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# HOW ARE REFUGEES FARING? INTEGRATION AT U.S. AND STATE LEVELS

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By Michael Fix, Kate Hooper, and Jie Zong

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June 2017

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# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>I. Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>II. Policy Framework: How Does the United States Assist Newly Arrived Refugees? .....</b>	<b>4</b>
A. Who Is Admitted to the United States as a Refugee? .....	5
B. What Services Does the United States Offer to Newly Arrived Refugees? .....	7
C. What Are the Sources of Funding for Refugee Services? .....	9
D. How Does Service Provision Vary by State?.....	10
<b>III. What Is Known about Refugee Integration Outcomes at National and State Levels? .....</b>	<b>11</b>
A. Education .....	14
B. English Language Proficiency .....	15
C. Employment and Underemployment.....	15
D. Household Income, Poverty Rates, and Public Benefits Receipt.....	17
<b>IV. Conclusions .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>22</b>
A. How States Administer Resettlement Assistance.....	22
B. Data Source and Methodology .....	23
<b>Works Cited .....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>About the Authors .....</b>	<b>32</b>



## Executive Summary

The United States operates the world's largest refugee resettlement program, admitting nearly 85,000 refugees in fiscal year (FY) 2016, or approximately two-thirds of refugees resettled worldwide. Since the passage of the *Refugee Act of 1980*, which established the U.S. resettlement program, the United States has admitted approximately 3 million refugees, adding to a long history of humanitarian admissions that stretches back to World War II. Despite this historical precedent, refugee resettlement in the United States has come under intense scrutiny since 2015 amid heightened concerns over national security, with current discourse focusing on: (1) how many refugees should be admitted, (2) which populations should be prioritized for admission, (3) how many—if any—Syrian refugees should be admitted, and (4) how much authority states and local communities should have in determining the number of refugees they receive. In recent years, some states and communities have also voiced concern about the use of limited resources to meet the needs of newly arrived refugee populations and the impact refugees have on housing, schools, welfare services, and health-care providers.

These concerns were reflected in early moves by the Trump administration to ban travel from some African and Middle Eastern countries and to initiate major changes to the refugee resettlement program. Among other things, the president ordered the suspension of the refugee program for 120 days, the reduction of the FY 2017 admission of refugees from 110,000 to 50,000, the expansion of state and local governments' roles in placement, and the production of reports on the long-term costs of the refugee program at the federal, state, and local levels. While the controversial executive order that mandated these changes was quickly challenged in court and had not gone into force at the time of writing, it is a clear demonstration of the scrutiny the U.S. refugee program has come under in recent years.

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*In FY 2016, the United States resettled refugees from 78 countries—more than double the number ... in FY 1981.*

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Viewed historically, admissions to the United States under the refugee program have become increasingly diverse. In FY 2016, the United States resettled refugees from 78 countries—more than double the number of national-origin groups admitted in FY 1981. This growing diversity in origins has been accompanied by increased linguistic diversity and significant variation in the educational backgrounds of those admitted. In FY 2013, newly arrived refugees spoke 162 languages, most of which had fewer than 50 speakers in the United States, and only one-third of new arrivals reported being able to speak some English (though this share varied substantially by national-origin group). While large shares of some groups reported being literate in their native language, others recorded widespread illiteracy. This variation in English proficiency and literacy levels is likely linked to refugees' uneven access to education prior to resettlement, which can hinge on factors that include restrictions in origin or first-asylum countries, living in an urban versus a camp setting, and gender.

Newly arrived refugees tend to enter into employment quickly in the United States, with employment rates close to those of the U.S.-born population. About half of newly arrived refugees who participate in resettlement assistance programs enter employment within eight months (the length of time for which they are eligible for refugee-specific federal funding). Earlier Migration Policy Institute (MPI) research on integration outcomes for the overall U.S. refugee population revealed that refugee men had a higher employment rate than U.S.-born men, while refugee women and U.S.-born women had identical employment rates. However, these averages mask variation between newcomers from different countries of origin, with lower rates among Iraqi, Bhutanese, and Somali refugees.



The 1980 *Refugee Act*'s stated objective of fostering rapid economic self-sufficiency underpins many of the transitional assistance programs that serve newly arrived refugees and, in turn, how refugee integration is assessed in the United States. While economic measures of integration do offer quantifiable metrics of success, such as employment rates or income levels, it remains much harder to evaluate other, more long-term measures of integration, such as civic and political participation. In addition, data suggest high levels of *underemployment* among refugees (for those who hold a college degree or higher and are unemployed or employed in a low-skilled job), which can affect professional mobility and attainment, and crucially, long-term earning potential. This underemployment is particularly significant given that most recently arrived refugees have low income levels and that the economic performance of recent cohorts has lagged behind that of their predecessors. One critique of the U.S. resettlement program is that the focus on early employment may come at the cost of forgoing interventions that could improve longer-term labor market outcomes and mobility—such as skills training, credential recognition or recertification, and intensive English language training—and may result in brain waste.<sup>1</sup>

In pursuing the goal of rapid economic self-sufficiency, the U.S. refugee program relies on a partnership between the federal government, states, and nine nonprofit resettlement agencies (also known as voluntary agencies) that are responsible for placing and resettling refugees. Over time, the scaling back of federal assistance and funding shortfalls have led the U.S. program to rely heavily on the resources of states, local communities, and voluntary agencies. These reductions are likely to have been among the factors contributing to the backlash against the refugee program seen in a number of states, particularly in areas with high unemployment rates and budget shortfalls, where local communities have voiced concerns about added pressures on public assistance programs and safety nets (e.g., food pantries) and the additional resources required to serve refugees (by, for example, providing legally mandated interpretation and translation services).

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*The results of this analysis indicate that a lottery effect based on state placement may not be as pronounced as previously thought.*

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While existing research documents how different refugee groups fare nationwide in the United States, much less is known about group outcomes in individual states. Some studies have suggested that where refugees are initially placed can affect outcomes—in other words, that a “lottery effect” shapes the integration of refugees resettled in different locations, where different labor markets, housing costs, and social welfare benefits affect their long-term prospects and potentially spur secondary migration.

The analysis presented here compares the characteristics and integration outcomes of five large refugee groups (Burmese, Cubans, Iraqis, Russians, and Vietnamese) in four states that vary widely in the generosity of their public welfare programs and that are home to a sufficient number of refugees to permit the kind of disaggregation carried out in this report. The states are California, Florida, New York, and Texas. All told, the study groups in these states account for approximately one-third of the nation's 3 million refugees.

The results of this analysis indicate that a lottery effect based on state placement may not be as pronounced as previously thought. A number of integration outcomes—including employment, rates of underemployment, and incomes—did not vary widely *within refugee groups* across states. These findings may point instead to the importance of refugees' resilience, the positive mediating effects of the wide network of nongovernmental organizations engaged in their resettlement, and the effects of the refugee program's “work-first” policy, among other factors.

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<sup>1</sup> Brain waste occurs when college graduates work in low-skilled jobs or are unemployed despite their high educational qualifications.



## I. Introduction

For many years, the United States has operated the world's largest refugee resettlement program, admitting 84,995 refugees in fiscal year (FY) 2016.<sup>2</sup> The legal framework for the U.S. resettlement program dates back to the *Refugee Act of 1980*, with a total of approximately 3 million refugees admitted since its establishment.<sup>3</sup> National resettlement efforts predate the law, however, and the United States has admitted large numbers of refugees since World War II. Prior to 1980, refugee admissions were ad hoc responses to different crises and often served broader foreign policy goals, such as weakening Communist regimes.<sup>4</sup> Following congressional concern in the mid-1990s about the political undertones of refugee admissions, the program shifted its focus to the most vulnerable humanitarian cases, relying on the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to identify and refer refugees for resettlement.<sup>5</sup> As the purpose of the program has shifted, so too has the composition of flows, with increasing diversity in the national, linguistic, and educational backgrounds of those admitted to the United States. Some analysts have contended that this shift has diminished public support for the program by downplaying the link between resettlement and foreign policy goals—a change that occurred alongside the increased dispersal of resettled refugees outside gateway cities to smaller towns and reductions in federal support for resettlement.<sup>6</sup>

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*The Refugee Act's stated objective of helping refugees rapidly attain economic self-sufficiency underpins many of the transitional assistance services offered.*

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The goals of the U.S. resettlement program are twofold: to protect vulnerable populations and to offer them the prospect of long-term integration. The *Refugee Act's* stated objective of helping refugees rapidly attain economic self-sufficiency underpins many of the transitional assistance services offered to them and, in turn, shapes how refugee integration is assessed in the United States. But while economic measures of integration offer quantifiable metrics of success, such as employment rates or income, other more long-term measures of integration, such as civic and political participation, are less systematically assessed.

Extensive research has documented how different refugee groups fare nationwide in the United States. A 2015 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) report, which used a unique methodology to identify refugees among the foreign-born population in U.S. Census Bureau data based on previously unpublished refugee and asylee data, found that for most major socioeconomic integration indicators, most—but not all—

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- 2 While the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has not yet released global resettlement data for 2016, in calendar year 2015 the United States admitted 64 percent of the 81,893 refugees resettled by UNHCR—a share considerably higher than second largest resettlement country, Canada, which received 13 percent of UNHCR referrals. See U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, Office of Admissions, Refugee Processing Center, “FY 2016 Arrivals by Region (based on Nationality of PA), All Nationalities, October 01, 2015 through September 30, 2016,” accessed April 19, 2017, [www.wrapsnet.org/s/Arrivals-by-PA-Region-by-MonthFY16.xls](http://www.wrapsnet.org/s/Arrivals-by-PA-Region-by-MonthFY16.xls); U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, “Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2017,” Table VIII, updated September 15, 2016, [www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/docsforcongress/261956.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/docsforcongress/261956.htm).
  - 3 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) calculation using data from the U.S. Department of State's Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS) for fiscal year (FY) 1980 through FY 2016.
  - 4 Kathleen Newland, “Impact of U.S. Refugee Policies on U.S. Foreign Policy: A Case of the Tail Wagging the Dog?” in *Threatened Peoples, Threatened Borders: World Migration and U.S. Policy*, eds. Michael S. Teitelbaum and Myron Weiner (New York: The American Assembly, 1995).
  - 5 Melanie Nezer, *Resettlement at Risk: Meeting Emerging Challenges to Refugee Resettlement in Local Communities* (Washington, DC: Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, 2013), 7, [www.hias.org/sites/default/files/resettlement\\_at\\_risk\\_1.pdf](http://www.hias.org/sites/default/files/resettlement_at_risk_1.pdf).
  - 6 David A. Martin, *The United States Refugee Admissions Program: Reforms for a New Era of Refugee Resettlement* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2005); Nezer, *Resettlement at Risk*, 8–9.





refugees were making substantial gains over time.<sup>7</sup> However, much less information is available on how different refugee groups fare across U.S. states. Some studies have claimed that the resettlement program has a “lottery effect”—that the different labor markets, housing, and social welfare benefits available in the locations where refugees are settled affect their long-term prospects and, potentially, spur secondary migration.<sup>8</sup> While studies have examined the differing policy frameworks in place at state and local levels, those policies have not been linked to specific integration outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

This report sketches how the United States assists recently arrived refugees and analyzes census data to examine how different refugee populations fare. It first assesses the socioeconomic outcomes of different refugee populations nationally over time. Then it compares how Burmese, Cuban, Iraqi, Russian, and Vietnamese refugees have fared in four major refugee-receiving states—California, Florida, New York, and Texas. This second line of analysis allows for a closer examination of whether the lottery effect hypothesis is borne out by state-level data on refugee integration.

## II. Policy Framework: How Does the United States Assist Newly Arrived Refugees?

Unlike many European countries, the United States lacks a national centralized immigrant integration system, with most responsibilities instead in the hands of state and local authorities or civil society. Refugee services are a notable outlier and the only example of the federal government playing a role in integration.<sup>10</sup>

The U.S. refugee resettlement program is founded on a partnership between the federal government, states, and nine national nonprofit resettlement agencies (also known as voluntary agencies) that receive and place resettled refugees in local communities, based on biographic information and other case records, and provide them with certain services.<sup>11</sup> The placement process aims to distribute refugees across the country to avoid disproportionately burdening certain localities or agencies, while

7 Randy Capps et al., *The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees: Successes and Challenges* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2015), 9–10, [www.migrationpolicy.org/research/integration-outcomes-us-refugees-successes-and-challenges](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/integration-outcomes-us-refugees-successes-and-challenges).

8 See, for example, Kate Brick et al., *Refugee Resettlement in the United States: An Examination of Challenges and Proposed Solutions* (New York: Columbia University, School of International and Public Affairs, 2010), 12–13, [https://sipa.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/IRCFINALREPORT\\_0.pdf](https://sipa.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/IRCFINALREPORT_0.pdf); Andorra Bruno, *U.S. Refugee Resettlement Assistance* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011), [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41570.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41570.pdf).

9 Wendy Zimmermann and Karen C. Tumlin, “Patchwork Policies: State Assistance for Immigrants under Welfare Reform” (Occasional Paper No. 24, Urban Institute, Washington, DC, 1999), <http://research.urban.org/PDF/occ24.pdf>; Manuel Pastor et al., *California Immigrant Integration Scorecard* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, 2012), [http://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/731/docs/California\\_Immigrant\\_Integration\\_Scorecard\\_web.pdf](http://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/731/docs/California_Immigrant_Integration_Scorecard_web.pdf); Julia Gelatt, Hamutal Bernstein, and Heather Koball, “State Immigration Policy Resource,” Urban Institute, May 4, 2017, [www.urban.org/features/state-immigration-policy-resource](http://www.urban.org/features/state-immigration-policy-resource).

10 Mary C. Waters and Marisa Gerstein Pineau, eds., *The Integration of Immigrants into American Society* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2015), 78, [www.nap.edu/catalog/21746/the-integration-of-immigrants-into-american-society](http://www.nap.edu/catalog/21746/the-integration-of-immigrants-into-american-society).

11 The State Department Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration has entered into cooperative agreements with nine nonprofit voluntary agencies (or volags) that have networks of local affiliated agencies that provide services: Church World Service (CWS), Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC), Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM), Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), and World Relief Corporation. See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), “Voluntary Agencies,” updated July 17, 2012, [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/voluntary-agencies](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/voluntary-agencies); U.S. Department of State, “The Reception and Placement Program,” accessed April 1, 2016, [www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/receptionplacement/index.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/receptionplacement/index.htm); Anastasia Brown and Todd Scribner, “Unfulfilled Promises, Future Possibilities: The Refugee Resettlement System in the United States,” *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 2, no. 2 (2014): 101–20.





at the same time seeking to place refugees near their families to ease the integration process.<sup>12</sup> Refugees without ties in the United States, also known as free cases, are matched with host communities depending on the refugees' needs and the receiving community's resources. Factors considered as part of the process include the health, age, family makeup, and language of the refugee, as well as the cost of living and the availability of job opportunities, housing, education, and health services. One critique of the current placement model is that the voluntary agencies, when considering refugee cases and selecting those they will resettle, receive only basic information about the individuals. As a result, refugees are frequently placed in communities regardless of whether resources are available to meet their specific needs.<sup>13</sup> Refugees who arrive as free cases typically face greater integration challenges due to their limited family and ethnic community networks.<sup>14</sup>

### A. Who Is Admitted to the United States as a Refugee?

Since the 1980s, the United States has resettled increasingly diverse refugee populations. In FY 2016, the United States resettled refugees from 78 nationalities; up from 32 in FY 1981, the first year after the *Refugee Act* came into effect.<sup>15</sup> The top ten countries of nationality for resettled refugees in FY 2016 were the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Burma (Myanmar), Iraq, Somalia, Bhutan, Iran, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Eritrea, which together accounted for 90 percent of all refugees resettled that year.

#### Box 1. Who Is a Refugee under U.S. law?

The United States follows the international standard, outlined in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which defines a refugee as a person outside his or her country of origin who is being persecuted or fears persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. In special circumstances the president may also grant refugee status to people who are still living in their country of origin or last residence. As of FY 2017, this list of exceptional cases included specified persons in Eurasia and the Baltics, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Iraq.

Sources: *Immigration and Nationality Act* (INA), Public Law 89–236, 82nd Cong. (1952), *U.S. Statutes at Large* 66 §101(a)(42); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2010), [www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html](http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html); U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, “Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2016,” updated October 1, 2015, [www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/docsforcongress/247770.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/docsforcongress/247770.htm).

The growing diversity in the origins of resettled refugees has led to increased linguistic diversity and wide variation in educational backgrounds. In FY 2013, refugees spoke 162 languages, many of which have fewer than 50 speakers in the United States.<sup>16</sup> Most refugees could not speak English upon arrival: one-third of those who arrived between FY 2008 and FY 2013 reported speaking some English, while only 7 percent reported speaking good English, though this varied substantially by national-origin group. Refugees' education and literacy levels also vary by national origin. Nearly all Cuban Spanish

12 Audrey Singer and Jill H. Wilson, “Refugee Resettlement in Metropolitan America,” *Migration Information Source*, March 1, 2007, [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugee-resettlement-metropolitan-america](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugee-resettlement-metropolitan-america).

13 U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Refugee Resettlement: Greater Consultation with Community Stakeholders Could Strengthen Program* (Washington, DC: GAO, 2012), [www.gao.gov/assets/600/592975.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/assets/600/592975.pdf).

14 Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), *Needs Assessment of Refugee Communities from Bhutan and Burma* (Washington, DC: SEARAC, 2011), [www.searac.org/sites/default/files/2011\\_NeedsAssessReport\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.searac.org/sites/default/files/2011_NeedsAssessReport_FINAL.pdf).

15 MPI analysis of U.S. Department of State WRAPS data for FY 1981 and FY 2016.

16 Capps et al., *The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees*, 9–10.



speakers and Iranian Farsi speakers entering the United States between FY 2004 and FY 2013 reported being literate in their native language, compared to less than one-quarter of Somali and Laotian Hmong speakers.<sup>17</sup> Refugees' uneven access to education prior to resettlement is well documented and may explain much of this variation; even within countries of first asylum, access can vary depending on factors such as gender, living in an urban versus a camp setting, and legal restrictions.<sup>18</sup>

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*Historically, Cubans have been one of the largest refugee populations to enter through non-resettlement channels.*

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In addition to its refugee resettlement program, the United States also grants asylum to thousands of people each year.<sup>19</sup> In FY 2015, the United States granted asylum to 26,124 people, with another 7,116 people approved for derivative asylum status as immediate family members of asylees.<sup>20</sup> The top ten countries of nationality for asylees were China, El Salvador, Guatemala, Egypt, Honduras, Syria, Ethiopia, Mexico, Iraq, and Iran, accounting for 68 percent of all individuals granted asylum.<sup>21</sup> Individuals granted asylum are not dispersed across the country through resettlement and in recent years they have been concentrated in a few states: approximately two-thirds of those granted asylum affirmatively between FY 2013 and FY 2015 lived in California, New York, and Florida.<sup>22</sup> Historically, Cubans have been one of the largest refugee populations to enter through non-resettlement channels, as most enter seeking asylum or parole status under the Cuban-Haitian Entrants Program (CHEP).<sup>23</sup> As of 2009–13, there were 648,000 Cuban refugees in the United States, with 82 percent living in Florida.<sup>24</sup>

Since assuming office in January 2017, the Trump administration has proposed a number of changes to the U.S. refugee admissions program. In Executive Order 13780, which replaced an earlier order that was challenged in court, President Trump ordered the suspension of the refugee admissions program for 120 days, the reduction of the refugee admissions ceiling for FY 2017 from 110,000 to 50,000, and the development by the State Department of a proposal to increase state and local involvement in decisions

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17 Self-reported literacy in the refugee's native language at the time of arrival was used as a proxy for basic formal education due to inconsistencies identified by the authors in data on reported education levels. See Ibid, 13–15.

18 Sarah Dryden-Peterson, *The Educational Experiences of Refugee Children in Countries of First Asylum* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2015), 6–7, [www.migrationpolicy.org/research/educational-experiences-refugee-children-countries-first-asylum](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/educational-experiences-refugee-children-countries-first-asylum).

19 Since the United States is comparatively isolated geographically, asylum seekers have historically entered primarily by plane or sea on a temporary visa (including tourist visas). In recent years, some asylum seekers have also arrived at U.S. land borders; this includes an increase in the arrival of unaccompanied Central American children (though few have been granted asylum).

20 At the time of writing, FY 2015 represented the most recent year for which data on asylees were available from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Immigration Statistics. See Nadwa Mossaad, *Refugees and Asylees: 2015* (Washington, DC: DHS, 2016), [www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Refugees\\_Asylees\\_2015.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Refugees_Asylees_2015.pdf).

21 These statistics describe only primary applicants for asylum and exclude the nationalities of family members approved for derivative asylum status.

22 If an applicant voluntarily submits an asylum request to a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) officer at any time, it is considered an affirmative request. If the applicant files an asylum request with an immigration judge during a removal hearing, it is considered a defensive request. See Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova, "Refugees and Asylees in the United States," *Migration Information Source*, October 28, 2015, [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugees-and-asylees-united-states](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugees-and-asylees-united-states).

23 Though some Cubans come through the regular resettlement program (via in-country processing), the majority of Cuban refugees enter the United States through a special program (the Cuban-Haitian Entrants Program) that grants parole status to those who arrive on U.S. soil. On January 12, 2017, the Obama administration terminated the "wet-foot, dry-foot" policy that allowed Cuban nationals to claim refugee status if they reached U.S. shores.

24 MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2009–13 American Community Survey (ACS) data, pooled.



about where refugees should be settled.<sup>25</sup> A presidential memorandum issued the same day also mandated a report on the long-term federal, state, and local costs of the refugee program.<sup>26</sup> Though the revised executive order was enjoined before it could go into force and, at the time of writing, the appeal by the federal government to this ruling was still being litigated,<sup>27</sup> the order's refugee provisions mark a sharp break with past policy.

## B. What Services Does the United States Offer to Newly Arrived Refugees?

The stated purpose of the U.S. refugee resettlement program is to help refugees “achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible.”<sup>28</sup> Consequently, many of the orientation and integration services made available to newly arrived refugees focus on finding early employment—and, thus, avoiding reliance on cash assistance.<sup>29</sup> Not surprisingly, there is a tension between this push for rapid self-sufficiency and the goal of finding employment commensurate with the professional qualifications and experience of mid- to high-skilled refugees. Achieving economic self-sufficiency may also be a challenge for some, given the program's animating goal of admitting the most vulnerable refugee populations, many of whom have experienced trauma, have physical or mental health needs, and/or have been out of the labor market for years while displaced.<sup>30</sup>

Prior to departure for the United States, refugees receive three to five days of cultural orientation, which describes the resettlement process, refugees' rights and obligations, and life in the United States. When resettled refugees arrive in the United States, they are met by a representative from one of the nine voluntary agencies who provides them with initial reception and orientation services during their first 30 days in the country.<sup>31</sup> These services include help with purchasing food and clothing, finding affordable housing, enrolling children in school, receiving English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction and employment assistance, applying for social security cards, and navigating social services. Voluntary agencies receive a one-time grant from the federal government for each refugee, but must meet any additional costs themselves.<sup>32</sup>

25 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States” (executive order, Washington, DC, March 6, 2017), [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/03/06/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/03/06/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states); Sarah Pierce and Doris Meissner, “Revised Trump Executive Order and Guidance on Refugee Resettlement and Travel Ban” (policy brief, MPI, Washington, DC, March 2017), [www.migrationpolicy.org/research/revised-trump-executive-order-and-guidance-refugee-resettlement-and-travel-ban](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/revised-trump-executive-order-and-guidance-refugee-resettlement-and-travel-ban).

26 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Memorandum for the Secretary of State, the Attorney General, the Secretary of Homeland Security” (presidential memorandum, the White House, Washington, DC, March 6, 2017), [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/03/06/memorandum-secretary-state-attorney-general-secretary-homeland-security](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/03/06/memorandum-secretary-state-attorney-general-secretary-homeland-security).

27 Sela Cowger, Jessica Bolter, and Sarah Pierce, “The First 100 Days: Summary of Major Immigration Actions Taken by the Trump Administration” (fact sheet, MPI, Washington, DC, April 2017), [www.migrationpolicy.org/research/first-100-days-summary-major-immigration-actions-taken-trump-administration](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/first-100-days-summary-major-immigration-actions-taken-trump-administration).

28 *Code of Federal Regulations*, Refugee Resettlement Program—Introduction—Basis and Purpose of the Program, title 45, part 400, subpart A, sec. 400.1 (b) states: “It is the purpose of this program to provide for the effective resettlement of refugees and to assist them to achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible.”

29 *Immigration and Nationality Act* (INA), Public Law 89–236, 82nd Cong. (1952), *U.S. Statutes at Large* 66 §412 (a)(1)(A) states: “In providing assistance under this section, the Director shall, to the extent of available appropriations, (i) make available sufficient resources for employment training and placement in order to achieve economic self-sufficiency among refugees as quickly as possible, (ii) provide refugees with the opportunity to acquire sufficient English language training to enable them to become effectively resettled as quickly as possible, (iii) insure that cash assistance is made available to refugees in such a manner as not to discourage their economic self-sufficiency, in accordance with subsection (e)(2), and (iv) insure that women have the same opportunities as men to participate in training and instruction.”

30 Brown and Scribner, “Unfulfilled Promises, Future Possibilities,” 107.

31 Iraqi and Afghan special immigrants can also opt to receive these services while applying for their Special Immigrant Visas. See U.S. Department of State, “The Reception and Placement Program”; Bruno, *U.S. Refugee Resettlement Assistance*, 6.

32 In FY 2016, the federal grant for each refugee in the Reception and Placement (R&P) Program was \$1,975; this increased to \$2,025 in FY 2017. The program can be extended for up to 90 days if there are delays in delivering services. See U.S. Department of State, “FY 2016 Notice of Funding Opportunity for Reception and Placement Program,” updated April 24, 2015; U.S. Department of State, “FY 2017 Notice of Funding Opportunity for Reception and Placement Program,” updated March 21, 2016, [www.state.gov/j/prm/funding/fy2017/254909.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/prm/funding/fy2017/254909.htm).



Most refugees initially enroll in public assistance programs to support themselves and their families (see Table 1). Depending on their income and demographic profile, refugees may be eligible for various federal means-tested benefits including (1) cash payments for low-income families, senior citizens, and adults or children with disabilities; (2) payments to low-income people to purchase food; and (3) health insurance coverage for low-income children and some adults.<sup>33</sup>

**Table 1. Refugee Eligibility for Major Means-Tested Federal Public Assistance Programs, as of May 2017**

Program		Description	Refugee Eligibility Time Limit
<b>Cash Assistance</b>			
<i>Either/or</i>	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)	Time-limited cash assistance and other support services for qualifying low-income individuals with dependent children.	Up to 5 years, then depends on state rules*
	Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA)	Program similar to TANF for refugees who do not qualify for TANF.	Up to 8 months
Supplemental Security Income (SSI)		Cash assistance to low-income individuals who are aged, blind, or disabled.	Up to 7 years
<b>Medical Assistance</b>			
<i>Either/or</i>	Medicaid/State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)	Health care coverage for qualifying low-income individuals.	Up to 7 years, then depends on state rules**
	Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA)	Program similar to Medicaid for refugees who do not qualify for Medicaid.	Up to 8 months
<b>Other Benefits</b>			
Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)		Food assistance for qualifying low-income individuals.	No time limit

\* States can set their own time limits on TANF receipt by curtailing federal TANF funds before the five-year limit or extending services beyond five years for the most vulnerable families through state TANF funds. Families without an adult recipient are not subject to this five-year limit.

\*\* Children under the age of 18 continue to be eligible for SCHIP beyond these time limits.

Sources (citations available in full in the Works Cited): Social Security Administration (SSA), "Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Overview;" SSA, "Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for Noncitizens;" Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), "Policy Basics: An Introduction to TANF;" U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP);" Medicaid, "Eligibility;" CBPP, "Policy Basics: Introduction to Medicaid;" U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), "About Cash & Medical Assistance;" Hooper, Zong, Capps, and Fix, *Young Children of Refugees in the United States*, 7.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) offers monthly cash payments and health coverage to low-income refugee adults who do not qualify for these federal programs for their first eight months in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Besides these cash and medical assistance programs, ORR funds an array of transitional

33 Unlike other categories of recent immigrants, qualifying refugees are immediately eligible for federal means-tested public assistance programs upon arrival.

34 Exceptions to this include the Targeted Assistance Discretionary Grant program, which serves refugees who have been in the United States for more than five years. Most of ORR's funds are allocated by formula, while some programs are discretionary grants that are competitively awarded. For example, Refugee Social Services are allocated to states, resettlement agencies, and ethnic community-based organizations according to the total number of resettled refugees and other eligible populations who have arrived in the last two years, adjusted for reported secondary migration, with a baseline amount to those hosting fewer than 100 refugees. See ORR, "FY 2015 Social Services Formula Allocations," updated April 28, 2015, [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/state-letter-15-04](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/state-letter-15-04).





assistance services for refugees. Many of these services focus on getting refugees into employment quickly—in line with the program’s stated goal of rapid economic self-sufficiency. For example, the Refugee Social Services program provides employment-related services such as help searching for job opportunities, on-the-job and vocational training, skills and aptitude tests, and English language training, along with additional support to address employment barriers, such as interpretation and translation services, child care, and citizenship and naturalization services.<sup>35</sup> In FY 2015, the program was funded at \$80 million.<sup>36</sup> Some programs focus on vulnerable groups within refugee populations, such as older refugees, children, or women with limited literacy; others support financial initiatives such as microenterprise development, matched savings accounts, and agricultural partnerships.<sup>37</sup>

ORR also offers modest funding to states and local communities to offset local costs and promote integration. For example, the Targeted Assistance program (\$43 million in FY 2015) funds employment services in states experiencing an influx of refugee arrivals,<sup>38</sup> while the School Impact program (\$15 million in FY 2015) provides affected school districts with grants for services that support refugee children, such as ESL classes, after-school tutorials and activities, interpretation services, and programs to promote parental involvement.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, the Ethnic Community Self-Help program (\$6 million in FY 2015) awards grants to ethnic community-based organizations to promote local integration through initiatives such as cultural orientation, encouragement of civic participation, and public education and outreach.<sup>40</sup>

### C. What Are the Sources of Funding for Refugee Services?

Although U.S. Department of State funding for the initial Reception and Placement (R&P) Program has increased significantly over the past decade,<sup>41</sup> ORR-funded transitional assistance services have struggled to keep pace with the growing number of refugees and their increasingly diverse needs. As a result, since 1980 states, local communities, and voluntary agencies have been under increased pressure to make up for funding shortfalls.

Funding levels for several transitional assistance programs—including employment-related services, Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA), and Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA) for financially eligible refugees—have either failed to keep up with demand or have been scaled back significantly.<sup>42</sup> For example, one report estimated that between FY 2006 and FY 2015, the population using these services doubled, while funding increased by one-third.<sup>43</sup> The *Refugee Act of 1980* stipulated that the federal government would

35 *Code of Federal Regulations*, Refugee Resettlement Program—Refugee Social Services—Employability Services, title 45, part 400, subpart I, sec. 400.154, [www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2010-title45-vol2/pdf/CFR-2010-title45-vol2-sec400-155.pdf](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2010-title45-vol2/pdf/CFR-2010-title45-vol2-sec400-155.pdf).

36 ORR, *Annual Report to Congress FY2015* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017), 14, [www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/arc\\_15\\_final\\_508.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/arc_15_final_508.pdf).

37 ORR, “Refugees,” updated January 28, 2016, [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/refugees](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/refugees).

38 ORR, “About Targeted Assistance,” updated June 10, 2016, [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/targeted-assistance/about](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/targeted-assistance/about); ORR, *Annual Report to Congress FY2015*.

39 ORR, “About School Impact,” accessed May 12, 2016, [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/school-impact/about](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/school-impact/about); ORR, *Annual Report to Congress FY2015*.

40 ORR, “About Ethnic Community Self-Help,” accessed May 12, 2016, [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/ethnic-community-self-help/about](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/ethnic-community-self-help/about); ORR, *Annual Report to Congress FY2015*.

41 R&P program grants increased significantly in recent years, from \$850 per refugee in FY 2009 to \$2,025 in FY 2017. See U.S. Department of State, “FY 2009 Reception and Placement Program—Budget (National Management Budget FY 2009),” updated June 16, 2008, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/prm/funding/181443.htm#B>; U.S. Department of State, “FY 2017 Notice of Funding Opportunity for Reception and Placement Program.”

42 Brown and Scribner, “Unfulfilled Promises, Future Possibilities,” 108–9.

43 For FY 2015, the total budget for Cash and Medical Assistance program—which funds Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) and Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA), among other programs—was \$286 million; this figure does not account for spending through federal and state funded cash and medical assistance programs. See ORR, *Annual Report to Congress FY2015*, 19; Refugee Council USA, “Toolkit for Local Congressional Visits: Increasing Resources for Refugee Protection & Resettlement,” updated November 2015, 6, [http://masspeaceaction.org/home/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/RCUSA-Toolkit-Local-Congressional-Visits-on-Refugee-Funding\\_11.05.15.pdf](http://masspeaceaction.org/home/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/RCUSA-Toolkit-Local-Congressional-Visits-on-Refugee-Funding_11.05.15.pdf).



cover all public assistance program costs incurred by states for the first 36 months a refugee was in the United States; but this reimbursement was cut entirely in 1990 as part of a broader government drive to reduce expenditure on social welfare programs.<sup>44</sup> In a similar vein, the 1980 law also committed the federal government to funding the refugee cash and medical assistance programs for the first 36 months a refugee was in the country; however, funding was reduced to 18 months in 1982, and then to eight months in 1991. In the meantime, federal and state funding for ESL classes and job training programs has fallen sharply, particularly during the recession, affecting both refugees and other immigrant populations.<sup>45</sup>

The growing reliance on state and local resources has likely been among the factors contributing to the backlash against the refugee program in different parts of the country, particularly in communities with high unemployment rates and budget shortfalls resulting from the economic downturn.<sup>46</sup> Local communities have voiced concerns about the added strain on public assistance programs and local safety nets (such as food pantries), and the additional resources required to serve refugees, such as legally mandated interpretation and translation services, especially for less commonly spoken languages.<sup>47</sup> These pressures can be exacerbated for communities that are destinations for secondary migration; when refugees leave their official resettlement location for jobs or to unite with family members elsewhere, local service providers are often not notified of their arrival until they begin to use services, and funding allocated to a refugee typically does not transfer between states.<sup>48</sup>

#### D. How Does Service Provision Vary by State?

The relatively decentralized nature of the U.S. resettlement system means that placement in a particular state or local community can have ramifications for refugees' access to public services and for the level of public assistance they receive.<sup>49</sup> As the cost of living rises in many urban centers, more refugees have been placed outside large metropolitan areas in smaller cities and towns that often have fewer resources and less experience providing refugee services.<sup>50</sup> For example, small communities often have little experience hosting refugee populations and may thus be ill-equipped to provide the tailored support refugee students need to address their interrupted formal education or to recognize and treat signs of trauma.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, while larger communities may have populations that share refugees' nationality, religion, or ethnic group and can help with the integration process, many smaller communities do not.<sup>52</sup>

44 Brown and Scribner, "Unfulfilled Promises, Future Possibilities," 108–9.

45 Marcie Foster, *Adult Education Funding Levels and Enrollment* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2012), [www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/files/adult-ed-funding-enrollment-February-2012.pdf](http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/files/adult-ed-funding-enrollment-February-2012.pdf).

46 Nezer, *Resettlement at Risk*, 8.

47 Federal antidiscrimination laws mandate that any agency or organization receiving federal funds must ensure clients with limited English proficiency have meaningful access to services. See U.S. Department of Justice, "Enforcement of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—National Origin Discrimination against People with Limited English Proficiency; Policy Guidance," *Federal Register* 65, no. 159 (August 16, 2000): 50123–24, [www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2000-08-16/pdf/00-20867.pdf](http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2000-08-16/pdf/00-20867.pdf); GAO, *Refugee Resettlement*, 18–20; Presentation by Ngoan Le, Chief, Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Services, Illinois Department of Human Services, at the MPI event "Resettling Increasingly Diverse Refugee Populations in the United States: Integration Challenges and Successes," Washington, DC, June 26, 2015, [www.migrationpolicy.org/events/resettling-increasingly-diverse-refugee-populations-united-states-integration-challenges-and](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/events/resettling-increasingly-diverse-refugee-populations-united-states-integration-challenges-and). Mirroring concerns about cost and strain to local services, President Trump issued a memorandum on March 6, 2017 that called for a detailed estimate of long-term costs of the U.S. Refugee Admission Program at the federal, state, and local levels. See White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Memorandum for the Secretary of State, the Attorney General, the Secretary of Homeland Security" (presidential memorandum, Washington, DC, March 6, 2017), [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/03/06/memorandum-secretary-state-attorney-general-secretary-homeland-security](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/03/06/memorandum-secretary-state-attorney-general-secretary-homeland-security).

48 Brown and Scribner, "Unfulfilled Promises, Future Possibilities," 112–13.

49 Brick et al., *Refugee Resettlement in the United States*, 12–13.

50 GAO, *Refugee Resettlement*, 1.

51 Ibid., 18; Dryden-Peterson, *The Educational Experiences of Refugee Children*; Selcuk R. Sirin and Lauren Rogers-Sirin, *The Educational and Mental Health Needs of Syrian Refugee Children* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2015), [www.migrationpolicy.org/research/educational-and-mental-health-needs-syrian-refugee-children](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/educational-and-mental-health-needs-syrian-refugee-children); Dina Birman and Nellie Tran, *The Academic Engagement of Newly Arriving Somali Bantu Students in a U.S. Elementary School* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2015), [www.migrationpolicy.org/research/academic-engagement-newly-arriving-somali-bantu-students-us-elementary-school](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/academic-engagement-newly-arriving-somali-bantu-students-us-elementary-school).

52 Brick et al., *Refugee Resettlement in the United States*, 13.



In addition to localized differences in resources and existing populations, because each state sets the levels of support, eligibility thresholds, and time limits for major public assistance programs, these can vary widely across the country. Table 2 reveals considerable differences across the major public benefit programs available in California, Florida, New York, and Texas. For example, a refugee family of three might receive a monthly Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) payment of \$789 in New York but \$281 in Texas. And to qualify for Medicaid, the family would need to have an income significantly below the federal poverty level (FPL) in Florida and Texas, but could earn slightly more than the FPL in New York and California.<sup>53</sup> The political climate and receptiveness of voters and politicians to receiving refugees also varies from state to state: while the governors of Texas and Florida have come out in opposition to resettling Syrian refugees in their state, the governors of California and New York have not.<sup>54</sup>

**Table 2. Variation in the Public Benefits Available to Refugees and Other Low-Income Persons in Study States, 2016**

Type of Benefit	California	Florida	New York	Texas
Maximum monthly Temporary Assistance For Needy Families (TANF) benefit level (family of three)	\$704	\$303	\$789	\$285
Maximum Supplementary Security Income (SSI) monthly benefits (single person)	\$889	\$733	\$808	\$733
Medicaid income threshold for adults (parents in family of three) as percent of federal poverty level	138%	34%	138%	18%
Expanded Medicaid to serve low-income childless adults	Yes	No	Yes	No
State-Level Earned Income Tax Credit	Yes	No	Yes	No

*Notes:* The federal poverty level (FPL), calculated based on total family income before taxes (excluding capital gains and noncash benefits such as food stamps), was \$24,755 for a family of four in 2016. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a federal tax credit for low-income working poor and low- or moderate-income working families with children; as of January 2016, 26 states and the District of Columbia supplemented this credit with their own EITC. The SSI threshold for California applies to single persons who are aged or disabled and have independent living status. Florida limits TANF receipt to 48 months, rather than the 60-month federal limit.

*Sources (citations available in full in the Works Cited):* CBPP, “State Fact Sheets: Trends in State Caseloads and TANF-to-Poverty Ratio,” Florida Department of Children and Families, *Temporary Assistance for Needy Families State Plan Renewal*; Kaiser Family Foundation, “Medicaid Income Eligibility Limits for Adults as a Percent of the Federal Poverty Level;” CBPP, “State Temporary Assistance for Needy Family Programs Do Not Provide Adequate Safety Net for Poor Families;” CBPP, “Policy Basics: State Earned Income Tax Credits;” CBPP, “A Closer Look at Who Benefits from SNAP;” SSA, “Supplementary Security Income (SSI) in New York;” SSA, “SSI Federal Payment Amounts for 2016;” SSA, “Supplementary Security Income (SSI) in California;” CBPP, “Policy Basics: The Earned Income Tax Credit.”

### III. What Is Known about Refugee Integration Outcomes at National and State Levels?

While an earlier MPI report examined refugee integration *nationwide*,<sup>55</sup> this section draws on the methods used in that report to examine the integration of Burmese, Cuban, Iraqi, Russian, and Vietnamese

<sup>53</sup> The state-to-state variation in the amount of maximum monthly Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefit is related to both the cost of living and the social welfare policies in differing states.

<sup>54</sup> Ashley Fantz and Ben Brumfield, “More Than Half the Nation’s Governors Say Syrian Refugees Not Welcome,” CNN, November 19, 2015, [www.cnn.com/2015/11/16/world/paris-attacks-syrian-refugees-backlash/](http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/16/world/paris-attacks-syrian-refugees-backlash/).

<sup>55</sup> For this earlier analysis, see Capps et al., *The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees*. For information on the methodology of this study, see Appendix B.





refugees (see Box 2) in four major refugee-receiving states: California, Florida, New York, and Texas. As outlined above, these states offer widely varying levels of benefits to low-income populations in general and to refugees in particular.

## Box 2. Major Refugee Flows to the United States

This analysis focuses on the following five major refugee groups that have been resettled in the United States since 1980. They vary significantly in important ways, including the reasons for their displacement and migration, period of arrival in the United States, and the human capital they possessed at entry.

- **Burmese.** Government persecution and ethnic and religious violence have led tens of thousands of refugees (primarily ethnic minorities) to flee Burma (Myanmar) for neighboring countries such as Thailand and Malaysia. Between 2005 and 2014, the United States operated a group resettlement program for eligible Burmese refugees in Thailand. As of 2009–13, there were approximately 78,000 Burmese refugees living in the United States.
- **Cubans.** The Cuban revolution and the establishment of the Castro regime in 1959 sparked large-scale Cuban migration to the United States, with most admitted through humanitarian channels since the mid-1960s. Following spikes in maritime migration in the mid-1960s, 1980, and 1994, Cuba and the United States established the “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy to manage orderly migration. Under this policy, which the Obama administration terminated on January 12, 2017, Cubans intercepted at sea were returned to Cuba, while those who reached U.S. soil were admitted and could proceed to permanent residency under uniquely favorable terms. As of 2009–13, there were approximately 648,000 Cuban refugees living in the United States.
- **Iraqis.** The United States has resettled Iraqi refugees since the early 1990s, following the first Gulf War in 1991, focusing on those with links to the U.S. government and persecuted minorities (e.g., Kurds). The second Gulf War and escalating violence displaced millions of Iraqis, and large-scale processing of Iraqi refugees was introduced in 2007. Iraqi nationals who were employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government in Iraq and who meet certain requirements are also eligible to apply for a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV), participate in the refugee resettlement program, and receive social services and benefits. As of 2009–13, there were approximately 119,000 Iraqi refugees living in the United States.
- **Russians.** The United States admitted refugees from the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War and into its immediate aftermath. As of 2009–13, there were approximately 200,000 Russian refugees living in the United States.
- **Vietnamese.** Following the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and the subsequent Indochinese refugee crisis, the United States resettled hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees, beginning in the late 1970s and continuing into the late 1990s. As of 2009–13, there were approximately 651,000 Vietnamese refugees living in the United States.

*Note:* Historical data on refugee resettlement by country of origin are limited. To overcome these limitations, the authors employ an imputation methodology to determine the number and characteristics of refugees. This method may underestimate recent refugee groups.

*Sources (citations available in full in the Works Cited):* Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services, “Refugee Families from Burma;” Rusin, Zong, and Batalova, “Cuban Immigrants in the United States;” International Rescue Committee, *Iraqi Refugees in the United States*, 4–5; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, “Iraqi Refugee Processing Fact Sheet;” Bruno, *Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Programs*; Newland, “Impact of U.S. Refugee Policies on U.S. Foreign Policy;” Miller, “From Humanitarian to Economic: The Changing Face of Vietnamese Migration;” Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2009–13 ACS data.

All told, the members of these five national-origin groups that live in California, Florida, New York, and Texas represent roughly one-third of the approximately 3 million refugees who entered the United States since 1980. As Box 2 indicates, the refugees in this sample vary significantly in terms of their modes of entry, period of arrival, the generosity of resettlement programs at the time of their arrival and distribution across states. Most Vietnamese refugees entered during the 1980s and 1990s, while those from Burma and most of those from Iraq arrived after 2000. Only Cuban refugees have entered relatively



steadily across all four decades. In terms of distribution, the high concentrations of Cuban refugees in Florida and of Vietnamese refugees in California are of particular note (see Table 3).<sup>56</sup>

**Table 3. State-Level Distribution of Major Refugee Groups, 2009–13**

Refugee Group	Total	California (%)	Florida (%)	New York (%)	Texas (%)	Other States (%)
<b>Vietnamese</b>	651,000	42	4	2	11	41
<b>Cuban</b>	648,000	2	82	1	2	13
<b>Russian</b>	200,000	15	4	24	3	54
<b>Iraqi</b>	119,000	20	2	2	6	71
<b>Burmese</b>	78,000	10	2	12	13	63

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2009–13 ACS data.

Because these five refugee groups vary so widely in terms of their period of entry, distribution, and experiences prior to resettlement, to understand the effect of state of residence (i.e., the lottery effect) this report focuses on outcomes *within* national-origin groups across states.

### Box 3. Measuring Social Integration Outcomes

The analysis of the U.S. refugee population in this report draws on data from the American Community Survey (ACS) and focuses on readily measurable socioeconomic indicators such as the education, income, English language proficiency, employment, and labor force participation. However, neither the ACS nor other national surveys (such as the General Social Survey) collect data on other important measures of social integration such as civic participation or perception of belonging. A 2016 survey conducted by the Colorado Refugee Resettlement Program tracked outcomes for recently resettled refugees and did include several measures of social integration, such as whether refugees:

- spent time with other members of their own cultural/ethnic/linguistic/religious group;
- spent time with members of other cultural/ethnic/linguistic/religious groups, and the nature of these relationships (e.g., whether they had received advice or support from members of other groups, or had been to each other's houses);
- celebrated American holidays;
- attended their children's school events, visited their teachers, or volunteered at their school;
- felt safe in their local community;
- had encountered racial/cultural/religious discrimination;
- intended to become a U.S. citizen; or
- volunteered with community organizations, clubs, or governmental agencies.

The report found that parent participation in the education of their children rose over time across all groups covered, discriminatory encounters were rare, and volunteering with community organizations grew slightly over time.

Source: Colorado Refugee Services Program, *The Refugee Integration Survey and Evaluation (RISE) Year Five: Final Report* (Denver: Colorado Department of Human Services, 2016), <https://cbsdenver.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/rise-year-5-report-feb-2016.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> Almost all Cuban, Russian, and Vietnamese refugees had lived in their current state of residence for more than one year. While most refugees in the United States are granted refugee status before entering the country, most Cubans enter under the Cuban-Haitian Entrants Program and are subsequently awarded parole status or granted asylum. Consequently, very few Cuban refugees are assigned to different states, with the majority choosing to settle in Florida with their compatriots.



## A. Education

Education is both a predictor and metric of successful integration because earnings and other socioeconomic indicators are highly correlated with education.<sup>57</sup> Prior to resettlement, refugee access to education can vary considerable; even within the same first-asylum country, access may differ by refugee population, where refugees live (e.g., in a camp or an urban setting), and gender.<sup>58</sup> These schooling disruptions, and their potential to affect long-term integration outcomes, can place certain refugee populations at a particular disadvantage. Nationwide, adult refugees are as likely as the U.S. born to hold at least a bachelor's degree. However, this average masks substantial variation as refugee populations had very different levels of educational attainment. For example, the majority of Russian refugees held at least a bachelor's degree, but less than one-quarter of Cuban refugees did.<sup>59</sup>

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*Schooling disruptions, and their potential to affect long-term integration outcomes, can place certain refugee populations at a particular disadvantage.*

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Refugees who share a common origin group but live in different states also vary in their educational attainment (see Table 4). More than three-quarters of Russian refugees in Texas were college graduates, a higher share than in California, Florida, or New York. And a significantly higher share of Burmese refugees in California was well educated, a fact is likely attributable to differences in the ethnic composition of Burmese refugees in California compared to those in New York and Texas.<sup>60</sup>

**Table 4. Share of Adults (ages 25 and older) with at Least a Bachelor's Degree, by Immigration Status, (%), 2009–13**

	United States (%)	California (%)	Florida (%)	New York (%)	Texas (%)
<b>U.S. Born</b>	29	33	27	35	28
<b>Refugees</b>	28	30	20	42	28
Vietnamese	23	25	23	23	23
Cuban	18	21	18	26	24
Russian	63	64	59	60	77
Iraqi	28	28	-	-	41
Burmese	20	42	-	26	8
<b>Other Foreign Born</b>	28	25	26	28	20

Note: “-” indicates a sample size of less than 100.

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2009–13 ACS data.

<sup>57</sup> Capps et al., *Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees*, 19.

<sup>58</sup> Dryden-Peterson, *The Educational Experiences of Refugee Children*.

<sup>59</sup> Capps et al., *Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees*, 21.

<sup>60</sup> The majority of Burmese refugees in California spoke the official Burmese language and only 7 percent spoke a minority language (e.g., Karen, Karenni, and Ka Chin), while in New York one-third of Burmese refugees and in Texas close to one-quarter spoke minority languages. Author discussions with the California Department of Social Services, as well as a 2011 report by the Burma Refugee Family Network (BRFN) examining the needs of Burmese refugees in northern California, confirmed that Burmese speakers are more likely to be college graduates, proficient in English, and have work experience prior to resettlement than speakers of minority languages. See Russell Jeung et al., *From Crisis to Community Development: Needs and Assets of Oakland's Refugees from Burma* (Oakland, CA: Burma Refugee Family Network, 2011), <https://cci.sfsu.edu/burma>.



## B. English Language Proficiency

English language proficiency is widely seen as key to economic mobility and civic engagement.<sup>61</sup> While refugees' self-reported levels of English language proficiency improve with time in the United States, a large share remains unable to speak English very well even after years of residence. Overall, 61 percent of adult refugees were Limited English Proficient (LEP), versus 51 percent of other immigrants.<sup>62</sup> MPI analysis found that more than half of refugees who had been in the United States for 20 years or more were LEP, and that this gap between refugees and other immigrants persists over time.<sup>63</sup> LEP rates also varied widely by country of origin: more than three-quarters of refugees from Burma and Cuba were LEP, versus roughly half of Russian refugees.<sup>64</sup>

Notably, across the four states in this study, LEP rates were generally high and showed little variation within groups; the slightly lower LEP rates of Russians in Texas and Burmese in California can be seen as a reflection of these groups' higher level of education in those states (see Table 5).

**Table 5. Share of Limited English Proficient Adults (ages 16 and older), by Immigration Status, (%), 2009–13**

	United States (%)	California (%)	Florida (%)	New York (%)	Texas (%)
<b>U.S. Born</b>	1	3	2	3	4
<b>Refugees</b>	61	62	70	57	60
Vietnamese	69	70	67	65	67
Cuban	74	66	75	67	71
Russian	44	46	43	56	31
Iraqi	63	65	-	-	63
Burmese	83	67	-	89	93
<b>Other Foreign Born</b>	51	58	43	47	61

Note: “-” indicates a sample size of less than 100.

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2009–13 ACS data.

## C. Employment and Underemployment

National-level data show that refugees tend to find employment quickly after resettlement in the United States. Around half of newly arrived refugees who participate in resettlement assistance programs enter employment within eight months, with about three-quarters retaining their jobs for at least 90 days.<sup>65</sup> Previous MPI research found that nationwide, refugee men had higher employment rates<sup>66</sup> than U.S.-born men (67 percent versus 60 percent), while refugee women and U.S.-born women had equivalent

61 Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix, and James D. Bachmeier, *Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2016), [www.migrationpolicy.org/research/untapped-talent-costs-brain-waste-among-highly-skilled-immigrants-united-states](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/untapped-talent-costs-brain-waste-among-highly-skilled-immigrants-united-states).

62 English proficiency is self-reported in the ACS, with respondents asked to indicate whether they speak English “very well,” “not well,” or “not at all.” In accordance with U.S. Census Bureau definitions, individuals who report speaking English less than “very well” are considered Limited English Proficient (LEP).

63 Capps et al., *Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees*, 18.

64 Ibid., 19.

65 ORR, *ORR Indicators for Refugee Resettlement Stakeholders* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015), 7, [www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/508\\_compliant\\_fy\\_2016\\_orr\\_indicators\\_for\\_refugee\\_resettlement.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/508_compliant_fy_2016_orr_indicators_for_refugee_resettlement.pdf); ORR, *Statistical Abstract for Refugee Resettlement Stakeholders* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014), 7–8, [www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/statistical\\_abstract\\_for\\_refugee\\_resettlement\\_stakeholders\\_508.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/statistical_abstract_for_refugee_resettlement_stakeholders_508.pdf).

66 This analysis used the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) definition of employment rate—the ratio of employed people to the overall working-age population—and measures employment status for the U.S. population ages 16 and over. See OECD, “Employment Rate,” accessed April 6, 2016, <https://data.oecd.org/emp/employment-rate.htm>.



employment rates (54 percent).<sup>67</sup> However, employment rates vary by country of origin, particularly for women. While Liberian, Russian, Ukrainian, and Vietnamese refugee women had higher employment rates than U.S.-born women, the rates for other groups—including Bhutanese, Iraqi, and Somali refugee women—were significantly lower.

Consistent with the refugee program’s strong “work-first” emphasis, refugee employment rates were equivalent, if not higher, to that of U.S.-born adults across the four study states, with the notable exception of Iraqis in California (see Table 6). While these data do not capture barriers to employment, an International Rescue Committee report on Iraqi refugees in the United States attributes their low employment rate to multiple factors: 1) significant mental and physical health problems that developed prior to resettlement; 2) the precarious family structure of a large number of Iraqi families admitted to the United States (e.g., widowed mothers with no work experience and young children); and 3) brain waste among those with high professional qualifications owing to limited English language proficiency and difficulty obtaining professional credentials.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, a longitudinal survey of predominantly Bhutanese and Burmese refugees in Colorado found that unemployment was highest among refugees with health issues or disabilities, and those caring for children.<sup>69</sup>

**Table 6. Employment Rate of Adults (ages 16 and older), by Immigration Status, (%), 2009–13**

	United States (%)	California (%)	Florida (%)	New York (%)	Texas (%)
<b>U.S. Born</b>	57	55	52	57	59
<b>Refugees</b>	61	57	59	61	67
Vietnamese	66	61	69	67	70
Cuban	57	47	57	52	65
Russian	62	61	58	61	65
Iraqi	41	38	-	-	53
Burmese	55	53	-	51	58
<b>Other Foreign Born</b>	61	60	57	60	62

Note: “-” indicates a sample size of less than 100.

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2009–13 ACS data.

Although refugees were slightly more likely than the U.S. born to be employed, their levels of *underemployment* (defined as holding at least a bachelor’s degree and being unemployed or employed in a low-skilled job) were also higher. Close to half of Burmese, Cuban, and Iraqi refugees were underemployed (see Table 7).

One critique of the U.S. resettlement program is that its focus on early employment may come at the cost of forgoing other interventions that could improve longer-term labor market outcomes and mobility, such as skills training, credential recognition or recertification, and intensive English language training.<sup>70</sup> A 2012 report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) noted that ORR requires refugees to be employed while receiving additional skills certification training, and limits this training to a year, even though recertification can often take several years to complete.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Capps et al., *Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees*, 16.

<sup>68</sup> IRC, *Iraqi Refugees in the United States: In Dire Straits* (New York: IRC, 2009).

<sup>69</sup> Colorado Refugee Services Program, *The Refugee Integration Survey and Evaluation (RISE) Year Five: Final Report* (Denver: Colorado Department of Human Services, 2016), 36–37, <https://cbsdenver.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/rise-year-5-report-feb-2016.pdf>.

<sup>70</sup> Brick et al., *Refugee Resettlement in the United States*, 11–12; Brown and Scribner, “Unfulfilled Promises, Future Possibilities,” 106–7; GAO, *Refugee Resettlement*, 29–31.

<sup>71</sup> GAO, *Refugee Resettlement*, 30. While employment can entail some on-the-job training, such training is much more commonly provided to higher-skilled—rather than low-skilled—workers in the United States. See Randy Capps and Michael Fix, *Still an Hourglass? Immigrant Workers in Middle-Skilled Jobs* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2010), [www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigrant-workers-middle-skilled-jobs-0](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigrant-workers-middle-skilled-jobs-0).





While underemployment rates for refugees from the same country of origin were roughly equivalent across states, they were notably high for Cubans and Russians in Florida. A 2008 Miami case study found that while many Cuban and other refugees were initially able to find employment in the construction and service industries, they were often unable to move into higher-wage jobs compatible with their skills due to low English proficiency.<sup>72</sup>

**Table 7. Share of College-Educated Adults (ages 25 and older) Underemployed in the Civilian Labor Force, by Immigration Status, (%), 2009–13**

	United States (%)	California (%)	Florida (%)	New York (%)	Texas (%)
<b>U.S. Born</b>	18	18	20	18	16
<b>Refugees</b>	29	24	40	26	24
Vietnamese	19	18	16	18	17
Cuban	44	-	44	-	-
Russian	22	20	33	23	15
Iraqi	48	38	-	-	-
Burmese	40	-	-	-	-
<b>Other Foreign Born</b>	24	24	28	25	21

Notes: Underemployment refers to college-educated individuals in the civilian labor force who are either unemployed or are in low-skilled jobs. “-” indicates a sample size of less than 100.

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2009–13 ACS data.

#### **D. Household Income, Poverty Rates, and Public Benefits Receipt**

Recently arrived refugees are more likely to have low incomes, experience poverty, and rely on public assistance than other immigrants or the U.S. born, but crucially, all of these indicators improve the longer these newcomers are in the United States.<sup>73</sup> For example, despite overall high employment rates, refugee households have proportionately lower incomes compared to U.S.-born households. However refugee incomes improve with length of U.S. residence: in the 2009–11 period, the median income of refugees who arrived in the 1980s was \$31,000 higher than that of refugees who arrived between 2006 and 2011. That said, MPI analysis has found that recent cohorts have made smaller income gains relative to U.S.-born households and have struggled to keep pace with the gains made by earlier groups over time. Thus, the economic performance of recent refugee cohorts can be seen to lag behind that of their predecessors.

Refugees’ relative household income (defined here as a share of the state’s median household income for the U.S. born) varies across states. Vietnamese and Russian refugee households had higher relative incomes in Texas than in other states (see Table 8). And Burmese refugees had higher relative incomes in California than in New York—again, a fact largely attributable to differences in the ethnic composition of Burmese refugee populations in these states. Poverty rates and cash welfare use closely tracked household incomes.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup> Nancy Pindus with Bret Barden, Everett Henderson, and Mike Mueller, *The Evaluation of the Refugee Social Service (RSS) and Targeted Assistance Formula Grant (TAG) Programs: Miami Case Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008), [www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/miamicasestudy.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/miamicasestudy.pdf).

<sup>73</sup> Capps et al., *Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees*, 21.

<sup>74</sup> Poverty refers to individuals living in families that have incomes below 100 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL), calculated based on total family income before taxes (excluding capital gains and noncash benefits such as food stamps). In the United States, FPL is used to determine eligibility for various means-tested public benefit programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), free and reduced school lunch, Medicaid, and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP). In 2013, the FPL was \$23,834 for a family of four. See U.S. Census Bureau, “Poverty Thresholds,” accessed May 10, 2017, [www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html](http://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-thresholds.html). “Cash welfare” refers to TANF, Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA), General Assistance (GA), and state and local general assistance programs.

**Table 8. Relative Household Income of Refugees and Other Immigrants, as Compared to the U.S. Born, 2009–13**

	United States	California	Florida	New York	Texas
<b>U.S. Born</b>	\$53,000	\$65,000	\$48,000	\$60,000	\$54,000
<b>Refugees</b>	84%	79%	73%	83%	91%
Vietnamese	108%	93%	99%	89%	107%
Cubans	61%	57%	67%	45%	69%
Russians	104%	84%	98%	89%	129%
Iraqis	39%	35%	-	-	36%
Burmese	52%	69%	-	40%	-
<b>Other Foreign Born</b>	91%	80%	87%	84%	74%

Note: “-” indicates a sample size of less than 100.

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2009–13 ACS data.

The rate at which refugees enrolled in public benefits programs, particularly public health insurance for low-income populations, appears to have been driven by state-level policies, though these ACS data preclude drawing conclusive ties. Public health insurance coverage for refugee adults during the 2009–13 period varied by state, in a manner that largely mirrors the relative generosity of state public insurance programs (see Table 9).<sup>75</sup>

**Table 9. Share of Adults (ages 18 to 64) with Only Public Health Insurance, by Immigration Status, (%), 2009–13**

	United States (%)	California (%)	Florida (%)	New York (%)	Texas (%)
<b>U.S. Born</b>	11	11	11	15	9
<b>Refugees</b>	16	20	11	21	10
Vietnamese	14	18	7	27	9
Cuban	13	21	13	26	14
Russian	10	10	7	15	1
Iraqi	42	47	-	-	31
Burmese	32	22	-	51	18
<b>Other Foreign Born</b>	9	12	6	20	6

Note: “-” indicates a sample size of less than 100.

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2009–13 ACS data.

In the United States, lack of insurance coverage can be a barrier to accessing health care, as the cost of paying out of pocket is beyond the reach of many uninsured patients. Since the passage of the *Affordable Care Act* (ACA) in 2014,<sup>76</sup> the number and share of all immigrants without health insurance

<sup>75</sup> The data used in this analysis ended in 2013, one year before the implementation of the *Affordable Care Act* (ACA) in 2014. As of January 2013, Medicaid income eligibility for parents with dependent children was 106 percent of the FPL in California (with 20 percent coverage) and 150 percent of the FPL in New York (with 21 percent coverage); the thresholds for Florida and Texas, which had 11 percent and 10 percent coverage, were 56 percent of the FPL and 25 percent of the FPL, respectively. Under the ACA, California and New York expanded their Medicaid coverage, while Texas and Florida scaled back their Medicaid coverage further. ACA also enabled many refugees to become eligible for the law’s subsidies and (income-based) tax credits to purchase private health insurance coverage themselves. See Kaiser Family Foundation, “Annual Updates on Eligibility Rules, Enrollment and Renewal Procedures, and Cost-Sharing Practices in Medicaid and CHIP,” updated January 21, 2016, <http://kff.org/medicaid/report/annual-updates-on-eligibility-rules-enrollment-and/>.

<sup>76</sup> The ACA aims to expand health insurance coverage by expanding Medicaid, creating health insurance exchanges (marketplaces) that are coupled with federal tax subsidies, and introducing a requirement that people have health insurance or pay a tax penalty.





coverage has declined.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, a longitudinal study of Burmese and Bhutanese refugees in Colorado, a state that expanded its Medicaid coverage under the ACA, found significant improvement in refugee insurance coverage between 2013 and 2014.<sup>78</sup> Further research is needed to understand more fully how variations in state policy and practice, as well as other state-level variables, can affect outcomes.

## IV. Conclusions

As the Trump administration advances steep cuts in refugee admission by executive order, seeks to expand the role of state and local governments in refugee placement, and calls for studies of the long-term costs of refugees at all levels of government, it is important to understand how refugee populations fare across the United States and the integration challenges they may encounter. Since the passage of the *Refugee Act* in 1980, the goals and the scope of the program have shifted to prioritize the admission of the most vulnerable humanitarian cases. Changing priorities have led to a diversification of the inflow of refugees and, in turn, to greater variation in linguistic and educational backgrounds and to more complex integration challenges.

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*The goals and the scope of the program have shifted to prioritize the admission of the most vulnerable humanitarian cases.*

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With limited federal funds, some states and communities have expressed concerns about their ability to meet the complex needs of these diverse populations and about the pressures resettlement puts on local infrastructure, including housing, schools, and other public services. Indeed, in 2016 four states expressed the intention to withdraw from the state-administered refugee resettlement program, after which basic refugee services would instead be administered through local voluntary agencies.<sup>79</sup> While research has detailed how different refugee populations fare on a national level, less is known about how these populations fare within and across states—and, crucially, whether state-level policy or other variables affect socioeconomic outcomes.

77 Nationwide, public and private health insurance coverage increased in 2014 following ACA implementation. Immigrant coverage increased dramatically during the first year after implementation, with the uninsured rate for both naturalized citizens and noncitizens falling more rapidly than the uninsured rate for the U.S. born: between 2013 and 2014, the uninsured rate dropped 5 percentage points for naturalized citizens (from 16 percent to 11 percent), 6 percentage points for noncitizens (from 46 percent to 40 percent), and 3 percentage points for U.S.-born citizens (from 12 percent to 9 percent), according to MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2013 and 2014 ACS data. See also Waters and Pineau, eds., *The Integration of Immigrants into American Society*; U.S. Census Bureau, “Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2014” (news release, September 16, 2015), [www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-157.html](http://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-157.html).

78 Colorado Refugee Services Program, *The Refugee Integration Survey and Evaluation (RISE)*.

79 In 2016, Kansas, Maine, New Jersey, and Texas expressed the intention to withdraw from the program, after which each must complete the formal withdrawal process. Other states that have partly or entirely withdrawn from the program include: Alabama, Alaska, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Nevada, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Tennessee. Under U.S. refugee resettlement policy, most refugees receive resettlement assistance through state-administered programs; ORR then reimburses states for the costs of their assistance programs. Resettlement continues in states that have withdrawn from participation in the resettlement program, with the process managed by nonprofit organizations and funded by ORR through a program called Wilson-Fish or through public-private partnership. See Appendix A of this report; Muzaffar Chishti and Sarah Pierce, “U.S. Meets 2016 Syrian Refugee Admission Goal; Opposition to New Resettlement Mounts,” *Migration Information Source*, September 28, 2016, [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/us-meets-2016-syrian-refugee-admission-goal-opposition-new-resettlement-mounts](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/us-meets-2016-syrian-refugee-admission-goal-opposition-new-resettlement-mounts); State of Maine, Office of Governor Paul R. LePage, “Maine Withdraws from Federal Refugee Program” (press release, Augusta, ME, October 17, 2016), [www.maine.gov/tools/whatsnew/index.php?topic=Gov+News&id=720345&v=article2011](http://www.maine.gov/tools/whatsnew/index.php?topic=Gov+News&id=720345&v=article2011); ORR, “Wilson-Fish Chart,” updated January 25, 2013, [www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/wilson-fish-chart](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/wilson-fish-chart).



Existing studies have suggested that refugee placement in different states and local communities, where policies regarding newcomers vary in their generosity, may create a lottery effect that shapes refugee integration outcomes. But the state- and group-level data examined here indicate that the program's lottery effect may be less pronounced than previously thought. National origins, rather than settlement location, seem to be more highly correlated with how refugees fare across a range of socioeconomic indicators such as employment, underemployment, and income. What accounts for the similarity of group outcomes despite state policy differences? One potential explanation may be the extensive network of the nine voluntary agencies that have been so central to the U.S. refugee resettlement program and that work across many different states. The breadth of these networks may mediate some state-to-state policy differences by effectively evening out the integration supports refugees receive nationwide. It should be noted, though, that sharp cuts in refugee admissions as well as potential cuts to social benefit programs more generally, are likely to substantially reduce the capacity of these civil-society organizations.<sup>80</sup> Other factors that merit further study include the role of refugee resilience<sup>81</sup> and the effects of the U.S. resettlement program's strong "work-first" philosophy.

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*National origins, rather than settlement location, seem to be more highly correlated with how refugees fare across a range of socioeconomic indicators.*

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Perceptions of slow refugee integration, high benefit use rates, and low employment levels have not, in general, been supported by the evidence. Refugees tend to find employment soon after arriving in the United States. Nationally, refugee men have a higher employment rate than U.S.-born men, while refugee women and U.S.-born women are equally likely to be employed. But these averages mask poorer employment outcomes for certain refugee groups, including those from Somalia, Iraq, and Bhutan; these lagging employment rates are often especially pronounced among women. Yet the refugee resettlement program's work-first philosophy does seem to have driven rapid labor force engagement for most groups in most states; in some cases, this early engagement can lead to formal or informal employer-provided on-the-job training.

Nonetheless, refugees in all four sample states, as well as nationwide, suffer from high rates of underemployment. One critique of the U.S. approach is that focusing on early employment—rather than longer-term interventions, such as credential recognition or intensive English language training—can perpetuate brain waste. This underemployment can affect professional mobility and attainment, and crucially, long-term earning potential. Policy and practice solutions to brain waste lie both within and outside of the refugee program; they include the reform of state and/or occupational licensing and credentialing policies, the increased provision of occupation-specific language instruction, and the introduction of bridging courses that enable refugees to build on their training and experience, rather than starting from scratch.

While the data presented here suggest that location may not influence refugee outcomes as strongly as previous studies predicted, this analysis should be seen as a starting point for further efforts to

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80 Voice of America has catalogued at least 300 layoffs among nonprofits in the United States and more than 500 overseas as a result of the reduction in refugee resettlement under the Trump administration. See Victoria Macchi, "Trump's Cuts to US Refugee Program Lead to 300-Plus Layoffs," VOA News, April 27, 2017, [www.voanews.com/a/donald-trump-cuts-us-refugee-program-lead-to-hundreds-of-layoffs/3826785.html](http://www.voanews.com/a/donald-trump-cuts-us-refugee-program-lead-to-hundreds-of-layoffs/3826785.html).

81 For example, one study of Hmong refugee outcomes in Gammertingen, Germany and Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas in the United States attributed refugees' successful integration in both locations (despite the very different host-community approaches) to the resilience and agency of the refugees themselves. See Faith Nibbs, "Belonging: The Resettlement Experiences of Hmong Refugees in Texas and Germany," *Migration Information Source*, September 30, 2014, [www.migrationpolicy.org/article/belonging-resettlement-experiences-hmong-refugees-texas-and-germany](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/belonging-resettlement-experiences-hmong-refugees-texas-and-germany).



understand how refugees fare across U.S. states. To better gauge impacts and guide policy-making, these studies should assess refugee outcomes at the state and local level, seeking to better disaggregate the effects of variables such as local labor market demand, housing affordability, social welfare benefits, and the presence of established ethnic communities. Such research would also foster understanding of the challenges to successful integration different refugee groups and their host communities face. Because these initial results are drawn primarily from census data, they are limited to socioeconomic indicators such as employment rates and income levels. And while these economic measures offer important, quantifiable insights into how refugees groups fare in different states, additional research could shed light on other important metrics of refugee integration such as civic and political participation, or refugees' sense of belonging in their new communities.

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## Appendices

### A. How States Administer Resettlement Assistance

At a state and local level, there are several different models for administering resettlement assistance. Most commonly, states administer their own programs, delivering refugee cash and medical assistance and referrals for refugee social services through the state welfare or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agency.<sup>82</sup> For example, the California Department of Social Services, the New York Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance, the Florida Department of Children and Families, and the Texas Health and Human Services Commission act as the refugee resettlement offices for their states. But several alternatives to state-administered programs have emerged that give some—or all—of this responsibility to local affiliates of the nine national resettlement agencies that participate in the Reception and Placement (R&P) program.<sup>83</sup>

- **Public-private partnership model.** Texas, for example, works with local voluntary agencies that administer refugee cash assistance for the state.<sup>84</sup> While states retain overall responsibility for managing the program, the public-private partnership model offers some flexibility in how cash assistance is delivered (e.g., adding incentives or sliding scale payments), allowing agencies that already provide initial reception and social services to streamline service provision.<sup>85</sup>
- **Wilson-Fish programs.** Wilson-Fish programs are administered wholly or in part by a private nonprofit agency—again, in an effort to streamline service delivery. Common features include creating a “one-stop shop” where refugees can obtain a wide array of services and front-loading services soon after arrival.<sup>86</sup> This model can promote more flexible program design and delivery: for example, San Diego County, California has a Wilson-Fish program, administered by Catholic Charities, that provides incentives for refugees’ early employment by financially rewarding those who are employed for 90 days or more within 120 days of arriving in the United States.<sup>87</sup>
- **Matching grant programs.** As of 2015, 42 states (including California, Florida, New York, and Texas) offered matching grant programs to eligible refugees.<sup>88</sup> These programs seek

82 ORR, *Wilson/Fish Alternative Program: FY 2015-2016 Program Guidelines* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, accessed December 19, 2016), 5, [www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/wilson\\_fish\\_guidelines\\_fy2015\\_16.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/wilson_fish_guidelines_fy2015_16.pdf).

83 Bruno, *U.S. Refugee Resettlement Assistance*, 12–14.

84 Texas Health and Human Services, “Refugee Cash Assistance Provider Manual—Section 1000, Overview and Purpose,” accessed May 1, 2017, <https://hhs.texas.gov/laws-regulations/handbooks/refugee-cash-assistance-provider-manual-rca/section-1000-overview-purpose>; Texas Health and Human Services, “Refugee Cash Assistance Provider Manual—Section 3000, Program Administration,” accessed May 1, 2017, <https://hhs.texas.gov/laws-regulations/handbooks/refugee-cash-assistance-provider-manual-rca/rca-section-3000-program-administration>.

85 ORR, “Divisions – Refugee Assistance,” updated October 3, 2012, [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/divisions-refugee-assistance](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/divisions-refugee-assistance); ORR, “Refugee Resettlement Program; Requirements for Refugee Cash Assistance; and Refugee Medical Assistance,” *Federal Register* 64, no. 5 (January 8, 1999), 1159–75, [www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2002/09/09/fr08ja99P.pdf](http://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2002/09/09/fr08ja99P.pdf).

86 ORR, *Wilson/Fish Alternative Program*, 5; Bruno, *U.S. Refugee Resettlement Assistance*, 14.

87 ORR, *Wilson/Fish Alternative Program*.

88 Participants in the Matching Grant program must be deemed “employable”; they are ineligible if already economically self-sufficient, if receiving cash assistance, or if elderly or disabled (and thus, likely to qualify for Supplemental Security Income). Enrollment is also subject to availability of funds. See U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, “Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2016,” updated October 1, 2015, [www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/docsforcongress/247770.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/docsforcongress/247770.htm); ORR, *Voluntary Agencies Matching Grant Program: FY 2014 Program Guidelines* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, accessed June 10, 2016), 4–5, [www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/fy\\_2014\\_matching\\_grant\\_mg\\_program\\_guidelines\\_for\\_grantees.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/fy_2014_matching_grant_mg_program_guidelines_for_grantees.pdf).



to help refugees become economically self-sufficient within four to six months without enrolling in public cash welfare programs. Local resettlement agencies provide services like case management and employment services (e.g., job placements), a cash allowance, and interim housing during the course of the program.<sup>89</sup> These programs are jointly funded by federal funds and largely in-kind support from participating resettlement agencies. Around one-quarter of refugees participated in fiscal year (FY) 2013.<sup>90</sup>

## B. Data Source and Methodology

The analyses described in this report are drawn primarily from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), using pooled data from 2009 to 2013—the most recent five years for which data were available at the time of analysis.<sup>91</sup> Five years of data are pooled to increase the sample size and the precision of the estimates. Since ACS data do not disaggregate the immigrant population by refugee status, the authors match country of birth and year of arrival in the ACS against U.S. government administrative data on refugee, asylee, and Cuban-Haitian entrant admissions. The authors combine these groups into one “refugee” category, even though they appear as three separate groups in U.S. immigration law and administrative data; this is done as all individuals in these categories fit the definition of “refugee” as set forth in the 1951 Refugee Convention and because all are eligible for the same set of services.

The administrative data are taken from three sources: the U.S. Department of State's Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS), U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) admissions data, and Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) data on service populations. WRAPS is the primary source of data on the nationalities, birth countries, and arrival years of refugees, but does not provide information on asylees or Cuban-Haitian entrants. DHS admissions data include the number of refugees arriving and the number of asylum grants by year, as well as country of birth and country of nationality. ORR data describe Cuban-Haitian entrant arrivals by year.<sup>92</sup>

The researchers assign “refugee” status to immigrants in the refugee, asylee, and Cuban-Haitian entrant populations based on different thresholds. Refugee status is assigned to every country/year combination for which refugee admissions in both DHS and WRAPS data exceed 40 percent of the estimated foreign-born population identified in the ACS data.<sup>93</sup> Country/year combinations in which asylee admissions in DHS data exceed 20 percent of the foreign-born population in ACS data are also assigned refugee status. Cuban immigrants are classified as refugees if the number of Cuban entrant

89 ORR, “About the Voluntary Agencies Matching Grant Program,” accessed April 1, 2016, [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/matching-grants/about](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/matching-grants/about); Bruno, *U.S. Refugee Resettlement Assistance*, 13-14.

90 ORR, *Statistical Abstract for Refugee Resettlement Stakeholders*.

91 U.S. Census Bureau ACS data were accessed from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS). See Steven Ruggles et al., *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 6.0* [Machine-readable database] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2015), <http://usa.ipums.org/usa/>.

92 ORR provided data on Cuban and Haitian entrants separately for 2010–12, but only Cuban and Haitian entrants combined for 1983–2009. The number of Cuban and number of Haitian entrants during the 1983–2009 period are estimated based on their shares of the total in 2010–12.

93 In some country/year combinations, refugee admissions based on country of birth in the U.S. Department of State's WRAPS data exceed 40 percent of the foreign-born population identified by ACS, but admissions fall below this 40 percent threshold in DHS data, which uses country of nationality instead. Generally, discrepancies between birthplace and nationality reflect protracted refugee situations, during which refugees may have had children in the country of first asylum before being permanently resettled in the United States. In such cases, the researchers use ACS ancestry codes, which are considered to be equivalent to the DHS and WRAPS codes for nationality. For example, the number of refugees born in Kenya exceeds 40 percent of all Kenyan immigrants in some years, but generally these are not Kenyan refugees; instead, they are the children of Somali refugees born in Kenya. In this example, the researchers only code Kenyan-born immigrants who also report Somali ancestry as refugees.



grants in any year of ORR data exceeds 40 percent of all Cuban immigrants in the ACS data; Haitians are classified as refugees if Haitian entrant grants exceed 20 percent of Haitian immigrants.<sup>94</sup>

Using this method, the researchers assigned refugee status to 1.12 million foreign-born individuals in the ACS, accounting for 95 percent of the total refugee, asylee, and Cuban-Haitian entrant admissions between 2000 and 2013 according to administrative data.<sup>95</sup>

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94 MPI analysts used the methods described in this section to assign refugee status to immigrants who entered the United States between 2000 and 2013. Assignments for immigrants who entered between 1980 and 1999 were conducted by Jeffrey S. Passel of the Pew Research Center using a similar methodology. MPI and Pew researchers used both single-year (2013) and pooled (2009–13) U.S. Census Bureau ACS data to determine refugee or asylee status, in order to account for sampling errors of the foreign-born population (especially for less common groups) in the ACS.

95 The number of refugee admissions, asylum grants, and Cuban-Haitian entrants reported in the administrative data totaled 1.17 million for the period of 2000 through 2013.





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The Migration Policy Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide. MPI provides analysis, development, and evaluation of migration and refugee policies at the local, national, and international levels. It aims to meet the rising demand for pragmatic and thoughtful responses to the challenges and opportunities that large-scale migration, whether voluntary or forced, presents to communities and institutions in an increasingly integrated world.

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