerous.

Beyond that, the low-level social, ethnic and racial tensions ***will*** likely gain in intensity as groups of ***immigrants*** become more visible.

For several decades, the flow here consisted chiefly of ***immigrants*** drawn by large medical and scientific sectors: Chinese engineers, Filipino doctors, Chilean lawyers. ***They*** lived throughout the suburbs and drew little notice, facing language and cultural barriers or generational conflicts but possessing resources. In recent years, refugees have increasingly settled in urban St. Louis, with poorer and perhaps illegal aliens moving nearby. While the latter two groups have tougher personal adjustment problems, ***immigrants*** and refugees generally are beginning to see signs of friction and to seek representation.

The risk, some suggest, is that if the conflicts are not addressed while manageable, solutions ***will*** be more elusive.

That may be all the more true because anti-***immigrant*** sentiment appears to erupt most fiercely in places least familiar with ***immigrants*** and their cultures - where ***they*** are seen as truly alien. In coastal or border states, with more ***immigrants***, there may be greater outward hostility, but there also are more personal ties and cultural familiarity.

The ability of the ***new*** groups to find a voice appears crucial both to expressing their needs and to resolving strife that may arise.

For example, Harold Law, president of the Organization of Chinese Americans and head of a successful engineering and technology firm in Maryland Heights, is wrestling with ***how*** to make a presence felt in community affairs.

The 7,500 Chinese here are the biggest group after Mexicans but have been relatively uninvolved politically, because ***they*** are absorbed in their careers and have little visibility, Law says.

That allowed last year's exclusion of Asian-Americans from St. Louis' affirmative action program, he suggests. It also makes it difficult to respond to animosity between some blacks and Asians, to increased targeting by criminals of Chinese homes and restaurants, or to bias against Asian ***immigrants*** in business.

How issues of adjustment are ***dealt with*** is what matters most about immigration, contends Sister Mary Louise Stubbs, the driving force behind the Vietnamese clinic.

"The numbers debate is just a debate," she says. "Once people are here, however and for whatever reason ***they*** came, ***how*** ***they*** adjust is going to make a difference to the future of this country."

Graphic

PHOTO; (1) Color Photo by Wendi Fitzgerald/Post-Dispatch - Dr. Sudhirkumar Shah and his wife, Sonal Shah, from India, wait to be sworn in as citizens this month at the federal courthouse downtown. Son Saager, 2, is a ***U.S.*** citizen by birth. Naturalizations are rising here and elsewhere, in part a response to talk of tough immigration legislation. (2) Color Photo by Wendi Fitzgerald/Post-Dispatch - Khadija Yusuf, from Ethiopia, (foreground) and Mino Said, of Somalia, take a break from their studies at the International Institute. It is the biggest resettlement agency in the St. Louis area and helps refugees adapt to life here. (3) Photo by Wendi Fitzgerald/Post-Dispatch - Gedlu Metaferia, whose Ethiopian Community Association helps ***immigrants*** from several East African countries, had a novel approach to adapting when he moved here a decade ago: He read as much of Missourian Mark Twain's work as he could. A ***U.S.*** citizen as of Oct. 6, here Metaferia greets Ayelu Haileyesus as Ayanaw Asnakew watches. (4) Photo by Wendi Fitzgerald/Post-Dispatch - Cuong Nguyen (far left), from Vietnam, listens intently to a mid-level English class at the International Institute. In an area like St. Louis, without ethnic enclaves that ***immigrants*** can take cover in as ***they*** gradually adapt, learning English becomes all the more important. (5) Color Photo - Soon Sik Noh from Korea, Boris Tsukerman from Russia and Vinh Quang Duong from Vietnam smile after becoming ***U.S.*** citizens here earlier this month. (Three Star edition - Page 1A)

Classification

Language: English

Subject: IMMIGRATION (89%); REFUGEES (87%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (74%); ETHNIC CONFLICTS (72%); POPULATION GROWTH (68%); STABBINGS (65%); WAR & CONFLICT (64%); ILLEGAL ***IMMIGRANTS*** (64%); EMOTIONS (63%); MUSLIMS & ISLAM (52%)

Geographic: SARAJEVO, BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA (79%)

Load-Date: December 18, 1995