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### Narratives of Successful Refugee Resettlement in Houston

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Narratives of Successful Refugee Resettlement in Houston

Ward Westray

A Capstone Paper Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Applied Community and Economic Development Sequence

Department of Politics and Government

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
Introduction.....	5
Literature Review: Frameworks of Resettlement .....	15
Literature Review: Conceptualizing Refugee Integration .....	45
Methodology.....	59
Findings.....	63
Discussion.....	64
Summary and Conclusion.....	88
Addendum on How This Capstone Project Relates to the Researcher’s Field Placement .....	95
Appendices.....	108
References.....	126

### **Abstract**

This research project examines the connotations of successful refugee resettlement and socio-economic integration through a series of first-person interviews focusing on the well-being of refugees in the Houston metropolitan area. The responses from interviewed persons are examined in the broader context of refugee resettlement regimes internationally, in the United States, and also in Houston. Key findings that emerge from this study's literature review and primary data suggest that services from refugee resettlement agencies, while generally enough for a basic level of self-sufficiency, are not sufficient to provide the kind of long-term success as identified in this study's interviews with refugees and Special Immigrant Visa holders. Given interviewees' responses in the context of domestic and international literature on refugee resettlement and integration, this study finds that refugee resettlement in Houston falls short in the quality of services provided by resettlement agencies, and that the United States' refugee resettlement system needs more federal support and funding. At the same time, refugees' high valuation of positive multicultural interactions, social interconnectivity, and professional and educational networking and advancement are also apparent in first-person accounts. These values should be prioritized going forward with the goal of providing a resettlement model that encourages a more holistic wellness through keeping refugees' long-term integration in mind.

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## Introduction

The plight of refugees has taken on increasing importance as a global issue in recent years as numbers of displaced persons, refugees, and asylees continue rising to heretofore unseen levels. Furthermore, as numbers of refugees and other displaced persons increase by year, political pressures regarding the admission of refugees—by number, ethnicity, creed, and other characteristics—into countries of asylum correspondingly mount, giving the issue of ‘refugee politics’ a supreme international importance that one or two generations ago arguably did not exist as such. Widespread concerns about refugee resettlement, and the integration of refugees, are a relatively recent phenomenon. Coinciding with the post-2007 economic recession and the lack of increased support from countries’ national governments given to resettlement programs, worries that refugees pose a drain on local economies or are a security threat—or are at least culturally alien to a worrying degree—have become more commonplace (Bernstein & DuBois, 2018), transforming the issue of refugee resettlement into political and cultural referendums on protectionism and nationalism.

The particularities of resettlement programs are quite important, as policies at “the national and local level influence refugee integration by shaping refugees’ ability to participate socially and economically” (Hynie, 2018, p. 265), and also shape communities’ attitudes on integration in the long term. How exactly a refugee resettlement regime measures its own success often reflects the policy aims of such programs, which are key in shaping the short-term and long-term outcomes for refugees and the communities with which they interact. Studies involving interviews with resettled refugees, however, demonstrate that their own reaction to experiences of refugee resettlement is sometimes incongruent with the expectations of their resettlement program. Therefore, creating a holistic and comprehensive refugee resettlement program with best practices for integration requires analysis of the international refugee

resettlement regime, different countries' resettlement programs, and first-hand data from resettled refugees alike.

Examining international refugee resettlement systems first necessitates a basic understanding of the differences between countries, both between those whose resettlement programs are designed very differently and also between those who do and who do not resettle refugees. In 2018, 27 countries internationally accepted almost 55,700 refugees for resettlement, led by the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and Sweden in number (UNHCR, 2019b). Resettlement countries have established refugee resettlement programs and agree to admit refugees on an annual basis from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR—the United Nations' program with the mandate to protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities, and stateless people, and assist in their voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement to a third country. Some other countries take in refugees on an ad hoc basis or host resettlement programs which primarily benefit refugees with specific needs. Factors that influence the formation of refugee resettlement programs include: “the costs and benefits of accepting international assistance, relations with the sending country, political calculations about the local community's absorption capacity, and national security considerations” (Jacobsen, 1996, p. 655). For those countries which do regularly host refugees, potential issues with hosting may include the bureaucratic management of resettlement programs, bureaucratic inertia, how accepted refugees are in that country's political landscape, and power struggles between government offices and other refugee stakeholders (Jacobsen). In this light, refugee resettlement appears to be far from a universally-accepted standard and practice, even if the majority of countries are signatories to either the 1951 Convention Relating

to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, which represent the bedrock of the current international refugee response framework.

Despite political concerns about refugees' impact, economic research indicates that refugees can be a boon to a nation's economy, rather than a drain: in the United States, for instance, they pay billions of dollars in taxes each year, despite comprising less than one percent of the population (New American Economy, 2017). Data from 2010-2014 also suggests that refugees in the United States pay \$21,000 more in taxes per person than they receive in benefits over their first twenty years after resettlement (Evans & Fitzgerald, 2017). Whether refugees ever truly 'fit in' after arriving, however, depends on one's perspective regarding the aims of refugee resettlement. While outcomes such as self-sufficiency—often thought of in purely economic terms—are a common goal of resettlement programs and an ostensibly easy way to measure successful outcomes for resettled refugees, the question of whether those persons actually feel they have achieved personal success begs another series of inquiries, some more qualitative in nature.

A survey of the Global Compact on Refugees, a non-binding United Nations pact to improve responses to refugee situations, provides a good understanding of the state of international contemporary refugee policies. From that point, examining the practices and goals of different resettlement programs, what extant literature says about refugee integration, and what first-hand accounts of refugees reveal will round out what successful refugee resettlement and integration looks like on both theoretical and practical levels. This research aims to add to that knowledge by conducting a small number of in-person qualitative interviews in the area of Houston, Texas, where resettlement for the next fiscal year is at risk pending the prospective passage of the new Presidential Executive Order on Enhancing State and Local Involvement in



Refugee Resettlement—or Executive Order 13888—which provides states and municipalities within the United States the ability to withdraw their consent to receiving new refugee cases on a yearly basis.

### International Refugee Resettlement Regime

Any study of refugee resettlement must be well-informed about international refugee policies and its major bodies; to this end, it is worth analyzing the characterization of integration or successful resettlement according to organizations such as the UNHCR, and furthermore the domestic refugee resettlement programs of different countries. Only by examining the mechanisms and desired outcomes of those bodies can one then turn to first-hand accounts of actual refugees themselves and compare those refugees' assessments about integration with the ostensible expectations set upon them by refugee-related organizations, thereby better understanding the extent to which existing refugee resettlement paradigms truly are facilitating successful integration.

According to the UNHCR, 70.8 million individuals were forcibly displaced in 2018 (UNHCR, 2019a), a record high. The UNHCR categorizes the statistic of 70.8 million displaced into three types of displaced people: internally displaced people, asylum-seekers, and refugees, respectively. As of 2018, there are 25.9 million refugees; 41.3 million internally displaced people; and 2.5 million asylum-seekers worldwide (UNHCR, 2019a).

The United Nations' 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and its effective amendment in the form of the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, together comprise the “core” of the current international refugee regime (Hansen, 2018, p. 132).

As defined by the 1951 Convention, a refugee:

“...owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it” (UNHCR, 2010).

The Convention and Protocol define a specific role for the UNHCR, wherein “the UNHCR is tasked with, among others, promoting international instruments for the protection of refugees, and supervising their application” (UNHCR, 2010, p. 4). For its part, the UNHCR defines a refugee as:

“...someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries” (UNHCR, 2020).

An internally displaced person (IDP) is someone who has not crossed a border to find safety, and is on the run in her/his home country; as opposed to refugees, who have left their home country. While the reasons for an IDP’s flight may be similar to that of refugees, an IDP is still ostensibly under the protection of their country’s government, even if that same government was responsible for their persecution and displacement (Theirworld, 2018).

Lastly, people seeking asylum, which is a form of protection based on the principle of “non-refoulement” (Ostrand, 2015, p. 258), are people who have fled persecution in their home country and are seeking safe haven in a different country whose request for sanctuary has yet to be

processed. While not every asylum-seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, every refugee is initially an asylum-seeker before their claim can be definitely evaluated.

Though displaced persons, asylum-seekers, and refugees are often closely related and may even flee from the same conflicts, their differentiation is important on both a national and international level. The specific legal protections for and policies relating to each type of migrant are different, and institutions of systematic resettlement are primarily reserved for people registered as refugees with the UNHCR (Hansen, 2018). Refugees usually experience long periods of displacement, whether in refugee camps or in other vulnerable conditions, while they wait for a situation of permanent resettlement. The circumstances of their flight from persecution and violence, combined with many living in a limbo state of uncertainty regarding future resettlement, means that many refugees face physical and mental health challenges which “persist and that without adequate attention may have lasting consequences on their integration in the US” (Bernstein & DuBois, 2018, p. 4). For more information regarding the different stages of a refugee’s possible journey, from pre-flight to eventual resettlement, see Appendix 3.

While specific to the United States, Special Immigrant Visa holders, or SIVs, are distinct from refugees in that they are persons who worked with the U.S. Armed Forces as a translator, interpreter, or in another mission-related capacity in either Iraq or Afghanistan (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2016). However, they receive many of the same services that refugees do from resettlement agencies, and are relevant to this study as three of the study’s interviewees were Special Immigrant Visa holders.

### Outcomes of Refugee Resettlement

Only around one percent of refugees registered by the UNHCR worldwide are permanently resettled in a host country each year (Jones & Teytelboym, 2017; Bernstein &

DuBois, 2018), and only a handful of nations offer refugee resettlement on a regular basis (Ostrand, 2015). Within those states, the admission and quality of treatment of resettled refugees poses not only logistical concerns to the host countries, but moreover qualitative and quantitative questions alike concerning the well-being of refugees who are in fact resettled. Though recent years have seen the UNHCR and its member nations place increased importance on coordinating the efforts of different resettlement regimes in pursuit of more harmonized international refugee resettlement practices, in practice the particular aims and policies of different countries' resettlement programs do vary in significant ways, in turn affecting the outcomes of refugees in economic self-sufficiency, language retention, civic participation, social connectivity, ethnic community support, and other outcomes. The goals of one country's refugee resettlement program, therefore, may be considered indicative of, or at least correlated with, the notion of success in terms of that program.

For instance, refugee resettlement in the United States tends to primarily emphasize economic integration, as the United States' Department of Health and Human Services' focus on encouraging early employment and thereby avoiding prolonged refugee reliance on cash benefits suggests that a successfully-integrated refugee in the United States is one who has achieved and who maintains economic self-sufficiency (Fix et al., 2017; Sturm, 2016). This predominant emphasis on immediate employment is notable because the United States' federal government plays a centralizing role in determining refugee services policies; whereas with other non-refugee immigration, integration policies are largely left to the jurisdiction of state and local authorities and civil society and thus lack such a commonality (Fix et al.). It may also be said that differences in structure and funding do exist between the resettlement programs of different states, and that inter-state policy fissures may widen if state and local governments divergently

respond to the Trump administration's Executive Order 13888 should the Order surmount its current legal challenge. However, through present time the tendency to prioritize refugee economic self-sufficiency on a national level has been fairly consistent since the Refugee Act created the country's current resettlement paradigm in 1980 (Scribner & Brown, 2014; Tyson, 2017).

While self-sufficiency or, perhaps more specifically, self-sufficiency through economic integration, seems to represent the primary goal of refugee resettlement in the United States, examining the aims and processes of other countries' resettlement programs provides different, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, understandings of refugee integration. For instance, Canada's approach to refugee resettlement encourages a mutual social-cultural adjustment between both new refugees there and the larger society; and Australia's places greater emphasis on neighborhood connections and providing broader social inclusion experiences for refugees (Sturm, 2016). Definitely proving the superiority of one country's resettlement model over another is an impossible exercise. However, examining them compared to one another, both through their own purported aims and through research completed about their relative strengths and weaknesses, can provide a better understanding of what values a holistic refugee resettlement program might include.

Recent research on refugee integration outcomes in the United States examines economic and social outcomes for various refugee communities since the late 1970s (Bernstein & DuBois, 2018). Research on resettlement programs in other countries similarly assesses the outcomes of refugee integration using both qualitative and quantitative metrics (Betts et al., 2017; Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). Measuring refugee integration is itself a very complex task, however, and attempting to encapsulate it in a given country or location with one metric, or even a handful

of more easily-identifiable metrics such as employment rate and language capacity, provides an inadequate understanding of how a refugee group interacts with a community (Bernstein & DuBois, 2018). Moreover, the impressions of refugee persons themselves vary regarding the extent to which they feel successful in their integration and overall life quality.

Surveying the different focuses and policies of resettlement programs across the world may provide tangential insight into how those programs' countries perceive successful refugee integration, but lost in that examination are the qualitative experiences and viewpoints of the refugees themselves who are being resettled therein. While a small body of research exists which explores the practices and effects of refugee resettlement from the refugee's point of view, it cannot fully account for the experiences and opinions of refugees in cities where there have yet to be similar qualitative studies. Given that resettlement in one city may not resemble resettlement in another, even within the same country, fully understanding refugees' lived experiences within a locality necessitates research focusing on that area. Within the United States—the primary focus of this study—current political polarization regarding refugee resettlement especially merits more research into the well-being of resettled refugees. The recent Executive Order 13888 from the Trump Administration, if ultimately upheld in American courts, will effectively stratify respective cities and states in the United States into those that choose to continue to resettle refugees and those who do not (Kriel, 2020). With this in mind, studying which conditions lead to a successful kind of refugee resettlement—and which do not—from refugees' points of view, and in the unique circumstances of different cities and municipalities in the United States, will surely help policy makers in creating equitable and holistic refugee policy, especially in Houston, which has historically resettled many refugees (Kragie, 2015a) and long been home to a diverse immigrant population (Capps, Fix, and Nwosu, 2015). Narratives on

refugee integration at the least stand to benefit from more first-hand “refugee perspectives within this context . . . [which can serve to] challenge more top-down perspectives in forced migration theory” (Curry et al., 2018, p. 446).

The primary goal of this research is to build on previous studies which have examined refugee integration by collecting data from refugee persons in the Houston metropolitan area about their self-expressed conceptions of success in terms of their post-resettlement experiences. Houston is an area which has traditionally resettled large numbers of refugees and which is in danger of losing future support from Texas’ Governor Abbott towards resettlement funding. Given this uncertainty, policy-makers could benefit from new in-person accounts from refugees about their resettlement experiences. In light of this goal: in what terms do Houston-area refugees conceptualize successful refugee integration, and what commonalities are there in their responses? How do these perceptions compare with the values and goals espoused by the U.S. government and U.S. resettlement agencies? And in what ways is Houston unique, or if not unique then analogous, to different U.S. cities in terms of refugees’ conceptualization of successful resettlement? These are the questions I seek to answer through this study.

The research’s findings will be then examined in the broader context of refugee resettlement in the United States and also in Houston. What the literature says about these is of key importance, and related topics that will be discussed include: how successful resettlement is defined or described by various involved persons and organizations in the United States, including the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the different Voluntary Agencies which provide the actual reception and placement services for refugees; what prior literature says about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the United States’ resettlement program, and about resettlement in Houston; and what other first-person accounts

there are from refugees regarding their conceptualization of success after being resettled. Lastly, looking abroad at international bodies and other countries' resettlement programs, what is the narrative of successful resettlement in those circumstances and what are the findings from first-person accounts of resettled refugees there? What extant research says about these topics, alongside this research's findings on successful refugee resettlement in Houston, will then provide a richer context to understanding successful refugee resettlement in a holistic sense.

### **Literature Review: Frameworks of Resettlement**

#### The Global Compact on Refugees and Refugee Self-Sufficiency

As the world's refugee population continues to grow each year, so too does the importance of and scrutiny given to the refugee resettlement programs of countries who take in refugees. In order to alleviate the disproportionately large burden of hosting and supporting refugees which falls on a relatively small number of countries, and to adopt progressive policies which address the large gap between the needs of refugees and the resources available to them, the United Nations adopted in 2016 the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, its member states thereafter making a range of commitments including taking "key steps towards a more sustainable system for providing refugee protection and responding to the needs of host countries and communities" (UNHCR, 2018, p. 2). One of the outputs of the Declaration was the non-legally-binding adoption in December 2018 of a Global Compact on Refugees, which, aside from reaffirming the international refugee regime and the values espoused in the 1951 Refugee Convention, establishes architecture for a stronger, more predictable, and more equitable global response to refugee situations. As well as serving to better-integrate state responses to refugees and displaced persons, the Global Compact establishes a structure for resettlement which is centered around values of resilience and self-reliance; thereby making refugees less dependent



on aid and additionally better-equipped to both contribute to the communities that are hosting them and to return home as productive societal members when conditions allow. Furthermore, the Global Compact establishes a follow-up series of actions which create concrete measures to help meet the Compact's objectives and arrange for follow-up and review in subsequent years (United Nations, 2018).

The four main objectives of the Global Compact on Refugees are as follows: Seeking out ways to provide greater support to hosting countries and communities; engaging a wider range of states and new partners that are ready to respond to large refugee situations; fostering the resilience and self-reliance of refugees by facilitating access to livelihood opportunities and national systems and services; and seeking to ensure that refugee responses are rights-based and integrate gender, age, and diversity considerations throughout (United Nations, 2018). In light of the comprehensive refugee response framework adopted by the United Nations' member states, member states will additionally undertake a Programme of Action divided into two sections: the 'arrangements for burden- and responsibility-sharing' and the 'areas in need of support.' The Global Compact acknowledges that achieving its aims will require a 'whole-of-society' approach which engages with "all actors [to create] enabling environments that are safe, inclusive, and sustainable," including "upholding all age-, gender- and diversity-related commitments and the adoption of measures that will support refugee- and migrant-led organizations" (Domicelj & Gottardo, 2019, p. 79). The Compact seeks as well to facilitate increased government and municipality cooperation and leadership for their engaging civil society and dictating policy commensurate with the aims of the Compact. Whether the Global Compact's calls for more multi-actor partnerships, increased responsibility sharing, and greater inclusion of refugees within their host societies are effectively realized has yet to be seen, although its framework calls

for continued mid-point reviews through a Global Refugee Forum, which is to meet every four years (Domicelj & Gottardo).

Responses to the Global Compact on Refugees from scholarly sources are varied. Though some authors have commended the Compact's efforts to reduce pressures on host countries and emphasize inclusion and self-reliance, the Compact's focus on voluntary repatriation and third-country solutions to the ongoing refugee crisis has received more criticism (Hansen, 2018). Other critiques of a resettlement model primarily focused on strategies of self-reliance posit that it is not conducive to optimal social and economic outcomes for refugees, pointing to the drawbacks of a self-reliance strategy such as Uganda's as compared to an 'encampment' one as used in Kenya. Refugees living in camps in Kenya lack the right to work or move freely; the camps are centralized and reliant on international aid; and most refugee-host interactions in the camps are limited to those between refugees in camps and aid workers, many of whom are from non-governmental organizations (Betts et al., 2019a). In contrast, Ugandan refugee camps take a more progressive approach in giving refugees greater freedom of movement and work. The merits of these dual approaches will be examined below.

The UNHCR's Global Compact on Refugees was ultimately adopted in 2018 with 181 votes in favor, two against (the United States and Hungary), and three abstentions (Eritrea, Libya, and the Dominican Republic), demonstrating at a minimum a general global willingness to restructure, reorganize, and reemphasize the importance of refugee policies. The Global Compact stresses that voluntary repatriation of refugees is the "preferred solution in the majority of refugee situations" (United Nations, 2018, p. 19); however, failing this option, refugee integration within host countries must be conducted with careful consideration of the respective needs and assets of the host communities and the refugees they host. Going forth, examining the

extent to which United Nations countries' refugee policies reflect the values put forth in the Global Compact, and the respective successes and difficulties faced by their refugee resettlement programs, will help provide further insight on the nature of successful refugee resettlement and what steps should be taken to ensure its worldwide practice in a holistic and comprehensive manner.

While refugee self-sufficiency is commonly cited as a goal for resettlement, actual studies on self-reliance have used varying and often imprecise indicators, making it difficult to compare different measurements on the matter. Moreover, self-reliance has seldom been directly measured by resettlement agencies in the past, despite its so often being highlighted as a priority, meaning that agencies are often not directly held to the goal of fostering refugees' self-sufficiency (Slaughter, 2017). To address this type of problem, the Global Compact on Refugees aims to promote increased cooperation and to create a metric-driven framework for enhancing the autonomy of refugees. However, while the Global Compact represents a positive direction for the field of refugee-related work through its mandate for better international cooperation on the issue, what refugee integration should specifically entail through policy is less evident, as local conditions may greatly affect integration strategies and outcomes. The model presented in the Compact is largely one of self-reliance: local integration processes should include language and vocational training, participation in local labor markets, and pathways to durable legal status or naturalization if appropriate (United Nations, 2018). Understanding the differences between countries' resettlement frameworks is paramount to comprehending what refugee resettlement looks like in various forms across the world, and what different resettlement programs' strengths and weaknesses are. Self-reliance and empowering refugees with self-autonomy may have naturally positive connotations, but the mechanisms by which this autonomy is achieved, and the

metrics used to track its performance, can lead to problematic conclusions. According to one study based in Uganda, refugee self-reliance strategies are often:

“...used without precision or clear definition. Most formal definitions focus on outcomes. UNHCR defines it as ‘the social and economic ability of an individual, a household, or a community to meet essential needs in a sustainable manner.’ In academic work, self-sufficiency is often taken to mean refugees’ degree of autonomy from humanitarian assistance. But in both cases, it remains unclear why these are the salient welfare outcomes we should be most interested in, what thresholds of what metrics indicate sustainability or autonomy, and how we should measure them. In the Ugandan context it is not uniformly clear that all policies and practices subsumed under the label of ‘self-reliance’ necessarily lead to better welfare outcomes for refugees. Analytically, it is important to recognise that both welfare and autonomy are necessary but insufficient conditions for self-reliance.” (Betts et al., 2019a, p. 38).

Self-reliance alone, particularly as understood in economic terms, is an insufficient way of measuring refugee well-being. Both those refugees who do “achieve self-sufficiency through a perpetual cycle of minimum-wage employment and [those who are] unable to fit within those narrow confines face increasingly hostile circumstances” (Digilov & Sharim, 2018, p. 1) in their day-to-day lives, reflecting the many other prerequisites needed to fulfil an ideal of successful refugee resettlement. An expanded definition of refugee self-sufficiency may encompass many additional indicators, including income, employment, access to shelter, food, education, health and healthcare, community and civic involvement, physical and emotional safety, legal status, and other forms of well-being (Slaughter, 2017; Nyiransekuye, 2020).

An epitome of a modern “self-reliance” model of refugee policy may be found in Uganda, which hosts eleven refugee camps and whose refugee policies are widely recognized as some of the most progressive in the world (Betts et al., 2019b). Uganda hosts more refugees than any other African country, yet allows its refugees freedom of movement and the right to work. Three core elements distinguish Uganda’s model: the allowance of refugees to choose their place of residence and work; the government allocation of land to refugees to cultivate within rural settlements; and the encouragement of integrated social service provision and market access (Betts et al., 2019a; Ilcan, 2018). Though Uganda’s model is certainly unusual for its progressive and open nature, many refugee scholars advocated for something akin to it in the discussions leading up to the Global Compact on Refugees. A lack of permanent residency, or full legal rights not being available or offered in some host countries, significantly hampers attempts to increase self-reliance amongst refugees. Proposed policies to redress such issues which were mentioned in Global Compact discussions included establishing a blanket work authorization for all refugees, exempting refugees from penalties associated with unauthorized work, and granting larger numbers of work and business permits (Slaughter, 2017).

When compared with refugee regulatory frameworks which focus on providing international aid in refugee camps, refugees under self-reliance strategies tend to have more sustainable sources of employment; earn higher incomes; have greater travel mobility; and face lower transaction costs for economic activities, such as lower arrest and bribe rates (Clements et al., 2016; Betts et al., 2019b). Uganda’s refugee policy, which aims to facilitate societal inclusion of refugees rather than coercing them into camps, is widely-regarded as forward-thinking in its facilitation of refugee self-reliance; it attempts to include refugees in social service provisions and grants them both market access and freedom of movement (Betts et al., 2019a, p. 4). Greater

personal mobility, more sustainable sources of employment, and higher incomes are all associated with Uganda's model (Betts et al., 2019b; Clements et al.). Uganda's model is well-developed to facilitate refugees' self-sufficiency because its institutions have experience working under such a regulatory framework; for instance, labor markets there can expect to employ reliable numbers of refugees who have the legal right to work (Clements et al.).

Aside from the countries in recent years with relatively successful experiences in increasing their refugee populations' self-reliance—such as Uganda—the larger historical record also contains other instances of attempts to foster refugees' self-reliance, some more successful than others. Some scholars have critiqued the international community for overlooking less successful case studies and moreover for problematically upholding self-reliance as an ideal alternative to 'dependence', while glossing over the former's problematic linkages to neoliberalism (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). Rather than as a value-driven ideal, refugee self-reliance as promoted by the UNHCR and donor organizations could perhaps more pessimistically be seen as a way to create cost-effective exit strategies from hosting refugee populations in the long term. The Global Compact's focus on voluntary repatriation and third-country solutions might also be problematic in their practical implementation and potentially-limited overall effect in reducing the global population of displaced people (Hansen, 2018).

Whether or not self-reliance can realistically become a pillar of refugee protection, as the Global Compact strives to facilitate, is a question without clear answers in extant literature on the issue. Besides Uganda today, historical models of Tanzania and Nepal in the 1970s, Mexico in the 1980s, and Guinea in the late 1990s and early 2000s demonstrate varying ways in which refugees were given increased levels of independence and ways to achieve self-sufficiency (Hansen, 2018). Strategies under these programs included micro-loans; the allowance of refugees

to farm and receive training and funding for doing so; granting refugees free movement throughout the country; and the donation of small land grants to refugee families (Hansen). Some of these strategies bear similarities to Uganda's self-reliance strategy, which has also sought to improve upon its mistakes over time by consulting and communicating more with nearby local populations with whom refugees interact frequently (Hansen; Betts et al., 2019b). However, in many countries, solutions which may lead to local integration and self-reliance have been rather underdeveloped, without comprehensive policies, programs, and deployment of resources that would most effectively support it. Such cases as exemplified by "existing [refugee] livelihood programs that are too often developed without an understanding of the market context" (Betts et al., 2017, p. 732).

The current paradigm of self-reliance strategies is then to some scholars overly-focused on promoting self-reliance as an individual matter, rather than as part of a community of refugees together; as such, overlooking refugees' mutual support or internal dependency can even create or worsen inequalities amongst given refugee populations (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). Returning to the Uganda example, its regulatory framework gives many refugees higher incomes and more sustainable sources of employment than they might have otherwise had, but others who are not able to take advantage of those conditions or who find themselves out of work or underemployed face worse prospects in both measures of self-sufficiency and general integration outcomes. Refugees in Uganda from the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, who more often have agricultural rather than entrepreneurial experience, have on average lower incomes than Somali refugees in Uganda (Betts et al., 2019a) and have more negative perceptions of their Ugandan host communities. In brief, while aspects of the progressive Ugandan model often lead to higher incomes for persons who have more experience with "capital-intensive work," other

refugee populations who are more engaged with “labour-intensive work,” such as agricultural work, often report lower incomes (Betts et al., 2019a, p. 20) and have a harder time integrating. In Kenya’s Kakuma camp, a nearby camp which also hosts many refugees but which imposes more restrictions on freedom of work and movement, refugees also largely appear to have more educational access than those in Uganda do, owing to the greater role of the international community and UNHCR in education provision in the camp. Conversely, Ugandan refugees’ access to state institutions and services such as the nationally-run schools there tends to face more barriers, such as problems relating to distance, language, and cost which inhibit institutional access (Betts et al., p. 36).

At the heart of discussions about the ostensibly disparate ‘aid’ and ‘self-reliance’ models of refugee policies exists a set of questions which serve to influence one’s understanding of idealized or successful refugee integration: chiefly among these, how does one balance the relationship between guaranteed formal assistance—yet likely more restrictive policies on the individual—and more liberties granted to refugee persons without assurance of certain refugees’ basic needs being met? However, the two approaches are not inherently mutually exclusive, and in fact identifying “the conditions under which particular self-reliance policies actually lead to improved welfare outcomes” (Betts et al., 2019a, p. 4) may make for best practice. Refugee self-reliance models at their best should involve deeply bilateral relationships between states and refugees and also markets, wherein the role of states in ensuring minimum protections and sufficient welfare is augmented by not only multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations but additionally by various business groups invested in corporate social responsibility and other methods of engagement with refugees (Betts et al., 2017).



Ensuring that no one is 'left behind' in situations of refugee resettlement and refugee encampment alike means striving towards an admittedly difficult balance of supporting the collective economic and cultural autonomy of dissimilar refugee groups whilst concurrently providing enabling environments and necessary resources, including forms of public benefits, to refugee populations. Transitioning from a model of relief to self-empowerment is an admirable goal, but the process towards doing so must not mistake individual success stories as reliable proof of concept. Resettlement programs should ideally account for unique traits of peoples' socio-ethnic groups, roles of genders within them, languages, educational backgrounds, and expectations as refugees. In doing so, discussion and cooperation on a broad scale and between many different actors is needed; this sharing of resources and increased collaboration is something encouraged by the Global Compact on Refugees, and can be seen as a positive development in the international community. Nonetheless, considering the benefits and implications of a form of 'collective' self-reliance should be a key point of discussion in ongoing collaborations and evaluations as part of the Compact's regular follow-up and review activities.

The Global Compact on Refugees espouses such a 'whole-of-society' approach which presents important opportunities to "embed the meaningful participation and leadership of refugees, migrants and host community members within the infrastructure developed for the [Compact's] implementation" (Domicelj & Gottardo, 2019, p. 79). Literature on refugee integration and what a successful version of it looks like suggests that integration is a bifold socio-economic process that affects and involves both the refugees themselves and their broader community. Ongoing engaged discussions with refugees, civil society actors, government agencies, and other stakeholders in the process will help inform the broader implementation of the Compact and its Programme of Action and follow-up processes. Within this framework,

however, a healthy dose of skepticism is required to prevent overly-enthusiastic appraisals of the Compact's pledges and plan of action. Contrasting a more individualistic resettlement model based in self-reliance versus a more 'traditional' one of welfare provision reveals strengths and weaknesses of each; and while the empowerment of refugee populations should undoubtedly be a primary goal, countries and communities following the Compact's direction should do well to evaluate criticism of past and present models of refugee self-sufficiency. Such nuanced discussions are necessary to avoid the trap of promoting ostensible self-empowerment under the sole auspices of the UNHCR and a small cohort of donor agencies while failing to develop any sort of comprehensive, well-rounded and equitable refugee integration and development infrastructure.

#### Policy Aims of Resettlement Programs in the United States

The desire of the Global Compact on Refugees to promote 'whole-of-society' responses stems in part from the tendency of certain resettlement programs today to fall short of comprehensive societal inclusion for the refugees under their purview. As mentioned previously, refugee resettlement in the United States has a primarily "economic orientation" which focuses on "integration into the local economy rather than into the community at large" (Tyson, 2017, p. 1). Notions of slow refugee integration, high rates of public benefit usage, and low employment levels have shaped refugee resettlement over time towards its current focus on rapid employment; however, these ideas are generally not corroborated by studies on refugee economic performance in the United States (Fix et al., 2017; Salehyan, 2018). While refugees in the United States have high rates of entrepreneurship (New American Economy, 2017) and demonstrate economic and other forms of resilience, the United States' resettlement paradigm contains deep deficiencies in its providing comprehensive resettlement services, as it can

somewhat described as providing “momentary help which is devoid of long-term responsibility” (Digilov & Sharim, 2018, p. 26). The United States’ resettlement system’s self-described purpose is to help refugees “achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible” (Fix et al., 2017, p. 7); and although it does provide a multitude of other services for recently-arrived refugees, particularly within the first 90 days after resettlement, the program’s heavy focus on the economic side of integration has drawn academic criticism (Digilov & Sharim; Tyson). As one author describes, “the current framework of US resettlement policy correlates public outcomes—such as obtaining a job that gets a refugee off public assistance and acquiring the bare minimum of English required to get that job—with ‘successful’ integration, leaving gaps between refugees’ understandings of successful integration and the assumption in the policy” (Tyson, p. 48). Understanding criticism of the United States’ resettlement program first necessitates an overview of the program’s history and goals.

Refugee Resettlement in the United States currently operates under the United States Refugee Act of 1980, which provides for a systematic and permanent procedure for admitting refugees of special humanitarian concern, as well as creating a framework for the effective resettlement and integration of those refugees who are admitted into the country. A “refugee” is defined in the 1980 Refugee Act as:

“(A) any person who is outside any country of such person’s nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, or (B) in such special circumstances as the

President after appropriate consultation (as Post, p. 103. defined in section 207(e) of this Act) may specify, any person who is within the country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, within the country in which such person is habitually residing, and who is persecuted or who has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (United States, 1980, p. 1).

The 1980 Refugee Act established an initial baseline ceiling of 50,000 refugees to be admitted annually; however, prior to each fiscal year the president can act to raise or lower the previous year’s admissions ceiling after consultation with Congress, based on considerations of both international humanitarian need and national partiality. This ceiling is set in September of every year. Notably, the Refugee Act stops short of establishing a fixed commitment to resettling refugees, and instead only provides for a reliable framework of resettlement to replace the rather ad hoc system of before. The Refugee Act was created in a way where “virtually no refugee is formally excluded from special humanitarian concern” (Martin, 1982, p. 107), thus ostensibly rejecting the practice of policy discrimination regarding refugee admissions whilst still allowing for the discretion of a given presidential administration to make individual decisions based on the national interest. While this flexibility—or, viewed more cynically, executive leeway—allowed the executive branch to “finesse the political complaints almost certain to be heard” from excluded groups and other political parties, it also was an arrangement “unlikely to last” (Martin, p. 107) in such a condition due to the possibility of political partisanship destroying compromise on the issue. It is worth noting that the Refugee Act was passed unanimously in the Senate in 1980 (Martin), while little refugee-related legislation has passed since then, perhaps representing a more polarized era today than in 1980.

It is true that a variety of the Refugee Act's policies arguably reflect those in place beforehand in the preexisting framework under § 203(a)(7) of the Immigration and Nationality Act; for instance, the Act continues the effective practice of treating differently cases of what is now understood as 'asylees' and 'refugees' (Martin, 1982). However, the Refugee Act unequivocally also represents a clear break from preexisting migrant policies, both in formalizing the refugee definition as one closely aligned with the United Nations' definition of 'refugee' and in creating a systematic structure for allocation of refugees, a reliable yearly timeline for doing so, and a federal or centralized framework for the resettlement of refugees upon arrival to the United States.

The 1980 Refugee Act nominally ties the United States' refugee policy closely to the humanitarian values as provided in the United Nations' 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol Relating to the Convention of Refugees. However, as previously mentioned, it allows for considerable provisions when considering the 'national interest' when making decisions on refugee admissions. As such, actual resettlement policy has arguably long had a foreign policy bent to it, either working to destabilize foreign rivals or not antagonize allies through deciding whom would be accepted. This pattern was mostly clearly exemplified during the Reagan administration (Jacobsen, 1996), but a variety of literature on the subject argues that a similar politicization has taken place across other administrations. Political science research indicates that internationalist altruism is not the sole influencing force when deciding upon refugee admissions in the United States; and moreover that considerations of foreign policy and national security are often invoked in the refugee admissions process (Bermudez, 2016; Jacobsen, 1996; Newland, 1995). While refugee policy had earlier been a leading factor in shaping foreign policy during the Cold War, during the late 20th century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century foreign policy instead

began to be designed to achieve given objectives in refugee policy, thereby inverting the prior relationship (Capps et al., 2015b).

During the post-Cold War period, the United States also came to rely more on the UNHCR—which impartially identifies and processes refugee cases—to refer refugees to the U.S. program, leading to more U.S. involvement in refugee-producing conflicts where there was a less-significant foreign policy or military presence (Nezer, 2013). This change in turn helped diversify the population of refugees entering the U.S. (Nezer; Singer & Wilson, 2007), and more started coming from countries such as Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea (Bernstein & DuBois, 2018). Refugee policy and foreign policy interests remain intertwined in the modern age, however, and refugee policies often fail to address the root causes of refugee flow (Lindstrom, 2005). A 2013 study on conceptualizing refugee integration posits that while refugee crises are arguably the “consequences [of] political dynamics of state formation and transformation and of increasing global interdependence,” literature on refugee policy in western countries still “supports [a] nominalist perspective because who is or is not admitted as a refugee remains closely tied to foreign policy interests” (Rai, 2013, p. 47).

The United States’ current refugee resettlement policy relies upon values of self-sufficiency, independence, and productivity, and the provisions of the Refugee Act mandate an expedited acquisition of basic English language proficiency and employment placement within reasonable circumstances (Tyson, 2017). The Act stipulates that the purpose of the United States’ Office of Refugee Resettlement, or ORR, is to “make available sufficient resources for employment training and placement in order to achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible” (United States, 1980). The Refugee Act states that English should be taught to refugees, but specifically to the extent that refugees can find jobs in the United States, rather than

fulfilling social functions or furthermore giving refugees the necessary autonomy to navigate American institutions (Tyson). Once a refugee has been provisionally accepted for resettlement, the U.S. Refugee Processing Center works with private voluntary agencies, or VOLAGs, to designate where the refugee will live. The VOLAGs are then responsible for administering most direct services to the refugee within a 90-day period after their arrival. Intensive services are provided for the first 30 days after arrival which include food, housing, clothing, cursory English language tutelage, and employment guidance and ideally placement (Capps et al., 2015a). Refugees' children are also enrolled in school and are assisted in applying for Social Security cards and other social services. Critically, VOLAGs receive a one-time grant from their funding source, usually the federal government, which is to be used for each refugee; but any additional costs must be paid for by the agency (Fix et al., 2017). Research demonstrates that a funding-driven focus of service delivery towards resettled refugees, which is exemplified by resettlement in the United States, is increasingly leading to case management-focused refugee services which aim to provide a minimum of required services, rather than providing refugees a supportive framework of holistic care for their long-term development (Lenette & Ingamells, 2015).

It is important to recognize that funding for U.S. refugee resettlement is not entirely federally-derived, since the program operates as a public-private partnership in several states including Texas (Fix et al., 2017). Therefore, some scholars suggest that the effects of federal funding on refugee resettlement may not be as important as the political ramifications of where a refugee is resettled, including a city's political climate or its urban versus rural makeup (Xi, 2017). Other literature disagrees, however, and considers with much greater weight the direct impact of federal funding for the success—and numbers resettled—of the nation's resettlement program. Partner resettlement agencies' ability to do their job effectively, some authors argue, is

closely tied to federal funding, and failing to provide adequate funding could in the long term “undermine the capacity of the system to continue functioning at a high level” (Scribner & Brown, 2014, p. 111). Regardless of funding, however, the federal government’s policies play a large role in dictating the terms and aims of resettlement within the United States; and due to the key role of VOLAGs, the set of resettlement programs which are offered, such as English classes, job training, and cultural orientation, tend to be fairly similar to each other on a macro level (Evans & Fitzgerald, 2017).

Metropolitan areas usually serve as the site of a refugee’s initial exposure to U.S. culture, bureaucracies, institutions, and lifestyle, and many of them have a history of incorporating large numbers of foreign-born people into the labor force and schools, making them preferable for resettlement (Singer & Wilson, 2007). Resettlement of refugees in metropolitan areas has also been credited with economically revitalizing cities struggling with financial hardship and with helping spur new growth in smaller metropolitan cities (Kallick & Mathema, 2016). The cultural and socio-economic impact a refugee may have on a community, however, may vary greatly depending on the city’s context: in cities with fewer recent immigrants, such as smaller cities in particular, refugees are more visible in the community and can have a larger impact on its economies and neighborhoods (Singer & Wilson). Unfortunately, refugee resettlement and integration in rural settings in the United States is a relatively understudied topic. Rural communities may face a unique set of perceived issues related to resettlement, such as cultural miscommunication, employment competition, and community prejudices. Additionally, the Office of Refugee Resettlement does not provide funding for secondary migration or for direct resettlement in most smaller communities. Though the Office of Refugee Resettlement primarily resettles people in urban areas, however, refugees are increasingly moving to rural locations as



secondary migrants after their initial placement. Limited case studies of refugees moving to rural communities demonstrate that, over time, they are able to integrate themselves within the community and may ultimately have better resettlement or post-resettlement experiences and higher levels of civic attachment than many of their urban counterparts (Marks, 2014).

Secondary migration—that is, when resettled refugees voluntarily move to states other than those they were resettled in—is generally not included as a feature of the United States’ current refugee resettlement framework, especially secondary migration from urban to rural settings; but some degree of research nevertheless indicates that refugee populations are able to find success in small towns (Marks). More studies about success of refugees in smaller communities, whether regarding those directly resettled there or those more commonly entering as a secondary migrant, can help identify the unique needs of refugees in these settings and how to best serve them and their host communities.

Interestingly, while integration is a stated goal of the U.S. resettlement program, the Office of Refugee Resettlement does not explicitly define its use of the word. One of the nine voluntary agencies within the United States defines refugee integration as “a two-way process in which newcomers and receiving communities work together, creating a world where migrants are treated with dignity, respect, welcome and belonging” (Sturm, 2016). While the United States’ resettlement paradigm was originally designed to equally consider the complex needs of recently-arrived refugees with values of self-sufficiency, this balance has since changed to one “in favor of reducing assistance to avoid [welfare] dependency” (Digilov & Sharim, 2018, p. 1). For its part, the ORR stated in its most recent annual report to Congress that refugee integration means “the functional capability to independently move through everyday life in a new environment[;] and assimilation being absorption into American society, understanding

observance of its laws, and adoption of its culture and customs” (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2016, p. 38). The report claims that the ORR attempts to facilitate these efforts through activities such as language acquisition, increasing participation in civic groups, building social connections, and building financial stability. At the same time, the ORR acknowledges that “full employment is among the most important steps for refugees and other ORR-served populations on the path to self-sufficiency and full integration into American society” (Office of Refugee Resettlement, p. 22).

Data on refugees’ economic performance in the United States suggests that most are economically self-sufficient within a year and that refugees can be a boon to local economies through entrepreneurship (New American Economy, 2017; Dagnelie et al., 2019). The most recent ORR report to Congress stated that working-able refugees aged 16 to 64 had an eighty-nine percent employment rate, compared to around ninety-one percent of all U.S. individuals in the same age group (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2016). While refugees receive public benefits such as Medicaid and dedicated cash assistance during their first months, the economic impact of refugees, especially over the long term, is a positive one: refugees boast high levels of entrepreneurship and demonstrate strong economic performance after having been in the United States for a long period (New American Economy; Salehyan, 2018). Furthermore, the presence of more refugees in a labor network who are themselves entrepreneurs may lead to greater employment probabilities for other refugees employed there, suggesting that providing business incentives and entrepreneurial opportunities to tenured refugees may also help those who are recently-arrived (Dagnelie et al., 2019; Beaman, 2012). Examined through an economic perspective, refugees generally do “integrate with time in the US. On average, their labor force

participation rates rise to or exceed native-born rates, their income levels rise, and their use of public benefits declines” (Bernstein & DuBois, 2018, p. 10).

Resettlement in the United States does not tend to emphasize personal educational attainment, with local support institutions instead filling such a role to various degrees on an ad hoc basis. Aside from their informal ‘education’ of cursory English training, cultural orientation and employment literacy, educational attainment for refugees post-resettlement often represents a daunting task. Often insurmountable costs for the verification of transcripts and recertification programs pose considerable difficulties, if such efforts are even possible, a disadvantage worsened by the increasing absence of affordable or free loan programs (Digilov & Sharim, 2018). Resettled refugees aged 25 years and older from between fiscal years 2011 and 2015 had an average of 8.7 prior years of education; and of all the 25-or-older respondents in the 2016 ORR Annual Survey of Refugees, only 15.7% were pursuing one of the following: a high school certificate or equivalency; an associate’s degree; a bachelor’s degree; a master’s or doctorate degree; a professional school degree; a certificate or license; or some other credential (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2016).

Refugee social connectivity is another area in the United States where the refugee resettlement program seems to often fall short. Social adjustment case management receives much lower funding allocations than employment services do in most resettlement agencies (Digilov & Sharim, 2018), and the reality that not all resettled refugees speak fluent English by the time of completing their agencies’ English courses—if they even finish said course at all before finding employment—serves as a potentially significant deterrent to social integration (Capps et al., 2015a). While the 2016 American Community Survey collected significant data regarding refugees’ education, income, labor force participation, English language proficiency,

and other socioeconomic indicators, it did not include a more qualitative analysis of refugees' social integration, including a sense of belonging and civic participation (Fix et al., 2017). A 2016 study from one state's refugee resettlement program attempted to take such measurements of the refugees under its purview through surveys: it found that refugees who were older and who had fewer English skills and cultural knowledge tended to feel more isolated, while suggesting that future studies be conducted to examine the relationship between refugees' social integration and other factors such as their residential neighborhoods and different family-related variables (Colorado Refugee Services Program, 2016).

Examining the whole of the United States' resettlement framework reveals a program that has long enjoyed bilateral political support—at least until recent years—and hosts a large population of diverse refugees who have high rates of employment and on an aggregate level achieve eventual economic success similar to that of other U.S. residents. Yet, the program's heavy emphasis on employment, and the priority of employment programs over social service programs which have seen steady funding cuts, has created a paradigm where refugees, especially recently-resettled ones, are at risk for having limited English proficiency, social isolation, and long-term underemployment. A monolithic focus on rapid employment, alongside increasingly limiting refugees' public benefit reliance, serves to inhibit refugees in the United States in areas such as learning their own crafts; prioritizing education and language acquisition; self-expression through storytelling; and having access to multiple methods of development depending on one's individual background (Digilov & Sharim, 2018). Comparing today's resettlement program to that of past decades—including the mid-1980s through the early-2000s—also suggests that as refugee resettlement in the United States has become more funding- and outcome-driven and employment-focused, levels of local community support, civil society

involvement, and delivery of critical social services have also decreased as the high prioritization of rapid employment increasingly disallows the time and moreover funding required for effective delivery of refugees' social integration (Digilov & Sharim; Martin, 1982).

While the United States voted against the Global Compact on Refugees in the United Nations General Assembly on grounds of protecting nations' sovereignty, the Compact does match the U.S. resettlement program's aims in one important regard: its focus on the self-reliance of refugees. This valuation of refugee self-reliance suggests an alignment of values to a degree between the U.S. program and the international refugee response community. Alongside the Compact's focus on economic self-sufficiency, it attempts to create measurable goals for a more comprehensive form of refugee integration, including how to identify and measure key indicators of success. These indicators include health and well-being, civic participation, and language proficiency (United Nations, 2018). Regardless of the extent to which the U.S. government is willing to cooperate with the UNHCR on the Global Compact, it would still do well to look to the Compact for ideas on how to better share information during the resettlement process; create indicators of success and timelines for evaluation of those metrics; develop and share best practices for community consultation; and provide resources to refugees to personally develop and best integrate into their new communities and societies.

#### Policy Aims of Resettlement Programs Abroad

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, one of the nine voluntary resettlement agencies in the United States, published a study in 2016 within its Migration and Refugee Services division which measured refugee integration through an international context. This study includes a comparative chart which allows for fast comparison of the resettlement programs of five countries which regularly admit refugees for permanent resettlement: the

United States, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. This chart is cited in Appendix 1 below. Rather than opinionating on the policy bent or effectiveness of these countries' resettlement programs, the study objectively examined those programs' self-stated goals and approach to refugee integration as best possible. The United States stands out in this comparative chart in particular in being the only one of the five countries examined which primarily measures refugee integration in terms of economic integration.

Germany considers integration as a long-term process of enabling refugees and other immigrants to participate in all aspects of German socio-political life, including necessitating the learning of German, and its approach places less emphasis on economic outcomes of refugees (Sturm, 2016) than in countries such as Canada and the United States. German nationhood is historically based on familial descentance, and citizenship depends on blood ties rather than birth in-country; as such, children born in Germany to immigrant parents are not automatically granted citizenship (Faist, 1995). Under such conditions, full citizenship is an essential aspect of German integration, and German society expects full refugee participation in civic life, German-language conversation, and political activities (Ager & Strang, 2008). In terms of absolute numbers of refugees resettled, Germany also has consistently ranked around the top ten of hosting nations (Hynie, 2018). Germany's resettlement program relies upon close cooperation between the state, civil society, other public spheres, and refugee groups, and involves a great deal of essential care for and establishing solidarity with refugees, including female refugees in particular; however, civil society and refugee groups generally have little say in actually dictating the terms of Germany's refugee policies (Funk, 2016).

Canada's resettlement program is internationally unique in that it offers two distinct avenues for refugee admissions: a private sponsorship stream and a Government Assisted

Refugee (GAR) program. Refugees in the United States are resettled through partnerships between the federal government, state governments, and private sponsors, and receive a mixture of public and private financial support and services, with a base minimum of 90 days of intensive services. In contrast, refugees resettled under the GAR program in Canada receive a full year of resettlement support and services (Capps et al., 2015b). Private sponsors are responsible for providing for resettled refugees, and they are also supported by civil society and cultural groups (Capps et al.). The approach of the GAR program to integration includes tracking economic outcomes, but foremost stresses the need for mutual adjustment between newcomers and the larger society they enter, with Canadians' understanding of the cultural diversity of refugees stressed as much as those refugees' own cultural integration experiences (Sturm, 2016). Such a 'two-way' model of integration can be significantly hampered by a lack of mutual language comprehension (Ager & Strang, 2008), which serves as a basic prerequisite to facilitating broader cultural understandings and enabling integration processes. Because of social insurance being provided to refugees in Canada, they are among the least-likely immigrant groups to be employed within the first year of their arrival; however, within five years this figure reaches relative parity with employment rates of other Canadians (Capps et al.).

While most refugees in the United States tend to be employed early on due to the focus on economic self-sufficiency, new refugees in Norway and Sweden have much lower employment rates: more attention is given to early development post-resettlement, including language development, as new refugees are less-often previously exposed to Norwegian and Swedish. Correspondingly, the attention given to social integration in those countries is greater than in the United States, with resettlement there taking a longer-term approach to fostering refugees' language training and cultural understanding. While these two countries' resettlement

programs are small in absolute scale, they nonetheless host a large proportion of refugees in terms of population size (Hynie, 2018), and take in refugees from a large pool of countries. Sweden and Norway alike invest significant resources in intensive orientation and language training programs, dedicating months and even years after arrival for these purposes and epitomizing a ‘train first’ rather than a ‘work first’ approach to refugee resettlement (Capps et al., 2015b). As opposed to resettlement in the United States, federalism also plays a more active role in Sweden and Norway, as municipalities must consent to the placement of refugees in their communities; such agreements also contain provisions for public housing and explicit social integration services. These additional burdens have led to resistance to participating in resettlement program from some localities (Easton-Calabria, 2015), but despite the low initial employment and earnings rates in Sweden and Norway, similarly to in Canada the long-term economic performance of refugees there is relatively equal to other immigrant groups and citizens (Capps et al.). This brief overview of international refugee resettlement systems is not meant to provide a comprehensive analysis of each, but rather to highlight some of their differences when compared to resettlement in the United States and to stimulate thought about how resettlement in the United States might be adjusted to emulate aspects of other countries’ resettlement programs.

### Refugee Resettlement in Houston

As this research project examines refugee integration in the specific context of Houston, Texas, and draws upon responses from interviewees who resided in Houston at the time of interviewing, it is therefore worthwhile to additionally examine the characteristics of refugee resettlement in Houston and greater Texas. The United States’ refugee resettlement has never truly experienced ‘federalism’ in a true sense of the word (Xi, 2017), as until recently the



question of states rejecting resettlement has not been a policy issue; and furthermore refugee policies have demonstrated to be somewhat similar across the nation irrespective of states' political leanings (Fix et al., 2017). However, despite the effective centralization of resettlement practice in the United States, contrasting attitudes between states have emerged more in recent years, with an attempt by several politically conservative states to withdraw support for Syrian refugees in 2016 following a terrorist attack in Paris marking a recent flashpoint (Fandl, 2017). The legal ability of states to prevent refugees from being resettled there is now a more distinct possibility, whereas up to this point the federal government has been able to compel all states to comply with the terms of the Refugee Act and by extension the standards of the 1967 Protocol and international refugee regime. The Trump administration's Executive Order 13888 represents such a possibility for change: this executive order effectively grants states and municipalities within them the ability to withdraw consent for new resettlement for a fiscal year (Federal Register, 2019). Though at present time held up by a federal judge's preliminary injunction (Mena & Shoichet, 2020), if said executive order is successfully re-enacted, both individual municipalities and their larger states will have considerably more autonomy than ever before in shaping both their and the overall nation's future of refugee resettlement.

National public opinion regarding admitting refugees has historically been relatively split (Desilver, 2015), although a more recent national values poll in 2018 indicated that 60% of Americans opposed the barring of further refugees from U.S. entry (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2018). Nonetheless, attitudes in Texas generally take a harder line towards the admittance of refugees, instantiated by recent polls demonstrating majority dissent to resettling refugees from Syria and other middle-eastern countries (Ramsey, 2017; Ramsey, 2016). The state of Texas withdrew from the United States' refugee resettlement program in 2016, leaving resettlement

work to the hands of non-profit organizations. However, on a functional level resettlement has been relatively unaffected by this decision, as the same resettlement agencies have continued their work since, albeit under new funding from the non-profit sector instead of the state (Digilov & Sharim, 2018). At present time, Texas is at risk of effectively slashing refugee arrivals to historically low levels for at least the next fiscal year, as in January of 2020 Texas' Governor Abbott withdrew consent to refugee resettlement per the provisions of Executive Order 13888 (Kriel, 2020). Although Executive Order 13888 would not completely curb resettlement agencies' activities in Texas, as they would continue to handle cases of secondary migration, Texas' level of support for refugees would stand to decline in such a scenario, as new arrival cases and corresponding funding for agencies would drastically decrease. In Harris County, the metropolitan hub of Houston and where the majority of refugee resettlement in Houston takes place, Houston's mayor and a consortium of other refugee stakeholders and organizations all voiced their support for the continuation of resettlement after Abbott's decision (Capps, 2020; Mone, 2020; Interfaith Ministries of Greater Houston, 2019).

Houston has a substantial immigrant population which is diverse not only racially and ethnically but also economically, with immigrants taking up a wide variety of professions (Capps, Fix, and Nwosu, 2015). Texas as a whole has historically tended to resettle large amounts of refugees per fiscal year, and amongst American cities has resettled the most refugees during several recent years (Kragie, 2015b). As of April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020 in the current fiscal year—which started on October 1st, 2019—Texas has resettled the third-most refugees of any federal state, trailing only Washington and California (Refugee Processing Center, 2020). Houston resettled around 200,000 Vietnamese refugees after the end of the Vietnam War and has a renowned history as a safe haven for refugees (Shilcutt, 2016; Kragie, 2015a). Data as of 2014

indicated that in a hypothetical situation with Houston as its own country, the number of refugees resettled there would rank fourth in the world; that around one-half of Houston refugees were part of family ties cases; and that refugees in Houston were from a diverse background despite being predominantly Vietnamese in the early days after the Refugee Act of 1980 was established (Kragie, 2015b).

Houston's status as such a draw for refugee resettlement may be attributed to its vibrant economy and established refugee-servicing non-profit organizations (Kragie, 2015a; Gray, 2020; Capps, Fix, and Nwosu, 2015). In fiscal year 2019—which lasted from October 1st, 2018 through September 30th, 2019—Texas ranked first in the nation in the number of refugees resettled by state (Manuel Krogstad, 2019), with 1,826 refugee and SIV arrivals in total. Of all Texas refugees and SIVs during that fiscal year, 28% of them were resettled in Houston, reflecting Houston's significant role in Texas' refugee resettlement. See Appendix 2 for more data tracked on the refugee arrivals in that period of time, including refugees' average hourly wages and how many who completed vocational training programs. Refugees in Houston have relatively high levels of employment, with one sample taken of Houston refugees from 2011 through 2015 recording 79% of Houston refugees as being 'self-sufficient' within 180 days of arrival, and with those sampled recording an average hourly wage of \$8.92/hour (Digilov & Sharim, 2018). However, the percentage of those who were 'self-sufficient' was also lower than for refugees in the same study from major resettlement agencies in Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin. See Appendix 5 for a summary comparison between the three cities.

While extant quantitative data about the well-being of refugees, SIVs, and other ORR migrants in Houston provides an easy-to-understand picture of their well-being, more qualitative studies, including those involving interviews with SIVs and refugees, are relatively scarce.

Assorted publicly-available evaluations of Houston's role in refugee resettlement as told by refugees themselves exist, including several released in response to Governor Abbott's recent decision to withdraw consent for resettlement in Texas (Talarico, 2020). One 2015 study examined the impact of a year-long health education program which aimed to empower Burmese refugee women in Houston through qualitative data content analysis (Frost et al., 2018). In this study, no specific issues endemic to Houston were seemingly identified that differentiated the health issues of refugees there from the general "barriers to accessing healthcare or health education programs" that refugees face nationwide, or that stressed the need for a "larger cultural context" in refugee health education programs (Frost et al., p. 961). Another study examined the gaps in Houston's healthcare system for refugees from Myanmar, using first-person data from the perspectives of interviewed refugees. The study specifically focused on those refugees' understandings of the United States' healthcare system, health-seeking behavior, and barriers to accessing healthcare. Some major issues identified included "non-compliance with . . . [preventive] medication due to barriers to obtaining medication refills, barriers to accessing specialty care services, transportation issues, written and oral language barriers, difficulties in applying for and using Medicaid and Gold Card, misunderstanding of emergency health services, lack of resources for health education, self-treatment with Western medicine, and income too low to buy health insurance" (Swe & Ross, 2010, p. 15). Another study examined chronic health concerns of Bhutanese refugees in Houston and subsequently created a needs assessment for them which suggested that limited health literacy and the complexity of the United States' healthcare system both served to worsen Bhutanese refugees' health outcomes (Misra et al., 2016).

Such studies on Houston's healthcare efficacy regarding refugees suggest that a combination of multi-faceted and comprehensive approaches are needed to resolve the miscommunications and outright lack of healthcare resources that inhibit many refugees in Houston. Though it primarily focused on health issues and outcomes relating to female Burmese refugees, the study's recommended areas of improvement for resettlement in Houston can be generalized to inform 'quality of life' discussions as well. These recommendations included introducing the "use of community health workers to train refugee health educators, pairing English lessons with health education material to promote development of English language skills, developing teaching materials for refugees with low literacy, establishing bottom-up support from refugee resettlement agencies, and incorporating the social work ecological model to tailor health-focused interventions to the specific needs of the refugee community" (Frost, et al., 2018, p. 949). The study examining refugees in Myanmar furthermore recommended that healthcare agencies better coordinate between each other (Swe & Ross, 2010).

While most Houston-area refugee studies are not interview-driven, they still attempt to examine refugees' well-being using various other measures. One study released in 2018 through Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research provides significant new insight into the conditions of refugees living in Houston. Titled "Refugee Realities: Between National Challenges and Local Responsibilities in Houston, TX," the study finds that despite accepting a large number of refugee and SIV arrivals annually, Houston provides "less assistance to newly arriving families than any other major destination after the period of initial resettlement" (Digilov & Sharim, 2018, p. 1), which is in part due to state cuts to public welfare assistance: Harris County residents in 2016 received 20 times less public welfare assistance than twenty years ago (Digilov & Sharim). Despite its longstanding history of refugee resettlement, the

authors posit that Houston has failed to capitalize on this lineage by improving refugees' standards of education, cultural adaptation, and community involvement over time, as Houston refugees' success via traditional metrics such as English acquisition, hourly wages, and entrepreneurship belies their lack of intergenerational improvement in categories such as education, cultural adaptation, and community involvement. The study's interviews with staff members of Houston's major resettlement agencies indicate a lack of capacity to adequately provide for recently-arrived refugees, and that potentially valuable long-term case management services have been underutilized. Instead, "incentives found within the system encourage ties to be broken with refugees as quickly as possible, labeling families as self-sufficient without consideration to their ongoing needs"; furthermore, in the "absence of a federal process interested in long-term outcomes, states stand as the final source of safety net and support funding . . . [and] drastic reductions in the state's public assistance infrastructure resulted in an increasingly hostile environment for both [refugee] families who entered low-wage work prior to their termination of assistance and those who did not fit within the rapid employment model" (Digilov & Sharim, p. 21-22). With diminished funding, little available welfare support, and an overwhelming incentivization for refugees to quickly enter low-wage and often short-term employment positions, Houston's refugee paradigm appears more dire than that of other cities across the United States, even if the general aims of resettlement remain similar.

### **Literature Review: Conceptualizing Refugee Integration**

Refugee resettlement and other programs which facilitate integration may not always harmonize with the expectations and best interests of refugees themselves. The potential for misalignment between the policies and lived realities of refugee resettlement is why some consider resettlement policies to have "contradictory elements inherent to their design that can be

detrimental to what refugees consider as successful resettlement” (Curry et al., 2018, p. 430). In order to address such a policy gap, the concept of integration itself must first be delineated and possibly even deconstructed.

Having now a better understanding of the refugee context and how different refugee resettlement programs facilitate refugee integration, an examination of extant scholarly literature about the subject will help complement the picture of what successful refugee integration specifically entails, leading to what studies involving refugee interviews have to say on the matter and finally this study’s own such findings about successful refugee resettlement from its conducted interviews. Though the integration-related outcomes and goals of organizations such as the UNHCR and various resettlement programs reveal the respective strengths and shortcomings of different visions of refugee resettlement—such as the various interpretations of ‘self-reliance’ and its implications—encapsulating the core of what refugee integration connotes also necessitates an understanding of a conceptual framework of refugee integration. This conceptual framework of sorts comprises the different domains of refugee integration, including economic success, social connections, language, and culture; and such a framework is integral when assessing what successful refugee integration looks like. Though socio-economic participation and outcomes, being metrics which are among those easiest to track, often represent the driving determinants of success from the point of view of resettlement agencies, they are not wholly representative of a refugee’s experience after resettlement. Looking to academic studies on various identifiers of success in refugee integration suggests that key elements include employment; social inclusion and integration; social and financial independence; and minimizing experiences of discrimination and racism (Curry et al.; Bernstein & DuBois, 2018; Tyson, 2017).

Employment arguably constitutes the most-researched aspect of refugee integration and resettlement (Tyson, 2017), but it is far from the only necessary ingredient for refugee well-being and overall integration. Other such important factors include housing, education, and health; and at the core of refugees' social connectivity needs lies a complex of social bridges, social bonds, and social links (Ager & Strang, 2008). Facilitating these social connections are feelings of safety and stability and language and cultural knowledge. Lastly, as a final capstone to integration are the realization of refugees' legal rights and citizenship and refugees' recognition thereof. While these core facets of integration and successful resettlement may be examined independently, each can have a profound effect on other areas; for instance, housing policies can serve to increase or decrease opportunities for social connections and a refugee's sense of safety (Ager & Strang). Below are several salient aspects of refugee integration which are commonly-identified in extant research, though such a listing is in no way comprehensive or representative of the experiences a given refugee may face in their adaptation to their host society.

### Economic integration

Economic outcomes are of particular interest because refugees "face different formal and informal institutional barriers and distortions in their economic lives compared to nationals or other migrants" (Betts et al., 2017, p. 1-2). Refugees are often highly-educated in comparison to other immigrant groups (Ager & Strang, 2008) although this is arguably trending down in recent years as the international pool of resettled refugees becomes increasingly diverse (Fix et al., 2017). While immediate employment is a salient goal of some, though not all, resettlement programs (Sturm, 2016), providing avenues for refugees to pursue career advancement requires the existence of consistent pathways to vocational training and further education (Easton-Calabria, 2017). Common factors which inhibit refugees from such opportunities include the



non-recognition of qualifications, previous work experience, and credentials, and the immediacy of entry-level employment for many refugees, which limits the time and resources they can use towards career advancement (Ager & Strang; Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2016). Even under resettlement programs where more refugees are employed, however, refugees are more likely to work in lower status and lower paying jobs, and often face deep structural barriers to their employment such as the lack of a professional network and employers not accrediting their foreign work and educational accreditations (Campion, 2018).

### Social connectivity

Refugee integration touches upon complex social issues which coexist with aspects of economic integration, even if the latter tends to garner more attention in resettlement programs. Refugees' flight commonly involves not only the loss of material possessions, but moreover separation from family members and other social networks; and during the transition from persecution to flight to asylum to resettlement, significant changes in social roles and the loss of previous ones may create considerable duress (Nyiransekuye, 2020), complicating their social connectivity once resettled in a host country. Social isolation is a common problem which resettled refugees face (Frost et al., 2018; Bernstein & DuBois, 2018), and while there are fewer extant studies about refugee resettlement in rural localities, available data generally indicates that immigrants face particular social isolation in such smaller communities (Marks, 2014).

While not discounting the effects of culture shock, post-traumatic stress, and mental health issues, refugees' feelings of isolation and depression may also be tied to inactivity and idleness. In the wealthier 'global north', refugees' "long-term welfare dependency is . . . [associated] with isolation and depression," while many refugees in the 'global south' face "long periods of forced idleness in refugee camps [which] create demoralized and frustrated

populations” (Hansen, 2018, p. 139). Yet, rapid and full employment to cease inactivity is no panacea for refugees’ social isolation, as refugees who practice self-reliance strategies frequently face discrimination, xenophobia, and further ostracization in their efforts to make a life for themselves (Iltan, 2018). Adjusting to a new culture, particularly without a local strong community to offer support, is an “alienating and depressing” experience for many refugees (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 183). The presence of like-ethnic groups in a new refugee’s community, and of refugee community organizations, are therefore essential in providing a voice for refugees, creating a way to engage in familiar cultural and social activities, and providing advice and support which is based in “expertise in dealing with refugee issues” and which may provide “sensitive responses to the needs of their target populations” (Duke et al., 1999, p. 119). In relation, research also points to cultural preservation as an important aspect of refugee integration, as it provides “a way both to establish and strengthen relationships within families and the wider refugee community” and allows refugees to “feel more integrated as a result of being able to hold onto [one’s] culture in a diverse society” (Tyson, 2017, p. 49).

### Language and culture

Although language proficiency is a common—and significant—barrier to refugee integration, its effect on integration also depends on the language in question. Refugees may be less exposed to non-English languages prior to resettlement, and those resettled in English-speaking countries generally fare better than in countries where English is not the most commonly-spoken language, such as in Sweden and Norway (Capps et al., 2015b). Regardless of the language at hand, as refugee resettlement intake becomes increasingly diverse, the share of new arrivals who have little knowledge of the host country’s language has also risen in recent years (Capps et al.,) making language proficiency all the more important. The effects of

refugees' language acquisition are deeply correlated with all other key areas of integration such as housing, health, social interaction, and employment; although the extent to which a given resettlement program prioritizes acquisition to the point of fluency, as opposed to a sufficient level where a refugee may seek some level of employment, depends in part on the "standards and expectations of that society [regarding the] basis for cohesion" and questions of societal "entitlement and common expectation" (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 173).

Similarly to the relationship between language and refugee integration, cultural aspects of integration are particularly dependent upon the host country's understanding of concepts like integration, ethnic pluralism, multiculturalism, and citizenship (Ager & Strang, 2008). Bloch & Levy's 1999 *Refugees, Citizenship, and Social Policy in Europe* identifies four primary models of citizenship: imperial, ethnic, republic, and multicultural (Bloch & Levy, 1999) which can be characterized by values of "subjection, 'blood ties,' political participation, and choice" (Ager & Strang, p. 174). Faist (1995) describes western democracy's immigrant integration models as either having 'ethno-cultural political exclusion'—in effect, encouraging assimilation—or 'pluralist political inclusion,' with different groups largely retaining their unique characteristics. Refugee integration as a general term may be specifically interpreted under markedly different concepts including assimilation, multi-culturalism, adaptation, and accommodation, each with their own connotations and potential policy implications (Rai, 2013). As such, while a given refugee policy may embrace values such as diversity, cultural acceptance, and the engagement of host communities with refugees, particularly communities new to resettlement (Curry et al., 2017), refugees' typified cultural interactions may drastically differ depending on the host country and even locality. Resettlement programs and stakeholders must therefore be aware of such differences when carrying out activities.

### Local conditions

According to data from 2006 to 2016, around two-thirds of refugees within the United States were placed in ten major metropolitan areas, with the rest extending across a wide range of localities (Bernstein & DuBois, 2018). Most refugees tend to be resettled in certain metropolitan areas, although some resettlement programs such as the United States' do aim to distribute refugees in a way that does not disproportionately burden given localities or agencies (Fix et al., 2017). One country's unified resettlement policy notwithstanding, economic, social, political, and other considerations on resettlement may change considerably depending on the region and city of resettlement. For example, a city's citizens and leadership may largely oppose the intake of new refugees there, and anti-advocacy groups which actively oppose resettlement may further complicate the picture (Bernstein & DuBois). Particularly in localities where resettlement is a newer feature of the community, the cultural-ethnic makeup is more homogenous, or pre-existing ethnic groups of the same origin as a refugee are less present, negative representations of refugee newcomers can create a sense of alienation and communal attachment, eventually leading to feelings of disenfranchisement and social exclusion (Curry et al., 2018; Ager & Strang, 2008). While problems relating to social inclusion are not a unique attribute to such cities which are smaller or more new to accepting refugees, such situations do highlight the status of civic attachment as an important indicator of integration; that is to say, demonstrating the "feeling [a refugee] matters as a community member combined with [their] desire to contribute to the community" (Marks, 2014, p. 1).

### Mental health

Refugees may face a myriad of challenges before, during, and after their migration to their eventual country of resettlement. While successful integration may mediate or moderate the

effects of past trauma, the ability to integrate at all is also affected by past experiences. As described by refugee Mohammed Hassan Mohamud in his role as co-chair of the World Economic Forum's 2019 annual meeting, impositions on refugees are far from ended upon their relocation to a refugee camp, and are still present later when those who are resettled make that transition. At this summit, Mohamud relayed from his personal experiences that while refugees in camps may not necessarily experience the same severity of physical sufferings and needs as before, the psychological effects of staying in refugee camps for years and even decades with no seeming prospects for the future can cause considerable psychological damage (Murray et al., 2010). Then, later, "even if you're settled or repatriated, it's hard for you to integrate into society and become useful, because you've been beaten down and that's your default setting: just receiving food and being in line" (Whiting, 2019). One's such 'unsettlement' as a refugee is a process which starts during a person's initial displacement and which can last long after their supposed deliverance into situations of safety (Tang, 2015). Resultantly, refugee integration in the estimation of some studies ought to be as holistic as possible, and to move away from a model solely focused on case management and funding-driven goals towards one instead of comprehensive socio-economic support (Curry et al., 2018).

Aside from concepts of social, economic, linguistic, and cultural adjustment, the role of refugee mental health throughout the integration process cannot be overstated. The Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma cites refugee health as a "personal and social state of balance and well-being in which people feel strong, active, wise and worth-while; where their diverse capacities and rhythms are varied; where they may decide and choose, express themselves, and move freely" (Morin, 2013, p. 195-196). Refugees are also especially prone to psychological distress as they have often experienced complex trauma, which is distinguished from singular

traumatic events in that complex traumatic events are “chronic, interpersonal, and occur within the context of caregiving relationships” (Kliethermes et al., 2014, p. ix). Refugees’ psychological distress is exacerbated by both environmental and psychosocial outcomes, such as loss of societal role and social support and inactivity (Nyiransekuye, 2020). As such, many refugees develop mental health problems which they may exhibit more clearly after resettlement, as events post-resettlement that impede the dignity of the refugee can serve as a trigger for recalling past traumatic events. Often, refugees may not immediately realize the connections between those problems and their past traumatic experiences. Refugees who have been resettled usually have survived several traumatic experiences, including during stages of pre-flight, flight, first asylum camps, the search for a final destination, and final settlement and adaptation (Nyiransekuye); though it is necessary to remind that the majority of displaced persons never arrive at this final stage of permanent resettlement. See Appendix 3 for a summary of each one of these stages throughout the flight and resettlement process. Due to the cumulative impact of their extraordinarily difficult experiences, the psychological and social stressors experienced during refugees’ flight and journey towards resettlement can cause mental health disorders such as anxiety and psychosis to manifest during the post-migration period, with symptoms lasting long after resettlement (Hameed et al., 2018).

Refugee mental health and trauma is a vast and complex subject which is better examined in full in its own subset of literature, and indeed a great many studies exist which examine the different dimensions of refugee mental health and policy strategies to address it in resettlement (Williams & Westermeyer, 1986; Murray et al., 2010). For the purposes of this study, it is merely necessary to note that the well-being of refugees who have already arrived in their host countries is strongly influenced by their pre-flight experiences (Davidson et al., 2008;

Nyiransekuye, 2020). As such, all aspects of refugee integration and resettlement discussed henceforth must be understood through the lens of the experience that a resettled refugee has undergone prior to their arrival. Best practices of resettlement must therefore account for this trauma; but at the same time, they must avoid falling into traditional thinking of refugees as purely victims and resettlement entities as their liberators, which has dominated much international refugee policy and which ultimately serves to disempower refugees (Erden, 2017).

### Insight from primary data

Complementing studies which examine refugee well-being and integration through national surveys, such as census bureau data, and administrative data, such as program data from resettlement agencies, there exists another body of interdisciplinary academic research which uses primary data to examine the subject. Such research includes surveys and interviews with refugees, and also with resettlement agencies' staff and other stakeholders (Bernstein & DuBois, 2018). These first-hand data studies are limited in purview in that they tend to represent a smaller 'snapshot' of resettlement through whatever interview subjects or projects they examine; however, they may also provide much richer data which is grounded in the reality of refugees (Bernstein & DuBois; Curry et al., 2018). Many in-depth interviews with refugees regarding topics of integration reveal challenges in relation to social networks and relationships, career development, feeling wanted by the community, and receiving adequate support services and resources to succeed (Bernstein & DuBois; Betts et al., 2018; Korac, 2003). Aside from humanizing the refugee experience, qualitative interview data can also provide specific feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of refugee services in one country or locality. For instance, one study which conducted interviews with refugees in Austria highlighted the "value of a broad cultural knowledge in enabling integration processes and outcomes. This included both refugees'

knowledge of national and local procedures, customs, and facilities.” One interviewee in that study found cultural ‘integration houses’ to be ineffective, commenting that “I have never met an Austrian inside the house except the staff . . . all I have learned [here] is the language but nothing about the culture” (Ager and Strang, 2008, p. 182).

A recent study in Australia directly examined the concept of successful resettlement through interviews with resettled refugees there; said study also provided significant inspiration for this capstone project. Findings from the Australian study suggested success to be a fluid term, as such a concept arguably takes on different meanings at different points of the post-resettlement experience. The study’s interviews highlighted the “narrow, funding-driven focus in service delivery with refugees, which contributes to the diminishing architecture of supportive and holistic practice in favor of individualistic, case-management models” (Curry et al., 2018); and in doing so, they denoted gaps that exist between the goals of Australia’s resettlement program and the experiences of those resettled under it.

Data collected from the Australian study’s semi-structured interviews conveyed three common aspects of successful resettlement from the refugees’ point of view: employment, social networks and relationships, and support services. Many refugees in that study were relatively happy with their immediate living situations, though some complained of the often perfunctory work of refugee support services, such as job training agencies, which were limited by time or simply by their very nature of being case management services. The study’s refugees also expressed that the five-year period during which refugees in Australia are eligible to receive settlement support services was too short. The authors indicated that most interviewees had a prolonged reliance on said services throughout the duration of all five years and that, correspondingly, more time should be made available to receive support services afterwards.



Aside from economic successes and failures, the social well-being of the study's interviewees was also a salient talking point (Curry et al., 2018). Broader perceptions of refugees are quite important to their social well-being, as integration in its broadest sense refers to both economic and social inclusion and participation. The impact of policies on the social context along the entire migration pathway is of utmost importance in the refugee context: perceptions of threat, feelings of empathy, intergroup anxiety, the construction of the refugee identity and associated stereotypes, and interpersonal contact can all have significant positive or negative effects on both the refugee and the communities in which they live (Hynie, 2018).

Another interview-driven study conducted interviews with refugees resettled in both Italy and the Netherlands. A common theme in these interviews was the gulf between commonly-identified core elements of integration, such as having housing and personal safety and social connections, and those refugees' actual self-reported feelings of feeling integrated and being a participant of those societies. Refugees interviewed for this study commonly reported feeling disempowered due to the client-caseworker nature of the help they received upon arrival as opposed to feeling part of a broader social inclusion. These interviews also highlighted their need to "become part of the receiving societies through [the] establishment of closer ties with the established community, while [also] retaining a sense of their distinct identity. In other words, the refugees in this study prevailingly approached integration as the process of building 'bridging social capital' while not abandoning the idea of nourishing ties with native cultures or roots" (Korac, 2003, p. 21).

Discourse around the effectiveness or success of resettlement policies has often focused on the service performance of resettlement agencies, rather than on refugees' lived experiences (Curry et al., 2018; Digilov & Sharim, 2018). While a handful of similar interview-driven studies

exist in the United States and elsewhere, there is a dearth of recent first-hand interviews with Houston-area refugees. One study published in 2020 in collaboration between Baylor College of Medicine and The Alliance for Multicultural Community Services carried out 26 semi-structured interviews with refugee case managers and community leaders, albeit not with resettled refugees themselves (Huang et al., 2020). This study included a qualitative needs assessment of the strengths and limitations of refugee integration in Houston as relating to language learning, employment acquisition, transportation, domestic relations, and other categories. The research group ultimately found that refugee communities in Houston face multiple complex barriers in the resettlement process, and that these barriers require interprofessional and multidisciplinary solutions; and that the social determinants of health are key to refugees' well-being. These determinants to health can be summarized as "the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age" (World Health Organization, n.d.) and should be accounted for when providing refugee resettlement services.

#### Refugee resettlement in context and purpose of this study

Establishing a background contextualization about the policy aims of different resettlement programs, and current global discourses and frameworks about resettlement, is important when examining first-hand data derived from interviews with resettled refugees regarding their experiences and notions of successful refugee resettlement. Broadly speaking, self-sufficiency, however well- or ill-defined, represents the current order of the day as a goal for resettlement programs to work towards, with the UNHCR and the guidelines of the Global Compact on Refugees helping to facilitate those programs' interaction and interconnectivity. The resettlement regime in the United States is primarily focused on immediate employment, and in tracking its refugees' 'self-sufficiency' and success often uses easily gatherable economic

indicators, such as employment rates and hourly wages, as a primary tool of measurement. Research suggests, however, that this focus may often come at the cost of refugees' long-term career achievement, educational attainment, language proficiency, and establishment of strong social connections.

In Houston, Texas specifically, a strong economy and a long history of admitting refugees have led to Houston's recognition as a major hub of refugee resettlement within the United States. Simultaneously, however, wavering political support for the resettlement program, cutbacks to Texas' state public benefits, and a lack of long-term refugee case management services pertaining to integration beyond initial employment all portend troubling signs for refugee resettlement's future in Houston. While studies have examined the status of Houston-area refugees from a variety of angles, thereby providing valuable insight into the refugee existence in Houston, a lack of published first-person narratives from that population regarding their experiences with integration still represents a missed opportunity, and moreover one at a crucial time for determining the program's future. Though the handful of interviews conducted for this study are in no way meant to epitomize a quintessential Houston refugee lived experience, they do aim to provide a small sample of much-needed in-person feedback about resettlement in Houston and additionally give certain refugees who have not previously voiced their valued opinions a platform with which to do so. These interviews attempt to examine the core questions of this study: what does successful refugee resettlement entail, as expressed by refugees themselves? And what do these findings, contextualized by extant literature on refugee integration both in Houston and elsewhere, have to say about policy recommendations?

## Methodology

Participants with refugee status and those with Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) living in the Houston, Texas area were both considered as interviewees. “Refugees” in the context of this project refers to refugee persons admitted to the United States under § 207 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. As previously mentioned, Special Immigrant Visa holders are distinct from refugees in that they are persons who worked with the U.S. Armed Forces as a translator, interpreter, or other mission-related capacity in either Iraq or Afghanistan. However, SIV holders, or SIVs, are eligible for the same ORR benefits and services as refugees are and for the same time period as refugees (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2016). Therefore, once arrived in the United States, SIVs may have comparable resettlement experiences to those of refugees from this study’s integration-focused point of view, while acknowledging the inherent differences between the prior backgrounds of refugees and SIVs and possible subsequent effects of those differences. The following persons who otherwise may receive services from the Office of Refugee Resettlement or related affiliates were not considered for interviews: persons with asylee status, either granted asylum or awaiting decision on asylum status; Cuban and Haitian entrants; unaccompanied refugee minors; and victims of human trafficking.

Study participants lived in Harris County, the county where most refugee resettlement occurs in the Houston metropolitan area. Participants were all 18 years of age or older and were resettled as a refugee or SIV in Houston. There was no respective upper or lower ‘limit’ placed regarding how recently an interviewee had been resettled, a choice made to further diversify the interviewees and account for both refugees who had arrived in Houston recently and additionally those who had been living in the United States for a longer time. While many other interview-based studies on refugee resettlement have targeted interview subjects who had been present in the study’s chosen country for a certain minimum period of time, thereby assuming that

“indicators of successful resettlement have been met” (Curry et al., 2018, p. 435), interviewing those who have arrived more recently was decided for this study in order to provide a more diverse pool of responses regarding refugees’ perceptions of success in resettlement. A more recently-arrived refugee may have had less overall exposure to the United States’ resettlement system, but their ideas of what they expect out of resettlement may also be less distilled by that same exposure, for instance. Due to lack of funding on the research team’s part, translation services were unfortunately not provided for interviewees; however, friends or family who wished to interpret for the interviewee were allowed to do so in order to minimize the resulting data skew towards English-speaking refugees as much as possible. Otherwise, participants were required to be English-proficient to a level where they self-avowedly felt comfortable being interviewed in that language.

The interview questions were broadly framed around ideas of success in refugee resettlement and key determinants of successful resettlement. Study participants were recruited from local non-profit organizations with no restrictions on their gender, religion, ethnicity, or cultural background. If the participants granted consent to audio recordings, their interviews were electronically recorded and an interview transcript created by hand thereafter by the principal investigator—that is to say, created without the aid of any third-party software. Otherwise, for interviews where participants did not grant consent to participation, meticulous electronic notes were taken throughout the interview. In such cases, while the exact quotations of the interviewees were not then available, the idea of what was said in answer to each question was still largely preserved, even if not verbatim. All audio recordings were transcribed solely for the purposes of completing this study, and they were later destroyed immediately preceding its publication. For interviews which had been recorded, transcripts were de-identified of

participants' names and any identifying information. Interviewees' quotations were used in the paper only if the interviewee had granted explicit permission to do so, provided that the quotation did not contain personally identifying information. All participants' names were made anonymous for this study.

Due to the global COVID-19 health crisis, late in my interviewing process I modified my project so as to be able to conduct interviews remotely via telephone as well. I did not audio record telephone interviews due to confidentiality concerns with the recording process, but instead took careful notes to closely match the language used by the interviewees. If participants elected to be interviewed remotely this way, I sent them a copy of my consent form via email; their way of providing consent was then to reply back to that email with a message demonstrating that they gave consent to be interviewed. When interviewing remotely, I conducted phone calls in solitude and out of earshot of any other persons, and asked that the interviewees do the same. I only conducted these remote interviews with interviewees who did not require translation, as I did not want to create further risks regarding confidentiality and privacy of information, and additionally did not want to risk misinterpreting peoples' translated responses through phone interpretation.

This study received ethics approval from the Institutional Review Board of Illinois State University, and all participants provided their informed consent prior to being interviewed, whether through signing a written consent form or by providing consent via email as described above.

In line with a grounded theory approach, thematic analysis was used to identify common core themes from across the interviews. As the number of interviewees was unfortunately smaller than initially expected, purchasing and using qualitative analysis software such as

ATLAS.ti, which allows for content analysis through both open coding and axial coding, was deemed unnecessary and inappropriate for the sample size at hand. This project being an unfunded one also contributed to this decision, as purchasing such software would make better sense only with a considerably larger pool of interviewees' responses to analyze. For an alternative and scaled-back method of qualitative analysis, the principal investigator, through close examination of the notes or transcriptions taken from each interview, looked to compare and contrast the responses from the different interviewees and thereby identify common core themes present in the interview data. Thematic analysis of interview responses was accomplished by identifying common themes across interviewees' statements—such as comments about relationships with neighbors and people in the community, professional networking, and caseworkers at resettlement agencies—and categorizing them together into eight thematic groups: the interviewees' initial conceptualizations of success; economic success and employment; education; the role of the United States' government; case management and support services; language; social and cultural integration, relationships, and networks; and comments about Houston.

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted in the first half of 2020. Participants answered questions about their feelings of socio-economic well-being, what successful refugee resettlement would look like in their view, and whether their own resettlement experience in the United States had so far lived up to that ideal. No sample size can truly be representative of a refugee population in an area, and although the study attempted to recruit a sufficient variety of refugees and SIVs from different genders and age and socioeconomic status, this study does not represent the general refugee population of Houston, Texas. The principal investigator's intention to 'widen the net' of interviewees meant recruiting potential interviewees from a

variety of different sources; however, given the relative dearth of interviewees who ultimately participated in the study, a true representation of refugee populations could not be claimed.

As a final tally, there were six male and two female participants. One participant had a friend or family member present to interpret for them, although his level of English was sufficient to answer most questions. Ward Westray, the study's principal investigator (PI), conducted all eight interviews. These interviews took place either in private conference rooms at Westray's workplace in Houston; at public locations which those select interviewees had agreed to; or remotely via a telephone. Interviews lasted from between around 30 minutes to 150 minutes, with most taking slightly over an hour. See Table 1 for a summary of participants' basic demographics, which were voluntarily disclosed by them before conducting the interview.

## Findings

Table 1

Participant number	Sex	Status	Country fled
1	M	SIV	Afghanistan
2	M	SIV	Afghanistan
3	M	Refugee	Sudan
4	M	SIV	Afghanistan
5	M	Refugee	Iraq
6	F	Refugee	Congo (DRC)



7	F	Refugee	Iran
8	M	Refugee	Eritrea

Using either notes taken from interviews or, when possible, transcriptions taken from recorded interviews, several major themes emerged from interviewees' narratives on what successful resettlement meant to them in the United States and in Houston.

### **Discussion**

Though success meant something different to each interviewee, all conceptualized it as something requiring meeting a variety of socio-economic needs. Meeting these needs included furthering their education or seeking foreign educational accreditation, having access to career advancement, and establishing strong familial ties and a reliable social support network. Additionally, two primary findings emerged from both their responses and the preceding literature review. First, federal funding given to resettlement agencies is inadequate and should be increased; and second, refugee resettlement agencies are providing inconsistent and sometimes poor-quality services, and they must communicate with and listen to their clients more and furthermore implement better quality control services.

These interviews provide valuable first-hand insights into a variety of refugee resettlement experiences in the Houston area. Funding-driven conceptualizations of successful resettlement, which emphasize providing a basic level of economic self-sufficiency, have driven the experiences of many refugees, just as foreign policy interests have likewise historically helped shape the U.S. resettlement program. However, the perspectives of this study's interviewees reveal a much greater depth of experiences and different notions about what success means to them and what services and quality of life they expected. While in some areas the

interviewees expressed satisfaction with their experiences and felt optimistic about having sufficient opportunities to succeed in their desired fashion, responses to some topics revealed deeper concerns. For the sake of clarity, interviewees' responses, and discussion thereof, will be categorized by theme as much as possible. However, one must acknowledge the often highly interconnected nature of all responses and themes about resettlement, as no aspect of refugee well-being and integration exists in a vacuum—something often expressed during the interviews themselves.

### Interview responses and common themes present

#### *Definitions of success*

In Table 2 below I summarized each interviewee's answer in response to being asked what success means to them, so as to directly capture their responses to this key question as best possible. In effect, these are the interviewees' answers to the central question posed in this study: what does refugee resettlement in Houston resemble? The text in Table 2 does not consist of quotes, but instead paraphrased summaries of answers given to the question, "What does personal success mean to you?" While the entirety of each interview overviewed different aspects of each interviewee's life after resettlement and their perception of their own personal successes and struggles in that time, Table 2 largely represents the initial responses given to this salient question in the context of their post-resettlement experiences, and thus interviewees' answers to this study's central question.

In certain cases, the interviewees would later in the interview return to their conceptualizations of success and amend or add to them; these changes are also reflected in Table 2. For instance, interviewee 6 initially identified having a job and having reliable

transportation as what success meant to her; however, later in the interview, she brought up the concept of success again and added several other facets to her initial conceptualization, including access to education, good social connections, and having her family around her for support. Later during each interview, each interviewee was also asked to consider which personal successes and struggles, respectively, they had encountered during their time after resettlement. However, unless the interviewee specifically took that opportunity to amend their previous conceptualization of what success meant to them, the responses to this later two-part question were not considered for inclusion in Table 2. Quotes provided below Table 2 include both interviewees' direct quotes from transcriptions and quotes taken from the principal investigator's notes which closely match what was said during the interview, even if occasionally not quite verbatim.

Participant numbers and their corresponding interviewees in Table 2 match those shown in Table 1 above.

Table 2

Participant number	Responses pertaining to the interview question: "What does personal success mean to you?"
1	A combination of many elements, including social, familial, economic, and physical achievement and independence, all of which need to be present.
2	Included having a job, having a shelter and home, having time to spend with family; feeling respected by others in society; and being able to be independent.
3	Education: specifically, advancing his education.
4	Success has different meanings throughout life. At first after arriving, his view of success more closely resembled basic self-sufficiency and meant having a good job, living a comfortable life, and providing for his family. Now that he achieved that level of comfort, success meant helping out other people and making the world a better place.
5	Returning to his former career as a university professor, whether here if possible

	or by eventually returning to his home country. He believed that the provisions of resettlement agencies cannot make you successful; they can only make you self-sufficient.
6	Having a good job for paying the bills; having reliable transportation; being able to go to school and completing school (at minimum high school); and having good social communication and connections, including having family around her.
7	Growing in her job and getting a good career, or at least needing to feel that she can make her future. For that, she felt she needs a good social and professional network for both career advancement and also receiving general advice and support for her integration in the United States. Lastly, to feel like people and organizations around her are helpful and sympathetic.
8	Success is not the same as self-sufficiency. Success for him included access to education, English training, and access to vocational training and meaningful employment; as well as feeling supported and comprehensively provided for during the initial period after resettlement.

Though success meant something differently to each interviewee, their conceptualizations of personal success all envisioned their meeting a variety of socio-economic needs, which required time to do so. Interviewee 1 specifically noted that not only is success for resettled refugees a “combination of social, familial, economical, and physical achievement,” but “you have to actually be at a certain level in each and every of [those] aspects” in order to be successful, meaning that a lack of one crucial aspect will hinder the whole of his conceptualization of success. Therefore, while each interviewee did identify their notions of success, the respective weight each placed upon various components of that success was not necessarily the same universally.

Interviewees’ notions of success, like their other responses to questions, were also moderated by their past experiences. For instance, interviewee 6, whose primary understanding of personal success meant returning to his former career as a university professor, may have felt that way due to his past experiences working in that field. A portion of his interview was spent

discussing the realities of first- versus second-generation refugees, or alternatively between refugees who arrived in the United States as adults versus as children: he suggested that second-generation refugees or those who arrived as children generally have an easier time integrating and becoming successful. Conversely, interviewee 7, who did arrive as a refugee as a child, defined her success less in terms of having a specific career or obtaining the necessary educational accreditation to do so, and more so in having general financial stability and advancing her general level of education. While she said she learned English very fast and was not able to identify any major difficulties she had faced after being resettled, she did feel that over time she started to forget her own culture and even language, something she believes to be true for many other second-generation refugees as well. Relatedly, it is worth noting that the United States' Refugee Act contains no mention of cultural preservation, which is an important indicator of integration for many refugee groups (Tyson, 2017).

Two interviewees expressed their personal success as a variable concept which changes with time after resettlement. One of them, interviewee 4, said that his initial conceptualization of success after resettlement more so resembled one of self-sufficiency, and being able to live “a comfortable life”; however, “when you meet some level of success, it means something different: then you’re looking to be successful in other areas.” Nonetheless, he felt that most refugees do not ever meet this threshold and instead become perpetually stuck in a difficult cycle of subsistence, saying that “the rate of people getting out of this situation is 10%, maybe less; I’m just being optimistic. 90% of my friends who came with me, they are significantly under debt, [or] car loans, and they’re barely even making a living. And this is the situation for lots of [refugees].”

However, aside from discussing the core theme of their conceptualizing of personal success as a refugee, interviewees also responded to other questions which related to factors of successful resettlement as informed by extant literature on refugee integration and similar studies like this one. Interviewees' comments on these additional concepts relating to successful integration and socio-economic well-being are further explored in depth below and categorized by theme: employment; education; cultural and social comfort; language; and feelings of being welcomed and well-provisioned for by government and refugee resettlement entities alike. Not every interviewee's thoughts on each topic are explicitly detailed below, however. To read more about interviewees' thoughts on different integration-related topics, which are also paraphrased like Table 2 above, see Appendix 7.

While interviewees' thoughts on the following topics were, for the purposes of the study, ancillary to their initial definitions of success, the two response types naturally shared much in common with each other; and additionally interviewees' comments on the following topics would often tie into or otherwise moderate their initial definitions of success.

*Economic success and employment:*

Interviewees' responses tended to corroborate notions from prior research about a funding-driven focus on refugee service delivery which "contributes to the diminishing architecture of supportive and holistic practice in favor of individualistic, case-management models" (Curry et al., 2018, p. 446). Problematic aspects of resettlement which tended to reappear across interviews included, most prominently, a frustration with the inability to receive accreditation in the United States for degrees which had been earned abroad, and subsequently the low-paying and low-skill jobs which were commonly offered for first employment opportunities by the interviewees' resettlement agencies.

Most interviewees were dissatisfied with the initial slate of jobs offered to them by their resettlement agencies, and several of them either did not end up taking the job opportunities procured by their agencies or only held those first positions for short periods of time, citing reasons including low pay, long commuting distance, long hours, and strenuous work activities. Though most were taken to a handful of job interviews, interviewee 7 was only taken to one interview, and did not hear back from the employer; she eventually walked to a store nearby her house and found employment there on her own.

For those interviewees who were offered jobs by their resettlement agencies, their common reaction was that the available positions were low-paying and the tasks involved menial. Interviewee 4 interviewed for a position involving producing lenses and small computer chips, and turned it down at the prospect of standing on his feet all day and working for 80 hours a week. He did not believe that the position was necessarily “a trap, but [people like me], they come, they see the money, and—I don’t want to blame [our resettlement agency], but if you don’t put enough time into education, [and] so you just hit that blockade . . . these are walk-in jobs; they are not skilled.” He further said the jobs his agency was providing him “weren’t good . . . the jobs they are providing are basic and very labor-intensive. [It] doesn’t even matter what skills or experience you have.” Instead of prior experience overseas, interviewees found that prospects for career advancement instead depended on “not what you know, but who you know,” as interviewee 8 said. Interviewee 5, who had worked as a university professor in his home country, ended up with a factory job through his resettlement agency, and described working there for four months as very difficult. Interviewee 8 similarly felt that there were “very few options for jobs provided.” A majority of interviewees found that the job openings found for them through their resettlement agencies were too far away, with several feeling that bus transportation in

Houston was inefficient and inordinately time-consuming, which exacerbated the problem. A specific suggestion raised by interviewee 7 was to search for employer connections closer to the residential areas where resettled persons were most commonly given housing. Interviewee 8 also suggested that agencies need to focus much more on outreach and diversifying connections with partner companies: for example, as he said, “if an agency has three employers for options and an employment team of five, that represents an issue.” Lastly, given that agencies receive refugee and SIV clients from different vocational backgrounds, interviewee 8 wanted resettlement agencies to connect with more employers who can hire professionals or who can at least offer entry-level or professional jobs.

Attempts at professional networking for the interviewees were often difficult, especially for those who did not know much English after arrival. Interviewees widely expressed disappointment at their lacking critical networking skills needed for career advancement, and moreover at being given little knowledge from their agencies about how to network, especially with a limited cultural background coming into the United States. While many interviewees’ expectations before arrival were that their prior employment experiences, skills, and educational accreditation would generally be sufficient to find a good career or at least a reasonably well-paying first job after a time, the reality most faced was, as said by interviewee 2, that “you should have a good network and know somebody in an office and apply and get a job; otherwise it’s difficult.” After leaving his initial job which had been procured through his agency, he also found he needed someone to refer him to a position in order to have a chance of being hired. Interviewee 7 expressed her belief that “there is everything here, but you need a good network” to be successful. The value of a network in terms of employment was also reflected in the job search process for interviewees: for those whose first jobs were not found through their agencies,



they instead relied on whatever personal network they had to find alternative means of employment. Interviewee 8, disappointed that the jobs being offered to him through his resettlement agency were two hours away by bus in each direction, instead searched online for job openings and relied on his own connections, such as nearby friends and neighbors he knew, to find his first job. Interviewee 4 also started job-searching online after feeling dissatisfied with the offerings given by his agency, although his first job in Houston was procured through a relation of a friend.

*Education:*

The pool of interviewees all valued education highly and either expressed hope for education advancement for themselves or for their children in the United States, as those who spoke about the United States' educational system saw it as an opportunity to advance their socio-economic status in the long term. While all interviewees valued their education and many at the time of interview still intended to increase their level of education in the United States, the demands put upon those interviewees who had to work soon after arriving in Houston meant that their opportunities in higher education often limited. Interviewee 3, who holds a law degree in a foreign country, expressed his desire to return to school and earn a degree in the United States, but believed that his current level of English held him back, and additionally felt that balancing "the family, the education, it's hard. [One] can't go to school, can't go to work if you have a family, [and I had] four kids who needed help."

Among the interviewees who had an education level equal to or higher than having attended some college, a common shared frustration was the inability of employers in Houston to accredit their past education and work experiences and the interviewees' resultant feelings of professional debasement. Interviewee 5, who had worked as a university professor before

arriving in Houston, had high expectations about employment, especially due to his prior knowledge of English; however, no employers in Houston would recognize this experience, and he eventually had to accept a job in assembly as his first job in the United States. Though he now worked as a medical translator, he missed his old profession and described the embarrassment of realizing that his previous experience was now almost irrelevant. He went so far as to create four separate job résumés corresponding to PhD, master's degree, bachelor's degree, and high school education levels, as he learned along the way that "not all [employers] like to know that you are a professor." Interviewee 8 agreed, noting that "everything on your résumé says you are a foreigner, and people look over [your résumé]" when hiring.

While interviewees' opinions on public schools and universities in the United States were generally positive, an issue for many was having the requisite time and money for continuing higher education. Going to a university, and having his children attend free public school, represented a good opportunity for interviewee 2, as "this was my dream back home . . . I can study here, and my kids can get [an] education here." However, he was also disappointed that "everyone cannot go to school—this is the sad side" of access to education in the United States. While he was attending a university in 2017, he had one full-time job and two part-time jobs, and felt that he "should only have one job, and that should be a part-time job. I used to study hard, and used to work hard, [and] every day I would sleep four or five hours . . . it's not enough." However, while balancing work and studying was a difficult experience, he saw having access to college "as a good opportunity for me. At least I can get a job and I can study." Interviewee 6 appreciated public schools in the United States being free and not requiring fees, which was not the case in her home country; she said that the success she most appreciates after arriving in Houston is being able to go to school, and that graduating from high school in particular made

her father very happy. The same interviewee expressed her observation that some other refugee kids she knew who arrived as minors “go to [high] school and then drop out, and just get a full-time job,” and that she was very satisfied with being able to graduate high school as opposed to similarly dropping out. While she had attended Houston Community College for around eighteen months, she had to quit and find a job due to the costs involved with planning for her wedding, though at the time of the interview she wanted to return to college in the future if she was able to, and furthermore felt that she would have the opportunity to at some point.

*Role of government:*

The frequency of interactions and problems with bureaucratic structures greatly varied between interviewees. For some, most difficulties they had during the initial period after their arrival were able to be addressed by either their resettlement agency or some other community organization or friend. A few interviewees, however, were faced with larger or more intractable issues, such as problems with obtaining their social security number, maintaining their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, and even issues with immigration status, which necessitated their visiting government offices. In such cases, they expressed frustrations with both the United States’ bureaucratic systems, the workers working for them, and also the degree to which their resettlement agencies were able to provide them assistance. Oftentimes interviewees felt they received such little help from their agencies that they had no recourse but to solve a given complex problem on their own, which was extremely frustrating and time-consuming as they were not well-versed in navigating the United States’ government institutions; and it furthermore contributed to a feeling of not being welcomed.

Interviewee 1, whose expectation before arriving to the United States was of a “hyper-organized society and hyper-organized system of government,” recounted the surprising degree

of difficulty and frustration that resulted from an address error on his visa and the “lack of integrated systems” across the United States institutions which he discovered during the process to correct the error, including his frustration with his resettlement agency’s lack of help during this time. Interviewee 2, who after losing his passport soon after arriving spent copious time in an effort to obtain a new one, was dumbfounded that losing one’s passport meant “you can’t get a job or anything” and “you are like [an] illegal [migrant].” Despite suffering during this time with no job and little feeling of support from his agency, at the Social Security Office “nobody had [the necessary] experience” to help him. He furthermore perceived a lack of communication between various governmental offices to redress the issue, forcing him to make and attend multiple appointments with little outside guidance or help. He eventually “applied for [a new] Afghan citizen’s passport . . . [but] because I didn’t know how to apply and nobody helped me, there was missing documentation,” which further prolonged the process. It took him “four months to get only one stamp on my passport,” and “all [that], I did myself; nobody helped me here, even [my resettlement] agency.” In general, he felt that “the big problem with these offices . . . [is that] they’re not really helpful.”

Interviewee 7 reported feeling distinct culture shock from the lack of help she felt she received from both her caseworkers and government services after experiencing a significant injury and being housebound for an extended period of time. While interviewee 5 did not have problems with activities like obtaining a social security card or opening a bank account, he saw that other refugees involved in such processes especially struggled if they had a weaker command of English.

Interviewees’ thoughts on the policy driving refugee resettlement in the United States were diverse, yet at a minimum slightly skeptical. Two interviewees understood the resources

given to them as simply an initial help to get on one's feet, with natural limits; yet one dissented, believing firmly that "providing support for four months is not enough." Interviewee 4, worrying about those refugees who struggle to adapt and succeed, wished that "this resettlement program [was] easier for [those who struggle]." He felt that the services mandated by the United States' resettlement program were not sufficient, and gave the following recommendations:

"Let's give them more time, let's give them more help. . . find ways to push them to learn English, because I know guys after four years who still don't speak English . . . Don't try to take their food stamps, don't try to take their Medicaid, don't try to force them to go pick whatever job they can; give them at least a year to study basic skills in something so that they can survive. Not three months, not after they get a job . . . Give them more money, give them a thousand dollars [per month] for their rent so they can live in a good neighborhood, not \$300. Give them more food stamps; give them \$300 instead of \$100 in food stamps . . . So that is my thing that the government should focus more on, because these people, when they come here, they're looking for a better life. Don't put them in a situation where they struggle."

*Case management and direct support services:*

Interviewees' assessments of the quality of services received from their resettlement agencies varied, and depended in part on their own expectations prior to being resettled. While some interviewees had few issues working with their resettlement agencies after arriving, others were less appreciative and recounted mostly negative interactions with their resettlement agencies and the caseworkers therein.

The interviewees' attitudes towards the demeanor and helpfulness of their former caseworkers were mixed. Interviewee 5, several years after first arriving in Houston, was

employed for around three months as a caseworker at one refugee resettlement agency, and was able to examine refugee-caseworker relationships from a new perspective as a caseworker. He believed that, while his clients frequently complained to him, telling him that “this was the only way for them to make their voice heard,” such behavior was unnecessary and prevented his clients from focusing on becoming employed. In interviewee 5’s own experiences as a client after resettlement, he appreciated the gesture of his agency providing an Arabic speaker for him his first day and had few problems in general, although he partially attributed this to his prior knowledge of English and acknowledged that in three or four other refugee cases he knew of the resettled individuals became so depressed as to eventually return to their home countries.

In the case of interviewee 2, he lost his passport early on after arriving to the United States, and reported that his resettlement agency did not point him in the right direction for obtaining a new one, and furthermore did not offer to transport him to the necessary governmental offices to do so. As a result, after arriving he underwent an exhausting four months during which he had to visit, often multiple times, his resettlement agency, the social security office, the Customs and Border Patrol office at the Houston airport, and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office in Houston, including having to make appointments and travel by bus and foot to these places by himself even though he was unsure of how to do so. He described that his resettlement agency seemed as if they “never had this experience before” regarding his lost passport, and that it was “like an unexpected situation for them”; and that when he initially asked them what to do, they did not provide advice. Interviewee 2 also described his caseworker as someone who did not “feel a responsibility to help” and who “rejected me.” Interviewee 8’s experience was that the “perception from the agencies [was as if] you came from a cave and you can’t do anything,” and that caseworkers would often treat their clients in an insulting way.

Interviewees 1 and 4 reported largely neutral to positive experiences with their agencies, although they made clear that their expectations of their agencies were limited. Interviewee 1 mentioned that some situations, such as teaching refugees to drive and giving them access to drivers' test manuals, would "be impossible for some individuals" and that the agency "wouldn't be able to help them with that, because [the agency is] limited to those aforementioned programs." He generally believed that his agency's activities encompassed "limited things, because they don't have as [many] resources available; they just give out what they have. But what they have, they're doing it okay." Interviewee 4 expressed a similar opinion in saying that, while the services his agency provided to him were not useful because "I was already above [the level]" of English and job skills they were teaching, he saw that "their hands are tied with the money because [funding] was limited" and that the agencies "just used [their funding] in the way they were able to." Nonetheless, he felt that given the services provided by his agency, "You're not going to have a good quality of life, but you [will] survive." Interviewee 3 also reported being generally satisfied with his experiences with his resettlement agency: he could not identify any major difficulties he experienced after resettlement and characterized "everything [as] medium" in difficulty. This interviewee arrived in the United States in 1998, meaning he was the least recently-arrived of all eight interviewees. His resettlement agency paid for him to attend business classes at the University of Houston for around four to five months, and he recalled learning much about business there.

Several interviewees had primarily negative interactions with their case managers, such as interviewee 2, who described his caseworker as a "really, really rude person," and interviewee 7, who reported distinctly negative interactions with her caseworker as well. Within her first 90 days in the country, when agencies typically find their clients their first jobs, she was hit by a car

and badly injured while walking to a bus station; this occurred on her 80th day after arrival. Her recovery process, which she says cost her two wasted years as she was at home recovering, was made worse by her perception that her resettlement agency was not cooperative or understanding of her situation: she called her case manager on her 97th day after arrival and explained that she was unable to start working due to her accident, and reported that her case manager did not help her and instead simply informed her that they were no longer her case manager.

Interviewee 8 specifically explained that his vision of success was detached from the services provided by his agency, which he believed only served to make him self-sufficient in a basic sense; but more crucially, he was disappointed by the quality of services provided by his agency, despite not having “enormously high expectations” at the outset. For example, he cited case managers at his resettlement agency failing to follow through on promises to take clients to medical appointments and job interviews, and felt that case managers’ work ethic was low. Interviewee 8 recommended that resettlement agencies need to look for passion in their new hires, and most importantly need to obtain regular feedback from refugees, and then amend services accordingly. While acknowledging the limitations of time and budget, he advised that agencies should treat refugees more as individuals and avoid providing them with too standard of a service; and that they must focus on improving both their quality of services and communication with clients. As agencies’ staff are being paid to help refugees, he argued that those staff should “avoid punishing [refugees] for non-compliance.” Additionally, he suggested for agencies to reevaluate how they examine refugees’ levels of actual success and to make sure they have the tools to succeed: instead of simply declaring the client finished with their initial period of services and therefore cut off from further help, agencies should work to make that transition easier through continued support and encouragement, and should assure refugees and



other clients that they will not be alone, even though they will no longer receive intensive services from the agency.

A common refrain throughout most interviews was that the interviewees wished they were given more culturally-attuned and practical advice from their caseworkers and people they interacted with early on after resettlement. Interviewee 8 expressed that the orientations he was given from his resettlement agency “barely tell you what you need to know” and did not have “enough practical advice”: he wished he had been given more specific help in activities such as learning the bus system and navigating the work marketplace. One caseworker he interacted with did give him useful advice, such as how to open a bank account; how to get good credit; why to get a credit card; how to make appointments; and how to apply for schools. However, he felt that assistance like this was applied inconsistently: for instance, while his agency did have vocational training made available for clients, he was not made aware of these trainings and only learned about them from another client and then asking his caseworker if he was able to enter a session.

Interviewee 6 recalled her caseworkers helping her family a lot, but felt “the issue was getting into details, getting into the reality of it. Don’t just tell us something and go away; or don’t just tell us something and expect us to do it exactly as you taught us. Show us. This is a new environment; we don’t want to touch anything. Refugees are afraid of touching anything, and don’t want to get involved with anything they don’t know. So if you teach them how to do something, they’re not going to do it exactly that way unless you guide them.” Her family’s caseworker did not adequately demonstrate to them their apartment’s appliances and specifically how to use the apartment’s stove; consequently, they went almost two weeks without cooking a warm meal, and had to eventually ask neighbors for assistance in using the stove. Interviewee 7

had a somewhat similar experience, and explained her surprise at having a wood-frame apartment and not initially understanding how to use all its amenities.

Besides physically demonstrating to new refugees how to use household appliances, as interviewee 6 suggested, interviewees suggested that giving practical advice applied in a nonliteral sense as well, and described various crucial yet complex procedures which they felt they received little to no guidance about. For instance, interviewee 4 had to research on his own about college scholarships and loans, and felt in general that he “did not have opportunities from any organization other than me figuring things out myself, me Googling, me looking for opportunities, me finding a way, and I didn’t have any help from any friend or organization who told me, ‘this is the path you should take or this is what you should do.’”

Interviewee 7 had a similar experience at her agency to that of interviewee 8, wherein certain other clients had received vocational training through her same agency but she was never made aware of it; and only after “two or three years of calling and asking to receive vocational training” was she able to access those services, she said, as her agency had repeatedly told her there was no budget to include her. Another sort of practical advice this interviewee wished she had been given included medical advice. After her injury, she specifically wished that someone from her agency had given her practical advice about medical services in the United States, and that someone had told her “if you have a medical problem in the U.S., these are the steps you can take.” She further explained that due to many differences between Houston and her home city, routine tasks such as going to the grocery store, visiting the doctor, and visiting the pharmacy were very different and oftentimes difficult, giving her a sense of culture shock; and that she felt she did not receive adequate help in adjusting, either through practical advice from her agency workers or through cultural orientation classes provided to her.

*Language:*

Due to the limited funding of this project necessitating a lack of professional interpretation available for interviews, the pool of interviewees chosen was fundamentally skewed to some extent towards those who already spoke English at a more proficient level; however, the level of English between interviewees did vary some, as not all interviewees spoke it at a fluent level by their own admission. The rates at which interviewees became acclimated to, and in some cases comfortable with, English varied. Three interviewees attributed these differences to a generational divide, positing the idea that refugees who came over as children have an easier time learning a new language and furthermore adjusting to a new culture when young.

Regardless of the level of English spoken by each interviewee, however, language was cited by most interviewees as a crucial aspect of their vision of success, both in terms of basic self-sufficiency and in thriving in a broader and longer-term sense after arrival. Interviewee 5 described language as the key to integration, as a refugee cannot understand the society, community, education system, economic system, or political system without command of the language of one's new country; and language was described by interviewee 3 as "essential" in the United States, if at a bare minimum for the purposes of filling out applications and maintaining a basic standard of living. Interviewee 4 had a slightly differing perspective in describing language not as a skill, but in a unique category of its own, as "it doesn't matter how well you speak [a language]; if you don't know how to do [a] job, you are worthless."

The interviewees' descriptions of English classes at their resettlement agencies mostly portrayed it as insufficient for becoming English proficient, referencing both the mandatory time commitment of the class and its topical scope. Interviewee 1 felt that his resettlement agency's

English classes tended to be “job-focused,” and interviewee 8 believed his agency’s English classes to be “not good; only 2 months, then after that you are free,” and that “six hours a week is not enough [to learn a] language.” Interviewee 3 said that, while his agency did have English classes, he never attended them due to finding a job first. Such an occurrence, of not completing English courses due to finding early employment, was also commented on by interviewee 8, who asked “What if you attend two classes and then find a job? Then you don’t end up learning English.”

*Social and cultural integration, relationships, and networks:*

Culture shock and adjustment was a common theme across the interviews. Factors such as differences in language, cultural attitudes, and performance of daily tasks all contributed to several interviewees' sense of alienation. While Interviewee 2 did know English prior to arriving, he felt that, despite him valuing “people [being] in contact and communication with the people who are newly-arrived in this country, and [to] share their culture and ideas . . . I never felt like somebody helped me like this.” Interviewee 7 described having considerable culture shock, and said that the “differences are huge” between her former country and her current one: she cited seemingly small differences, such as her house’s material and appliances and going grocery shopping, which nevertheless cumulatively made a large personal impact and shock. Interviewee 6 noticed high rates of divorce of refugees in the United States, citing the pressures of being in new cultures; he reported feeling intense culture shock himself, and lost twenty-one pounds of body weight within two weeks after arriving. Interviewee 4, conversely, experienced little culture shock upon arriving because he “[tried] to see how [other] successful people got here and model [himself] after them—that’s self-sufficiency.” Interviewee 1 also experienced relatively little culture shock, as he felt he was “more American than many Americans” coming in,

although he largely attributed this to being a Special Immigrant Visa holder and being previously exposed to American culture.

When asked whether interviewees felt culturally comfortable, or accepted, in Houston, and how long that process took, most reported needing significant time to feel so. As said by interviewee 8, “there’s a relationship between time and feeling comfortable,” which “depends on the person who arrived here: if someone accepts the reality, it’s much easier for them to adjust. But for others who always remember their previous life, then it’s harder.” Interviewee 3 reported feeling very culturally comfortable at the time of interviewing, and that he was very friendly and talked with everyone around him after arriving as a refugee; yet also that it took him ten years of living in Houston to truly feel personally comfortable. Interviewee 6 also reported feeling a “huge shock” upon arriving, as her prior understanding of the United States was very different from the reality of it; she shared this sentiment with most of the interviewees.

While several interviewees had not encountered racial stigmas, several said they did experience some form of racism, with interviewee 7 believing that many people in the United States were indeed quite racist, in contrast to her home country, and that they would judge her based on her skin color, something which significantly bothered her. Interviewee 4 also felt that he experienced racism from his neighbors while living in his first apartment complex, and that he received criticism about his accent and the clothes he wore; however, he felt this was more attributable to “just stupidity” than a general feature of American culture. Interviewee 2 felt he experienced racism from his own caseworker, and believed that the caseworker treated Middle Eastern clients more poorly. The other interviewees reported no instances of racism.

The interviewees’ perceptions of feeling welcomed or supported by people in America varied as well. Several interviewees found other United States residents to be too uncaring, a

byproduct of the individualistic nature of American culture. Interviewee 3 noted that while he felt America did not have one culture, he believed most people “leave you to yourself” and “don’t touch other peoples’ cultures”; and interviewee 2 found the American culture to be highly individualistic, which came with drawbacks as he believed instead that “people should be dependent: if I have a problem, and I ask you, you should help.” He furthermore believed that “U.S. citizens are not welcoming of refugees here in the U.S. They don’t show their desire or interest in them,” even though he believed that interest and resulting inter-cultural connectivity to be essential in the process of immigrant integration in a new country. Interviewee 4 also felt American culture at times to be “very isolated” in nature. In contrast, interviewee 5 had no dislikes about American culture and felt that people in the United States were nice, helpful, and respected each other’s religions. Interviewee 8 thought American culture, particularly in Houston, to be very diverse; and that there is a “system and a way of respect” and willingness to help others. Interviewee 6 found American culture to be “understanding” and “adopting” with “open arms.”

Interviewee 5 was somewhat unique in that he intentionally strived to find housing, after leaving his initial apartment, in a neighborhood which did not have any Arab or Iraqi people, therefore increasing his exposure to people of other cultures. He recalled having very positive cross-cultural experiences in his community as a result. However, most other interviewees indicated that, especially in the early period after resettlement, they did not interact with their neighbors often, or at least that those they tended to interact with were of a similar cultural background. Interviewee 8 experienced something vaguely similar but much more affirming: he was placed in his initial housing in a neighborhood which was “full of migrants and refugees,” and their similar situations of “trying to survive and find a job” served to bring them together and

create friendships. Interviewee 6's family was also initially placed in a housing complex, and many other residents were also immigrants with whom she frequently interacted.

Language had a strong moderating effect regarding social integration for most interviewees, although additional factors such as cultural norms and even social stigmatization also influenced their perception of integration and being socially accepted. Most, though not all, of the interviewees said they tended to regularly interact with people of similar backgrounds. This was in part due to often living in similar neighborhoods as other migrant persons, at least for their initial housing placements, and in part due to innate language and cultural similarities. Interviewee 1 described that there are "immigrant enclaves in some countries, [which] is because [those] immigrants could not fit into this broader society—the general population, you could say—so they create these little enclaves, so they feel comfortable." While interviewee 4 currently worked with mostly Caucasian coworkers, he did not report having any Caucasian friends, "not because I don't like them, but maybe just because we don't have things in common," such as sharing the same sense of humor and hobbies. Interviewee 2 was disappointed that he had "never received any invitations from American citizens to ask me to join a party; maybe a meeting though. So I see this as their culture: everyone invites their own friends and families. I don't feel this is my country yet; I can't feel it."

*Comments on Houston:*

Addressing Houston specifically, interviewees mostly had positive comments regarding the city's diversity and relatively open political climate. Interviewee 8 enjoyed seeing people from different ages and backgrounds congregating together, and observed that in Houston there are "different cultures combined together that makes things unique"; furthermore, because of its diversity, he felt that refugees and other migrants alike do not distinguishably stand out, and can

live comfortably as a result. Interviewee 1 did perceive Houston to be too conservative for his liking, although he still said he enjoyed the city's diversity and cautioned that he had not lived in Houston long enough to make a more complete appraisal of the city yet. Interviewee 5 also believed there to be much diversity in Houston, but felt that ethnic groups coming to Houston together also stayed together; he mentioned Katy, a Houston suburb, as an example of an Arab cultural enclave within the Houston area where immigrants "don't have American friends or neighbors; or if they do, they don't tend to talk to them." While some interviewees specifically chose to come to Houston because of prior knowledge about it, such as its diversity in the case of interviewee 5, most of either them elected Houston as a first destination due to knowing a friend or family member living there beforehand, or they did not originally request to specifically be resettled in Houston at all.

Deficiencies in Houston's infrastructure, and specifically its public transportation system, represented a common criticism of Houston during the interviews. Transportation for those without a car, or for those before obtaining a car, was a heavy burden for the interviewees. Interviewee 1 said that, before arriving in Houston, he expected to find "a city where there is [good] infrastructure" and instead found that "public transport was non-existent" and that traversing the city to different governmental offices in the initial period after arriving took a significant amount of time. Interviewee 4 also believed transportation in the United States to be "bad" and that "Houston is worse" when compared to cities such as Chicago: "you're wasting like two to three hours a day" in Houston on public transportation, he believed. Interviewee 6, conversely, felt that while Houston is a "big city, [it's] not *that* big" and that it was fairly navigable. Several interviewees also commented on Houston's humid heat, which interviewee 2



described as problematic when trying to walk, ride a bicycle, or take public transportation, three modes of transport which he experienced frequently prior to purchasing a car.

As well as some interviewees having problems with the neighborhoods they were initially placed in, several recounted problems with their initial housing units, as well. Interviewee 4 described his first housing as a “bad experience” and found his neighborhood dangerous, as did interviewee 7, who was even robbed and physically assaulted in her initial apartment complex. Yet finding alternative means of housing beyond that which was initially provided by agencies presented a formidable challenge. As interviewee 1 described, “everything is based on a scoring system” such as a credit score and housing history, which, combined with often-unaffordable rent prices, refugees’ lack of credit history, and refugees’ relative immobility after arrival, meant that finding and securing other housing was almost impossible, despite whatever issues existed with the housing provided by one’s resettlement agency. Having access to a safe and friendly neighborhood was important to several interviewees because of their desire for communal connection, and sometimes due to past traumatic experiences informing their present need for a “community that is safe and obeys the law, and [which] is a safe environment,” as interviewee 5 expressed.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The present research project set out with the goal of building off of previous studies which have examined refugee integration by means of collecting data from refugee persons in the Houston metropolitan area about their self-expressed conceptions of success in terms of their post-resettlement experiences. Through data provided by this study’s group of refugee and Special Immigrant Visa interviewees, success for them meant meeting a variety of socio-economic needs after arriving in Houston, including furthering their education, having social and

familial support, and having access to career advancement opportunities. While interviewees' perceptions of the efficacy and quality of services of their resettlement agencies differed, with some having more distinctly negative experiences and others recounting fewer problems, the interviewees generally found the resources provided by said agencies to support a basic self-sufficiency but not long-term success; something which corroborates literature about the United States' resettlement program, which describes it as providing short-term help with a focus on early employment over more comprehensive services oriented towards the long-term integration of refugees.

Examining extant literature on refugee integration in the United States and abroad suggests that promoting a multi-actor, responsibility sharing 'whole-of-society' approach, as well as increasing refugee self-sufficiency, generally represents a current objective of the international refugee paradigm, and is something which the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees promotes in its recent Global Compact on Refugees framework. Despite the Global Compact's existence, and the fact that the majority of countries are signatories to either the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, how refugee resettlement actually plays out in common resettlement countries is far from standard. Issues such as the bureaucratic management of resettlement programs, political support for refugees within the populace and government, and power struggles between government offices and other refugee stakeholders can greatly impact the experience of a resettled refugee in a particular country. In the United States, reductions in welfare available to refugees since 1980 have coincided with a focus on encouraging early employment, thereby giving the resettlement program an increasing focus on economic integration above other forms of integration. While most refugees do become economically self-sufficient within a year, and in an aggregate sense

refugees positively contribute to the United States' economy, the resettlement program's focus on rapid economic integration simultaneously denies refugees the time, monetary support, and opportunity to develop crucial long-term skills which could better serve their comprehensive integration and success. Correspondingly, though the interviewees in this study managed to attain economic self-sufficiency after resettlement, their outlooks on likelihoods of finding long-term success were irresolute, with most citing at least one limitation on that success resulting from the lack of comprehensiveness of services they were given.

Two primary findings and corollary recommendations emerge from this study, which are informed by both interviewees' responses and previous literature on refugee integration and specifically integration in the Houston area. The first finding is that funding provided in the United States from the federal government to resettlement is inadequate, which limits the resources that resettlement agencies are able to provide to new clients. Increasing the funding given to resettlement agencies would help provide initial support for a longer period of time and therefore provide new refugees an elevated standard of living beyond the base level of self-sufficiency that many resettled refugees currently experience and are unable to escape. The second finding is that, regardless of funding, the quality of services given by resettlement agencies to refugees must be improved. Agencies must undertake more regular internal quality control activities, be more conscientious about their hiring practices so as to hire caseworkers with more compassion and a willingness to listen, and implement better communication lines between agency staff and clients. Owing to refugees' unique socio-ethnic backgrounds, gender roles and expectations, languages, educational backgrounds, and past experiences, agencies should additionally strive to restructure their services around a more individualized and

comprehensive care case management approach, especially during times such as today when fewer new clients are arriving per year and more attention may be given to each case.

With more than twenty-five million refugees registered with the UNHCR across the world, refugee resettlement is a crucially important—though too often imperfect and piecemeal—international effort to alleviate the burdens placed on countries which host refugee camps. Moreover, resettlement should be a means towards providing refugees with hope for a better life. As the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees places increasing importance on coordinating the efforts of different resettlement regimes in pursuit of more harmonized international refugee resettlement practices, careful attention should be paid to data on outcomes of refugee resettlement, including the first-hand thoughts of refugees who have experienced refugee resettlement. Countries which regularly accept and resettle refugees, and people influencing refugee policy therein, must be exposed to and learn from this information in order to work towards continuously creating a more holistic, comprehensive, and humanitarian form of refugee resettlement.

### Limitations

Several limitations are evident in the methodology of this study. An obvious limitation to begin with is the limited number of interviews conducted, primarily pertaining to the research team's limited time and funding. Although each interview was relatively in-depth in its questions asked and answers received, the findings from each interview are of course individualized for each respondent and representative of only one point of view; and therefore the small number of interviews conducted cannot be said to encompass a broad spectrum of the refugee experience in Houston. Relating to this limitation is that the refugees and Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders who were interviewed could have been more diverse in terms of their representation of

nationalities and backgrounds; and also in terms of their experiences after resettlement. For instance, multiple Afghan SIV arrivals were interviewed for the study, which skews the study's collected data as all of these interviewees already spoke English well and arrived as SIVs, who are inherently different in their background from refugees. Although one interviewee was Iraqi, he arrived as a refugee rather than as an SIV.

Most interviewees were male, which was not an intended outcome during the outreach process but which was simply the result of those whom the principal investigator was able to successfully recruit. Of the refugees who had expressed interest in being interviewed, but who either were ultimately unable to do so or who did not follow up with the research team, several were female. Unfortunately, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent stay-at-home orders in Houston served to hinder the researcher's outreach efforts, even if two people were able to be successfully interviewed over the telephone afterwards.

Lastly, many of the interviewees received some support, whether informal or formal, from other community organizations and people outside the purview of their resettlement agencies. Therefore, it is not possible to wholly attribute the outcomes of those persons' indicated levels of success to the resettlement agencies' direct support services.

#### Suggestions for additional research

This study aimed to fill a gap in existing research by informing about refugees' lived experiences in one city through a qualitative, narrative-driven method. However, due to the inherent limitations of the project, as well as the extenuating circumstances of COVID-19 which hampered the project's attempts at data collection, several suggestions can be made to replicate projects like this one in the future in an improved manner.

A first suggestion is to replicate interview-driven projects such as this one across major metropolitan areas in the United States, and with a larger number of interviewed persons each. Having more in-depth qualitative research conducted about refugees in various cities would help inform resettlement agencies with specific area-centered feedback and direct evidence of how their current and former clients are faring, with larger interview pools than used in this study. Any interviewee will bring natural experiential differences which influence their responses to questions; notwithstanding, interviewing more refugees and SIVs, and from a greater variety of backgrounds, including those who speak less English, more females, and more age groups, would make study participants more representative of the refugee population. Secondly, implementing an improved methodology could further the analytical reach of future studies such as this one. Qualitative analysis software such as NVivo, which uses axial coding to identify major themes present in interview transcriptions, could be employed to reveal commonalities and patterns across interviewees' responses in a more accurate manner than was done in this project's hand-coded analysis.

Lastly, the major themes revealed through the interviews notwithstanding, the most personally rewarding aspect of this project for the principal investigator was the process of interviewing and hearing peoples' stories firsthand. While their experiences are recounted as best as possible in the Discussion section with the use of select quotations, attaching the complete transcription or recording of each interview was obviously not an option in this project for the sake of space and clarity. Nevertheless, in the very act of paraphrasing peoples' experiences and fitting them into a narrative, some original aspect of what they said, including its emotional resonance, is unfortunately lost. For this reason, providing access to the entirety of each interview, whether by transcript or by recording, along with each study's published results could

prove valuable for readers of the study who are seeking access to interviewees' responses in detail, or for whom reading or viewing a first-person account may be more resonant and effective in their understanding of refugees' experiences. Thus, future interview-driven studies such as this one may consider beforehand the possibility of asking interviewees for permission to publish full transcripts or videos of their interviews alongside the actual resulting article.

### **Addendum on How This Capstone Project Relates to the Researcher's Field Placement**

During the second year of a master's program in Political Science at Illinois State University, this study's principal investigator was placed with Change Happens!, a social services non-profit organization in the Third Ward area of Houston, Texas, to complete an eleven-month term of professional practice. Change Happens hosts over eighteen social service programs which focus on improving the socio-economic well-being of Third Ward and other Houston-area residents. To fulfill requirements for Illinois State's Applied Community and Economic Development (ACED) sequence, fellows' capstone projects must address a significant issue or problem encountered during the ACED fellow's professional practice experience. This capstone paper serves to inform the operations of Change Happens! in two ways. First, it offers insight into refugee well-being as Change Happens! opens a new refugee mentoring program serving Houston-area refugee youth. Second, it establishes a connection, centered around the theme of displacement, between the socio-economic status of refugees and historic residents of the Third Ward of Houston.

Refugee well-being, and the way such well-being interacts with resettlement programs' structures, goals, and activities, carries such importance precisely because refugee populations are inherently vulnerable. Research demonstrates that refugees can be a great boon to a nation's economy and society—for instance, refugees in the United States pay tens of billions of dollars in taxes each year, show a particular willingness to make long-term investments in their new countries such as opening their own businesses, and earn citizenship and buy homes at high rates (New American Economy, 2017). Any debate regarding the extent to which the accomplishments of resettled refugees can be ascribed to the subjective success of a given resettlement program in facilitating integration, versus the innate resilience and resourcefulness of resettled refugees, is largely subjective in making a determination one way or the other; and it



is moreover prone to politicization and generally not productive for this study's purposes. Nonetheless, putting aside perceptions of whether refugees induce a positive or detrimental effect to a host country, region, or specific municipality, newly-arrived refugees are more likely to have low incomes, to experience poverty, and to rely on public assistance than persons born in the United States and other immigrants (Fix et al., 2017) and are at considerable economic risk. This risk is amplified in Houston, which has a relatively low-wage economy and comparatively higher poverty rates for immigrants and United States residents alike when compared with those of other major metropolitan areas (Capps, Fix, and Nwosu, 2015).

One arguably needed dimension of refugee resettlement which is largely absent in Houston is the widespread presence of a personal mentorship matching program for new refugee arrivals (Digilov & Sharim, 2018) and their children. Speaking generally of resettlement in the United States, services for refugee youths do exist: state and Wilson/Fish programs receive Refugee School Impact grants, which help schools develop programming such as after-school tutoring, summer clubs, bilingual counselors, and parental involvement programs (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2016). However, research conducted in preparation for the launch of Change Happens!' new refugee mentorship program indicates that refugee youths, while expected to 'catch up' to the same levels of educational personal development as their peers, still overwhelmingly struggle with trauma-related behavioral symptoms on top of other cultural adjustments, which lessens their prospects of success after graduating high school: see Appendix 6 for Change Happens' mentoring program's model, which illustrates the factors influencing development of refugee youth. Educational staff and programming in the schools where refugee children are enrolled are additionally often not equipped with the training or cultural understanding necessary to help refugee youths overcome the barriers which are often inherent to

their being exposed to unfamiliar social and educational modalities. Accounts from the Houston Independent School District (HISD) staff corroborate such findings: Shirin Herman, an academic trainer for the HISD who has worked with many refugee youths therein, summarized at the Houston Refugee Mental Health Conference in February 2020 that refugee youths in Houston face an uphill battle in their adjustment to Houston and its school systems.

The new Change Happens! Refugee Youth Mentorship Program was created to address such problems relating to refugee children struggling to adjust to life in Houston. This program was created in partnership with The Alliance for Multicultural Community Services, and its infrastructure will largely be based on Change Happens!' pre-existing My Brother's Keeper mentorship program which addresses "persistent opportunity gaps facing boys and young men of color and [which helps] ensure all youth can reach their full potential" (Breaking Barriers, 2017). Though this capstone project examines the well-being of all refugees and not specifically of refugee youth, a choice made in part due to the difficulties involved with interviewing minors, the study's findings on refugee integration in Houston exist to serve Change Happens!' Refugee Youth Mentorship Program, as well as to inform future research in the refugee services industry. Inherent difficulties involved with the subjective nature of what constitutes a refugee also broaden the discussion to other persons and groups of persons who have faced displacement, whether that of an immediate or historical sort.

While Change Happens!' new Refugee Youth Mentorship Program only explicitly targets youths between 15 and 24 years old, the wide assortment of community organizations, businesses, civic organizations, professional associations, universities, and faith-based organizations that have relationships with Change Happens! and My Brother's Keeper could feasibly be used in a future mentorship matching program for refugee adults, as well. The

Mentorship Program is currently set to run through fiscal year 2020, and depending upon its outcomes its grant may be renewed for future fiscal years as well. The Youth Mentorship Program's goal is to "strengthen the ability of refugee youth to achieve successful integration and thrive within academic, professional, and civic/social spaces," according to the program's strategic focus in its original proposal, which can be viewed in Appendix 6. The program's desired outcomes include four primary activity focus areas: Academic Support & Career Readiness; Critical Youth Empowerment & Civic Engagement; Family Engagement; and Mental Health & Wellness. Whether the Refugee Youth Mentorship Program meets these outcomes in its first fiscal year remains to be seen, as it is quite new and its mid-program evaluations are not yet available. Nonetheless, this mentorship program can serve as a valuable model and learning experience for those looking to create youth or adult refugee mentorship programs in the future.

This study's principal investigator specifically worked within Change Happens' Northern Third Ward Neighborhood Implementation Project (NTWNIP), which works with community members of the Third Ward of Texas, an area historically subject to disinvestment and, with increasing regularity since the 1990s, displacement (Moore et al., 2019) as new development increasingly encroaches from Houston's Midtown area. The NTWNIP works to implement community improvements across five areas of the Third Ward: neighborhood building; education; economic and workforce development; housing; and services for families, children, and seniors.

In many respects, one can compare the socio-economic status of resettled refugees in Houston to that of dispossessed minority populations. Houston's Third Ward has served as a thriving African American community for decades, yet "political and economic forces [have] caused disinvestment and suburbanization" (Moore et al., 2019, p. 9), leaving the present-day

Third Ward as a community which maintains a strong sense of identity and community yet which faces challenges of disinvestment and displacement. Identifying contemporary issues in the Third Ward starts with a recent Third Ward Comprehensive Needs Assessment Data Report, which was published by the Sanfoka Research Institute in October 2019. The Report's survey data was collected in a geographic boundary of SH-288/US 59 to the west, highway I-45 to the north, Cullen Street to the east, and Blodgett Street to the south. The dataset includes responses from 1,616 heads of households in the Third Wards, representing a 49% response rate. The Report observed several negative communal symptoms in the Third Ward due to housing adequacies, low incomes, food insecurity, and looming gentrification. However, the Report also found many positive aspects about the well-being of Third Ward residents, including their high rates of civic engagement and strong sense of community (Moore et al.).

The responses of Third Ward residents in the report bear interesting comparisons to studies measuring refugees' self-reported levels of well-being on the grounds that both groups have faced persistent disadvantages, although of admittedly different sorts in particular detail. While there is no comparative large-scale needs assessment of refugee persons in Houston, data suggests that while refugees perform economically strongly over time (Fix et al., 2017; New American Economy, 2017), reductions in public welfare available to refugees since the 1980 Refugee Act, particularly in Texas, and a program-wide monolithic focus on early employment have left recently-arrived refugees in Texas particularly vulnerable, forcing some to leave in search of help in other states (Digilov & Sharim, 2018). Houston's history of welcoming refugees, its strong labor market and relatively low cost of living, and its multiculturalism makes it attractive for hosting refugees (Shilcutt, 2016; Capps, 2020); yet for those 90% of Houston-area refugees who do not "[get] out of this situation" and significantly improve their socio-

economic conditions after resettlement, as estimated by interviewee 4, those persons may never attain an adequate long-term standard of living.

With limited support for long-term investments such as educational advancement and English language fluency under the United States' resettlement paradigm, refugees arriving at a developmental disadvantage may have a difficult time escaping an economic trap: one 2015 study found that over half of recent U.S. refugee arrivals coming with lower literacy and educational attainment levels have family incomes below twice the federal poverty level (Bernstein & DuBois, 2018), and analysis of American Community Survey data from 2009 to 2011 found that 45% of all United States refugees lived in low-income households (Capps et al., 2015a). One could argue that such situations involving lower standards of living represent not a true salvation for refugees but a symbolical extension of the "protracted displacement" (Easton-Calabria, 2017, p. 3) that many refugees face in camps before arriving at their final resettlement destination. In relation, data from the Third Ward Comprehensive Needs Assessment found that around 50% of its 1,573 respondents reported an annual income level of less than \$10,000, reflecting the "political and economic forces [which have caused] disinvestment" (Moore et al., 2019, p. 9), but which also present the opportunity for an equitable economic revitalization in the area. Of respondents making under \$10,000 per year, only 42.5% owned a personal automobile, with 70.5% of people of higher incomes owning one; and various suggestions were supported by respondents to improve transportation in the Third Ward, including providing more accessible information and education about how to use public transportation. Such feedback reflects the desire of the Third Ward community to empower those with lower economic status to make use of their skills, talents and aspirations. Furthermore, it speaks to both the data given by this study's interviewees, who felt they needed better support in learning to use public transportation

safely and reliably; and to the suggestions of extant literature on refugee integration to “create an enabling environment” for refugees to make use of their skills, including through actions such as improving transportation links and infrastructure (Betts et al., 2017, p. 732).

Besides economic standing and transportation, another foremost practical demand identified in refugee resettlement literature is housing, including quality of housing and rental prices (Bernstein & DuBois, 2018). Several interview-driven studies with refugees have brought up concerns about refugees’ housing conditions and mentioned the effect of refugees’ initial housing on their physical and emotional well-being (Ager & Strang, 2008). Similarly, respondents in the Third Ward Comprehensive Needs assessment found the housing situation in the Third Ward to be inadequate, as rising rental rates and low average residential incomes have created situations where “residents with very low incomes are vulnerable to eviction and may be fearful to report inadequate living conditions to a landlord or an appropriate city department” (Moore et al., 2019, p. 57). This is a reality shared in common with many recently-arrived refugees in Houston, who likewise often suffer in inadequate housing units, are forced out due to rising rent, and feel they have little recourse or alternatives when faced with poor housing situations (Digilov & Sharim, 2018).

Though this study explicitly examined the well-being of refugee persons in Houston, the United States, and elsewhere, the struggles faced by refugees in the integration process, though they sometimes derive in part from those refugees’ often traumatic experiences, also share much in common with other populations, both minorities and other types of displaced people. In Eric Tang’s 2015 book *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the NYC Hyperghetto*, Tang argues that the history of refugees and non-refugees co-existing under persistently poor standards of living, including situations of welfare dependence and poverty, can be tied to the United States’ history

of political and economic liberalism. Tang's research book takes an in-depth interview methodological approach through its extensive interviews with one Cambodian woman who was resettled as a refugee in the 1980s, and it subverts the linear narrative of refugee resettlement as one "from captivity to rescue to freedom" (Tang, 2015, p. 54). Tang instead depicts the refugee, specifically in the urban setting, as existing in a similar vein as other American minorities who were similarly "expected to achieve economic independence when all external economic conditions made self-sufficiency unlikely, if not impossible" (Tang, p. 68), with any hardships supposedly something to temporarily endure on the way to something better.

Tang's *Unsettled* criticizes the very term 'refugee' as something which is mutable and which has less to do with humanitarian criteria than with the political needs of sovereign nation-states that influence refugee policy. Tang finds that refugees in common discourse are portrayed as "perpetual newcomers on the verge of something else, as those only passing through" (Tang, 2015, p. 70), a supposed status represented by his neologism 'refugee exceptionalism.' This term describes how new refugees are rendered in discourse as those "necessarily in but never of" (Tang, p. 66) hyperghettos and situations of low socio-economic status. In short, refugee exceptionalism assumes that the poverty, joblessness, poor health, and other problems facing refugees are merely matters of "immigrant adaptation" (Tang, p. 71) and will be naturally solved in time as refugees transition to becoming integrated 'nonrefugees' and overcome various "economic, cultural, and social obstacles" (Tang, p. 72) along the way.

First-hand evidence, however, as exemplified by Tang's interview subject, Ra Pronh, suggests an entirely different experience for resettled refugees: that of 'refugee temporality': a long, unbroken period of unsettlement which lasts across different environments, including before and after refugee resettlement has taken place. The prevailing theme of Pronh's life is not

a linear progression towards the “deliverance and redemption” (Tang, 2015, p. 21) promised by refugee resettlement, but rather that of ‘unsettlement’: of being “transferred from one state of captivity to the next” (Tang, p. 49). Each successive step in Pronh’s journey—including captivity at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, being resettled in New York, and fighting against the increasing restrictions imposed by the Clinton administration’s welfare reforms—merely renewed her captive status as a victim of “capitalism, [which necessitates] extreme poverty” (Tang, p. 84). Though American government policies established ostensible anti-poverty measures, such as welfare reforms, such policies proved to be ignorant of urban refugee realities and ineffective in practice, and served to worsen the living conditions of urban refugees and other lower-class individuals alike, thereby trapping them in a cycle of poverty.

Tang argues that, in the media and popular discourse, refugees must “be repeatedly saved from the named enemies of liberalism: the post insurrectionary underclass” (Tang, 2015, p. 72-73). However, Pronh’s recollections and Tang’s research instead depict refugee groups either as being ‘whitened’ and in need of rescue—and therefore as a continuing justifying cause for foreign intervention—or alternatively being ‘blackened’ as having “few skills to succeed in the primary labor market” (Tang, p. 65), being associated with high unemployment, welfare dependency, and crime alongside the underclass, and ultimately as paradoxical enemies of liberalism, just as the black and latinex underclass. Despite the promises of Pronh’s refugee resettlement agency that she would escape her poor housing situation by finding gainful employment, she and other contemporary refugees remained on welfare long after she expected to be self-sufficient and never possessed the resources required to escape her new urban confines of poverty; thus, Pronh existed in a prolonged state of ‘unsettlement.’ Neither Pronh’s refugee resettlement agency, nor the government welfare programs which imposed restrictions and attempted to cut her off



thereafter, would ever admit the “failures of a resettlement program that once boldly predicted refugee self-sufficiency” (Tang, p. 81).

The failures of refugee resettlement as depicted in *Unsettled*, which range far beyond a critique of the United States’ resettlement program’s tendency to focus on employment, suggest deeper social and political problems in the United States with regards to housing markets, welfare programs, and the intergenerational consequences of concentrated disadvantage. Acknowledging the differentiating effects of Pronh’s being a refugee, her experiences as a longtime poor welfare recipient were not entirely unique, as she shared them with many others in New York City at the time. Rather, the “making of a new underclass out of refugees—[which] was possible under the terms of liberal warfare in the hyperghetto” (Tang, 2015, p. 65) gave refugees many commonalities shared with non-refugee minority groups who were “unemployed and living on welfare while piecing together whatever odd jobs they could find” (Tang, p. 68) and in similar socio-economic straits as refugees like Pronh; except that those other groups had already been ideologically ‘blackened’ and were no longer expected to achieve economic independence. Tang finds that certain refugee groups come to be ‘blackened’ over time, as well, and would thereby cease to be treated as exceptional.

While Southeast Asian refugees such as Pronh were continuously framed as newcomers and thus not “subjected to the same forms of vilification and ridicule that were directed at the putative underclass” (Tang, 2015, p. 66), they were nonetheless affected in similar, although not identical, measure by the fundamental condition of displacement. If “neighborhood inequality [is] one of the most rigid dimensions of inequality in America” (Sharkey, 2013, p. 35) and multiple other population groups are dependent upon a constricting welfare regime which has “meshed with the penal state” (Tang, p. 93), then the failure of some refugees to experience

success, whether by resettlement agencies' economic self-sufficiency measures or by their own indications, urges a critical re-evaluation of exactly what constitutes concepts such as the refugee and displaced person, respectively. In her paper "Canadian Refugee Policy and the Social Construction of the Refugee Claimant Subjectivity: Understanding Refugeeeness," Marie Lacroix examines the very subjectivity of refugees as a concept: specifically, the impact of refugee policy on refugee claimants, and how refugee determination processes respectively classify claimants into refugee and non-refugee status (Lacroix, 2004). Persons with internationally-recognized refugee status may individually share much in common with other nominal non-refugees who have similarly faced situations of flight, eviction, and repeated traumas. A discursive analysis of terms such as refugees, asylees, other displaced persons, economic migrants, and the ghetto necessitates a longer study of its own, and considerable literature on the topic exists (van Dijk, 2018; Behrman, 2014; Park, 2008; Wettergren & Wikström, 2014). For the purposes of this study, such a point is made solely to demonstrate that policies and social conditions which impact refugees—be that their initial displacement, flight, or eventual resettlement—can be understood in parallel with those affecting other displaced persons and minorities, and as more interconnected than one might initially believe.

As alluded to above, 'displacement' in academic discourse could alternatively be viewed as a status not uniquely held by refugees and other kinds of persons categorized by the UNHCR as displaced persons. Internally displaced persons as currently defined by the UNHCR's Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are "persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally

recognized border” (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2019). Internally displaced persons have been displaced from their homes, but have not yet crossed an international border as refugees have. Yet the refugee’s long, unbroken state of displacement as experienced by Ra Pronh both before and after her voyage to the United States can also be seen in parallel with the persistent brutality of American poverty as people are annually evicted from their residences by the millions, even if those people would not nominally qualify as internally displaced in the same manner according to the UNHCR’s definition. Just as Pronh continuously moved between various derelict housing scenarios, for instance, many in the United States lack a residential stability which “begets a kind of psychological stability, [and] which allows people to invest in their home and social relationships. [Residential stability] begets social stability, which increases the chances that children will excel and graduate. And it begets community stability, which encourages neighbors to form strong bonds” (Desmond, 2016, p. 296). The lack of such stability, or the presence of situations of continuous ‘unsettlement’ as described by Tang, is emblematic of the ability of systemic, often racialized inequality to engender displaced persons across a multitude of cultures and creeds.

Inequality in America’s neighborhood environments is “a phenomenon that is not experienced at a single point in time; it is a phenomenon that is experienced continuously, that lingers on within families as time passes” (Sharkey, 2013, p. 45). In short, the advantages and disadvantages of neighborhood environments tend to be passed across generations, a pattern which has changed little in the post-Civil Rights era (Sharkey). Living in an impoverished neighborhood means living in an “economically depressed environment that is unhealthy and unsafe and that offers little opportunity for success”; moreover, cumulative, multigenerational inherited poverty in the American context is “fundamentally interwoven with racial segregation”

(Sharkey, p. 28). While the specifics of refugee poverty and poverty of other minority populations in the United States may differ in some respects, they share in common the pernicious ability to self-sustain across multiple generations, with little outside attention being given to the plight of such people who are in a disadvantageous situation and struggling on a fundamental level.

Change Happens!' Northern Third Ward Neighborhood Implementation Project serves to support resident-driven processes to achieve a healthy, diverse and sustainable community. The project's activities are based on resident-defined community needs. While most Third Ward residents are not refugees, the types of critical issues which the NTWNIP addresses—including ensuring access to fair housing, economic development, and other resources—are not dissimilar to the realities and challenges facing resettled refugees and SIV holders in Houston and throughout the nation. As Tang suggests, re-examining American refugee resettlement with a critical eye demonstrates refugees not as exceptional subjects who are on an inevitable journey towards deliverance, but rather as repeated victims of the same deeper social and political problems in the United States that are experienced by many minorities with regards to housing markets, welfare programs, and the intergenerational consequences of concentrated disadvantage. Hopefully, Change Happens!' new Refugee Youth Mentorship Program and Houston-area refugee stakeholders alike can benefit from this study's findings and serve to improve their programming and policies based on the lived experiences of Houston-area refugees as recounted here.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Measuring Refugee Integration—the International Context, by Daniel Sturm

#### Measuring Refugee Integration – The International Context

By Daniel Sturm, Research and Evaluation Manager, USCCB/MRS  
Oct. 21, 2016 (Draft)

Indicators	The USCCB Migration and Refugee Services	The U.S. Resettlement System	United States – RISE STUDY <sup>1</sup> & ORR Integration Working Group <sup>2</sup>	Germany's National Action Plan on Immigrant Integration <sup>3</sup>	Australia – Refugees, Housing and Social Inclusion Survey <sup>4</sup>	New Zealand Resettlement Strategy <sup>5</sup>	Canada's Approach to Refugee Integration <sup>6</sup>
<b>Definition</b>	Integration is a two-way process in which newcomers and receiving communities work together, creating a world where migrants are treated with dignity, respect, welcome and belonging.	In the U.S., refugee integration is primarily measured as <i>economic integration</i> . Resettlement program goals are to "assist refugees in achieving economic self-sufficiency" (PRM) <sup>7</sup> or "become economically self-sufficient" (ORR). <sup>8</sup>	The RISE study analyzed 10 different integration pathways, measuring integration within each pathway and assigning an individual integration score.	Germany considers integration as a long-term process with the aim of including every-one, enabling immigrants to participate fully in all aspects of social, political and economic life. They are expected to learn German and to abide by the constitution.	The Refugees, Housing and Social Inclusion Survey focuses on the housing, homelessness, neighborhood and broader social inclusion experiences of refugees in Perth and Melbourne.	Refugees are participating fully and integrated socially and economically as soon as possible so that they are living independently, undertaking the same responsibilities and exercising the same rights as other New Zealanders and have a strong sense of belonging to their own community and to NZ.	Canada's approach to integration encourages adjustment by both newcomers and the larger society. Newcomers' understanding of and respect for basic Canadian values, coupled with Canadians' understanding of the cultural diversity that newcomers bring to Canada.
<b>Environment</b>	Family Self-Sufficiency	Self-Sufficiency	Economic Sufficiency	Labor Market Outcomes	Labor Force Participation	Self-Sufficiency	Economic Outcomes
				Vocational Training	Job Satisfaction		
	Cultural Orientation	Cultural Orientation	Education & Training	Education	Education	Education	Education
				Income & Social Integration	Income		
	Housing	Housing	Housing		Home Ownership	Housing	Housing
			Children's Education	Early Childhood Education			2nd Generation & Schools
	Ongoing Social Services	Ongoing Social Services	Health & Wellbeing	Health	Physical Wellbeing	Health and Wellbeing	Health and Mental Health
<b>Networks</b>	Ethnic Community Support		Social Bonding	Sport	Neighborhood Connections		Social Connections
	Parish Support		Social Bridging	Media			Age, Gender, Diversity
	Community Consultations	Community Consultations		Intercultural Openness			Refugees' Satisfaction
<b>Facilitators</b>			Language & Cult. Knowledge	Language	Language	Language	Languages
			Safety & Stability	Crime/Violence/Discrimin.	Discrimination		
			Civic Engagement	Civic & Polit. Participation	Citizenship	Participation	Citizenship
				Equal Opportunities			

<sup>1</sup> Lichtenstein, G., Puma, J., Engelman, A., Miller, M. [The Refugee Integration Survey & Evaluation \(RISE\) Study, Year 5: Final Report – A Study of Refugee Integration in Colorado](#) 2016.

<sup>2</sup> ISED Solutions/The Integration Work Group for the Office of Refugee Resettlement. [Exploring Refugee Integration: Experiences in Four American Communities](#) 2010.

<sup>3</sup> German Federal Ministry of the Interior. [Nationaler Aktionsplan Integration. Zusammenhalt stärken – Teilhabe verwirklichen](#) 2012

<sup>4</sup> Paul Flatau, Val Colic-Peisker, Alicia Bauskis, Paul Maginn, and Petra Buergelt. [Refugees, Housing and Social Inclusion Survey](#) The University of Western Australia, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Immigration New Zealand. [Refugee Resettlement: New Zealand Resettlement Strategy](#) Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Hyndman. [Research Summary on Resettled Refugee Integration in Canada](#) Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> The U.S. Department of State. [FY 2017 Notice of Funding Opportunity for Reception and Placement Program](#) 2016.

<sup>8</sup> The U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement. [Voluntary Agencies Matching Grant Program – FY 2014 Program Guidelines](#)

**Appendix 2: Fiscal Year 2019 Report on Refugees and SIVs, from the YMCA South Texas Office for Refugees**

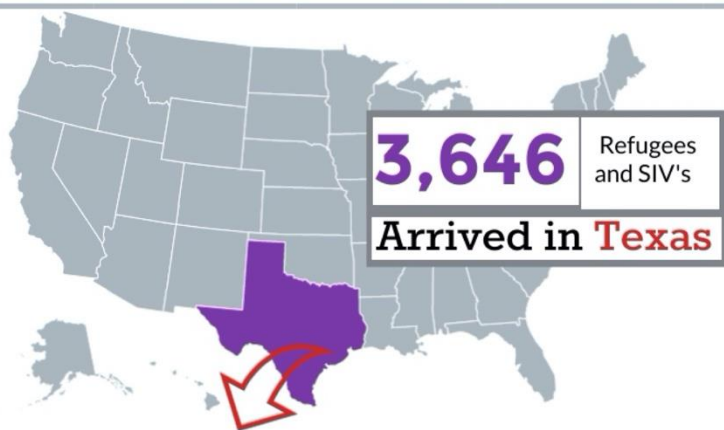


**2019**  
 Oct. 1, 2018 -  
 Sept. 30, 2019

**ARRIVALS**

**25.9 Million**  
 Refugees **WORLDWIDE**

**37,885**  
 Total US Arrivals

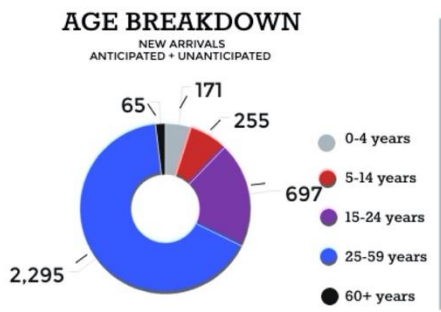


**HOUSTON WELCOMED**

**3,897** **INDIVIDUALS**  
 1,021 Refugees and SIVs  
 2,876 Other

**28%**  
 of the Texas Refugees and SIVs arrived in **Houston**

**DEMOGRAPHICS \***



\* Total number of demographics and programs do not reflect all clients. \*  
 Only a portion of the arrivals enroll in state-administrated programs.

## ELI UTILIZATION



**1,391**  
Active clients enrolled

**559**  
Clients **completed**  
program



**394**  
of the clients **level'd up**  
(Oct 2018 - August 2019)

## EMPLOYMENT



**1,815**  
Total job  
placements  
(Oct 2018 - August 2019)



**\$11.40**  
Average hourly  
wage (for the 1130 job  
placements)



**1,548**  
Offering Health  
benefits (85%)

## CAREER ENHANCEMENT

**129**  
Total number of  
clients in  
Vocational  
Training



**78**  
Clients  
**completed**  
program



**32**  
are receiving their  
Professional  
Re-certification

## SAS

A total of  
**4,304**  
Clients are  
receiving  
Case Management



## Top 3 Goals

1. Federal and State support programs
2. Orientation and Cultural Adjustment
3. Health

## CIVICS



**190** Active Clients  
receiving civics  
courses

**46** Clients **completed**  
the program



## CITIZENSHIP

**436** Clients are  
receiving their  
LPR

**203** active clients in  
pursuit of the  
citizenship

## CHALLENGES

- 1 Given a recent increase in Cuban Arrivals, the region is currently seeing a large delay in their receipt of EAD documentation.
- 2 The new Public Charge rule is creating fear, confusion and lack of participation in service (RCA, RMA, TANF, etc.).
- 3 Given changes in policy and documentation, refugees are facing a multitude of challenges in receiving public benefits.



**Appendix 3: Phases of the Refugee Career, from Slides 8-12 of Hadidja Nyiransekuye's 2019 Presentation "Contextualizing the Refugee Story: A Basis for Mental Health Intervention"**

## The Refugee Career

- **Pre-flight**
  - Social role
  - Activity
  - Built environment
  - Belonging
  - Beginning violence
  - Change in life trajectory
  - Tipping point

## The Refugee Career (Cont.)

- **Flight:**
  - Worsening violence
  - Forced displacement
  - Traumatic Losses: death, safety, possessions, separations
  - Assaults: physical assault; Sexual assaults/rape; psychological maltreatment
  - Discrimination leading to cultural adjustment: name changes, lies, bribes etc.
  - On the move; more losses ( Betancourt et al., 2017).

## The Refugee Career (Cont.)

- **First Asylum- Refugee Camps and Countries of first asylum**
  - Discrimination
  - Precarious Health
  - Unemployment
  - Dependency
  - Loss of Social Status
  - Children's education in jeopardy
  - Disintegration of family unit ( underage marriage of girls; women raped)

## The Refugee Career (Cont.)

- **The Clement- in search of final destination**
  - Resettlement application
  - The Vetting Process-Lengthy and expensive
  - Dependent on third country's willingness to accept refugees
  - Varies between 18 months to 10 years

## Refugee Career ( Cont.)

- **Settlement and Adaptation**
  - After acceptance in the new host country
  - Continues up to three years
  - Include the first euphoria of feeling safe for the first time
  - Learning new language
  - All the necessary skills to survive in a new place: money ,bus system; children schools for those with children
  - Place of worship
  - Shopping
  - Immunization
  - First job
  - First mental health symptoms set in

**Appendix 4: List of Interview Questions asked by Principal Investigator During  
Semi-Structured Interviews**

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Please be as specific as possible!

1. Tell me a little about yourself.
  - a. Where are you from?
  - b. When did you arrive in the United States?
  - c. How long have you lived in Houston?
  - d. Where do you currently work?
  - e. What resettlement agency/agencies did you work with, if any?
2. What does personal success mean to you?
3. How well do you think you have integrated or adjusted to life in the United States?
4. What are some of the obstacles or difficulties you have faced since coming to the United States; or what have you not felt successful about?
5. What are some personal successes you have had since moving to the United States? Why were you happy with them?

**Note: The below questions may or may not be asked, depending on the interviewee's responses to the above questions regarding their conceptions of success. For example, if a given interviewee is not particularly concerned with employment, income levels, etc. as an indicator of their personal success, I may not delve as deeply into that subject matter.**

**Additionally, because this is a semi-structured interview, some questions might come up that are not on the question list.**

6. What jobs have you had since you came to the United States?
  - a. Were they good jobs or not?
7. What are your career goals?
  - a. Do you feel you have the skills AND opportunity to achieve them?
8. How independent or self-sufficient do you feel you are? Such as having enough money, having reliable transportation, etc.
9. How comfortable are you with English?
  - a. (If less than totally comfortable: what problems does this cause you?)
10. What were your expectations before coming to the United States – what did you envision/imagine your life would be like; and what services you would receive?
  - a. Did things happen that way or differently?
11. Did you like the resettlement agencies you worked with? Why or why not?
  - a. What services did they provide you, such as English classes?
    - i. Were they helpful?
12. What do you think of American culture? What do you like or dislike about it?
13. Do you feel socially comfortable or accepted in everyday life here?
14. How many people do you know in your neighborhood?
15. How many other people [name of their home country or self-identified group] do you know here?
  - a. How many are friends, or people you see often?
16. What is one thing you would change? Like a job, house, city, etc.
17. What is one thing you are satisfied with? Like a job, house, city, etc.

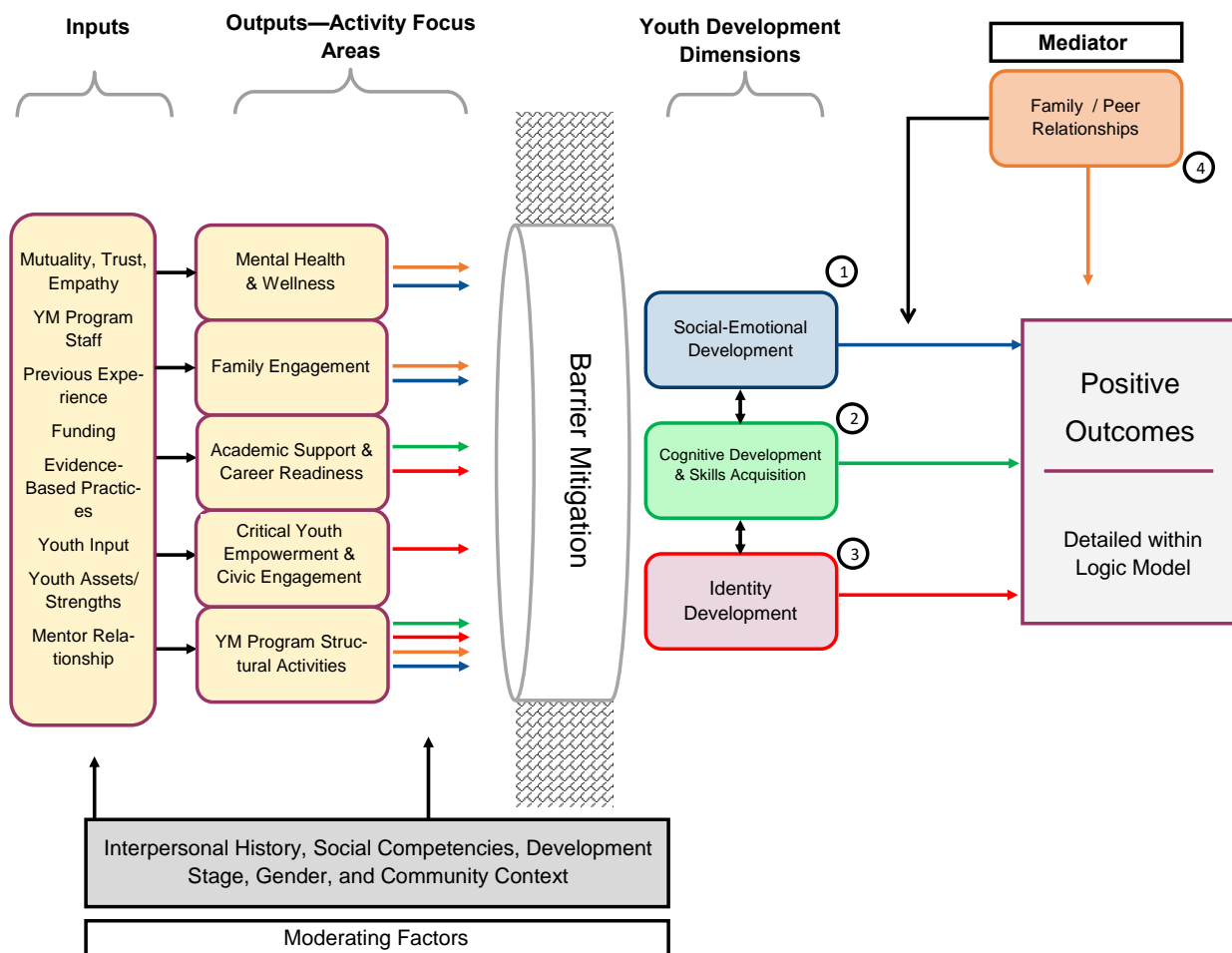
**Appendix 5: Summary of Short-Term Employment Outcomes in Texas, 2011-2015,  
from Digilov & Sharim’s “Refugee Realities: Between National Challenges and  
Local Responsibilities in Houston, TX”**

**TABLE 4 Summary of Short-Term Employment Outcomes in Texas, 2011-2015**

Sample of Texas Resettlement Agencies with the Largest Caseloads (2011-2015)				
City	Enrollment Sample	Self-Sufficiency after 120 Days	Self-Sufficiency after 180 Days	Average Hourly Wage
Houston	5,768	58%	79%	\$8.92
Dallas	3,692	77%	87%	\$8.44
San Antonio	2,394	62%	82%	\$8.45
Austin	615	56%	82%	\$9.19
<b>Sample Total</b>	<b>12,469</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>\$8.70</b>

Note: Data comes from caseloads of Matching Grant cases. Since this system was built to be applied to the most employable, it should overstate employment outcomes. In Texas, however, the limitations of public welfare force many families into the Matching Grant program, thereby making the sample set more representative of average cases.

**Appendix 6: Refugee Youth Mentoring Program Model, from the Refugee Youth Mentoring Program led by The Alliance for Multicultural Community Services and Change Happens!**



**Appendix 7: Tables 3-9: Summarizing interviewees' responses to topics through paraphrase**

Table 3

Participant number	Key responses pertaining specifically to economic success and employment
1	Had not started working yet due to somewhat recently arriving. Felt the need to polish his skills before joining the labor market and was optimistic about being able to do so.
2	Felt obtaining a job in the United States is not easy, as you must know someone in an office before applying to have a realistic chance of being hired. Felt obtaining a job does not depend enough on experience as it should. Found that "everyone can get a job" in the United States, even if not a good job.
3	Obtained first job not through resettlement agency, but through friend; however, other refugee clients he knew at the same agency reportedly did not like their first jobs, which were "just the first job[s] available."
4	Felt the jobs initially offered through his resettlement agency's services were not good long-term opportunities and, while some were high-paying, they mostly represented a "trap" as their long hours precluded refugees working there from advancing their education through part-time school.
5	Experienced significant struggles with expectations versus reality regarding employment, given his background as a professor; did not enjoy first job provided by agency. Had found employment since, including as a refugee case manager and currently as an interpreter; however, his vision of success was returning to his old career, and for this reason he wished to eventually return to his home country. Did not anticipate that recommendations are the "most important (thing needed) to hire" someone, as opposed to skillset.
6	Was not offered a job by resettlement agency due to being a child at the time. Believed having a job to be very important; however, had noticed that many refugee youths go to high school and then drop out in order to get a full-time job, rather than furthering their education.
7	Noted the importance of developing a good network for careers in the United States: "there is everything here, but you need a good network."
8	Found networking very important: it's "not what you know, but who you know." Felt he currently had the resources and opportunities he needed to succeed professionally.

Table 4

Participant number	Key responses pertaining specifically to education
1	Felt he was “spoiled” by free education in Europe, and now finds a very different educational system where you have to pay for everything and usually must take out a loan.
2	Was happy he and his children were going to school and saw it as a good opportunity. However, believed that “everyone cannot go to school” in the United States due to lack of equal opportunities. Frustrated with lack of foreign education accreditation, as his foreign degree was not accepted in the United States. Felt 100% of foreign education should not be refused, and that universities should accept at least some of his prior education.
3	Valued education very highly and wants to obtain a degree from the United States at some point; however, never had the opportunity to do so after resettlement due to immediate limitations of money, time and family commitments. “For my education, it’s hard here in America.”
4	Found educational attainment very difficult as a refugee, as there was nobody to help with applying for colleges and scholarships; and found going to school while simultaneously working, as he did, to be exceedingly difficult. Taught himself many skills to compensate his for lack of educational opportunities in the United States so far.
5	Frustrated with lack of accreditation of foreign degrees. While initially he advertised to employers that he was a professor, he afterwards made separate résumés reflecting education levels of down to high school, because “not all [employers] like to know that you are a professor.”
6	Appreciated public schools being free in the United States, and valued education very highly; graduating high school was a major success for her and a source of happiness for her father. She currently wanted to return to college and finish her degree. During elementary school, before she learned English, she had many communication problems with other people; and in middle and high school, other children caused her and other refugee children problems because “they didn’t have the same clothes [and] couldn’t speak” the same language.
7	Struggled with accepting the lack of education accreditation, as she owns a master’s degree abroad. Wants to obtain professional certificates here, but this is made difficult as her first priority is maintaining a stable income.



8	Would change education accreditation situation if he could: “employers should know that [I have] lots of experience.” He would like to see resettlement agencies advocate for all migrants and help them return to their original work fields.
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Table 5

Participant number	Key responses pertaining specifically to the role of the United States’ government in post-resettlement experiences
1	The United States’ resettlement paradigm does not seem to help refugees integrate and become part of a “bigger society”; although integration is a two-way street, and the general society of a country has to be ready to accept those people as well. Also disappointed at the lack of integration of governmental systems. Perceived a heavy emphasis on finding a job within refugee resettlement in the United States.
2	After losing his passport, the government was very unorganized and unhelpful in his efforts to obtain a replacement one. He felt that government offices were not properly communicating with each other, forcing him to make repeated appointments on his own and struggle with public transportation to get there over the course of over four months. He also felt treated with mistrust due to losing this document, rather than adequately helped.
3	No specific comments on the role of government in particular.
4	Had higher expectations of the government than what he experienced. Felt the government should provision refugees with more financial support, more useful training programs, and a stricter emphasis on learning English in order to help them more than simply survive.
5	Felt the system of resettlement agencies cannot make one successful, as it is “outside their purview.” Provisions from resettlement agencies helped him live for the first few months, but not to “succeed.” Success from that point came primarily from his own efforts. Had no problem with the United States’ bureaucracy, but observed that other refugees who spoke less English had more problems going to clinics, opening a bank account, resolving issues with SNAP benefits and social security cards, and the like.
6	No specific comments on the role of government in particular.
7	Was expecting a “good government to help me start my life,” but felt she “didn’t receive any help” when struggling early on. Appreciated that “you have your human rights” in the United States, but cautioned that statement by saying that “you need to know your rights” and be made aware of them.
8	No specific comments on the role of government in particular.

Table 6

Participant number	Key responses pertaining specifically to case management and direct support services
1	Generally pleased with case management support and understanding of the agency's natural limitations. However, felt there is "a lot of bureaucracy around" the programs offered by the agency; for example, having to sign consent forms multiple times for multiple different tasks. Found the cultural orientation classes which were offered to be inadequate.
2	Had a negative experience with his case manager, and felt his resettlement agency behaved as if they "never had this experience before" when he lost his passport, and that the agency was not helpful.
3	Grateful to his resettlement agency for funding his taking business classes at a local college. Was given an apartment and had rent paid for 6 months by agency; did not mention any negative experiences with them.
4	Was provided SNAP benefit and cash benefit services for 3 months and Medicaid for 6 months. Found first job on his own, as the jobs provided by resettlement agency were "basic and very labor-intensive." Found resettlement agency's services to provide for a basic standard of living enough to "survive" but "you're not going to have a good quality of life." Felt agency's services were not entirely helpful to him, but also that "their hands are tied" and "they gave us what they were able to give us."
5	Appreciated being provided an Arabic speaker on his first day, and had no specific problems with case management services. Was still very disappointed with the jobs being offered by his agency, especially given his high level of education.
6	Felt her family's case manager did not give them an adequate tutorial about their apartment, leaving them unable to independently use appliances for a time afterwards. Also wished her agency had taught her family more about the bus system and, in general, demonstrated how to do things instead of relaying instructions.
7	Very unhappy with her resettlement agency's response to an injury she suffered from early on, and felt that they were unhelpful and did not believe what she said. Suggested that resettlement agencies "[institute] more programs that teach us how to better ourselves and have more information, [because] what they are doing is not helpful. They need to teach us how to do things. [And] better empathy is

	needed; they just lied about things.”
8	Expected better quality of services from his agency: while he expected to “feel supported and comprehensively provided for,” he felt what was provided by his agency was enough for a basic self-sufficiency. Felt that agency orientations “barely tell you what you need to know” and do not offer enough practical advice, and that every client was not always aware of useful agency programs such as vocational training programs. Felt there was a lack of transparency and work ethics in his resettlement agencies, and that agencies were not obtaining feedback from their clients; that they did not treat clients enough like individuals; and that agencies were too punitive and quick to put refugees’ cases into non-compliance.

Table 7

Participant number	Key responses pertaining specifically to language
1	Believed that resettlement programs should systematically teach refugees the language of the host country at a high level before successful integration can take place.
2	Saw language as a necessary aspect of feeling successful and integrating into a host country’s society.
3	“Language in America is essential.”
4	Knew other refugees who do not speak English after several years of residing in the United States; felt they should have been pushed harder by their agencies to learn English instead of needing to find a job immediately and stopping English classes at that time.
5	Posited that in order for refugees to understand the society, community, educational system, economic system, and political system of their host country, they must have a command of that country’s language. However, saw many other Arabic-speaking refugees who “have a problem with language” and who only ever see other Arabic-speaking people.
6	Is a fast learner of languages; however, her parents, despite attending English classes, were not able to learn English. Felt that knowing English early on helped her have few difficulties with adjusting and cultural bridging.
7	Is comfortable with English, but did not feel her English was yet sufficient for use in professional situations.
8	Had few language-related problems due to already knowing a high level of English when arriving. Found the English classes provided by his agency to be insufficient: there was little time spent in them, and they could be prematurely

	ended by finding a job.
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Table 8

Participant number	Key responses pertaining specifically to social and cultural integration, relationships, and networks
1	Believed that participating in the culture of a host country is key, and is beneficial to the society and the refugee. Otherwise, the natural instinct is to solely associate with like-minded people. Found American culture not particularly conducive to cross-cultural interactions, as it is not “really accepting of me knocking on neighbors’ doors” and introducing himself.
2	Found the United States to be very culturally individualistic, and that people are not dependent on each other enough; relatedly, American residents do not take enough of an interest in refugees’ lives and do not make them feel very welcome. Felt there is a cultural stigma towards refugees, especially those from the Middle East, which is held by many American citizens.
3	Took ten years to feel comfortable, or well-integrated and adjusted, in the United States. However, early after resettlement he easily made many social connections with his neighbors, many of whom were also immigrants; this helped establish a personal network for him. Felt a strong sense of neighborhood belonging there, even though at the time there were relatively few people from his home country. Found American culture too diversified to truly categorize, but believes that “people leave you to yourself and people don’t touch other peoples’ cultures.”
4	Little feeling of culture shock, and adapted quickly, in part by learning from others’ behavior. Little sense of neighborhood bonding in initial housing complex, and moreover experienced certain negative interactions with people living nearby.
5	Found American people to be nice and helpful people, and that they respect the religion of others; however, had felt singled out as a minority before, as well. Felt happy with the rule of law where he currently lived. However, felt a large culture shock upon arriving, and knew of many other Arabic-speaking people who never learned English and who struggled more than him. Cited a high divorce rate for refugees in the United States “due to [the] pressures of new cultures,” and three or four other people he knew eventually “got depressed and went back” to their home country. Believed that 2 <sup>nd</sup> -generation refugees and immigrants are more successful at integrating.
6	Felt American culture is very understanding and adopting, and that people have open arms. Felt generally accepted “being here” in society. Although not everyone has welcomed her, she liked in American culture that most people have a low tolerance when they discover that discrimination is occurring, and that they “respect everyone in their own position.” Though she adapted to life in the United

	States fairly easily, she found a problem with 2 <sup>nd</sup> -generation children such as herself is that they “will forget their culture.”
7	Experienced a large culture shock in the United States, and felt that people are cold and do not help each other and that “relationships are very far from each other,” including between family members. Felt that, at least on a surface level, people are “very nice and friendly,” but also that there is considerable racism in the United States.
8	“There is a relationship between time and feeling comfortable. It depends upon the person who arrived here. If someone accepts the reality, it’s much easier for them to adjust. But for others who always remember their previous life, then it’s harder to adjust.” Liked that there is a “system and a way of respect” in the United States.

Table 9

Participant number	Key responses pertaining specifically to Houston
1	Houston is very diverse, but it may be too politically conservative for his liking. Found it to have bad infrastructure and public transportation.
2	Houston is a multicultural community, which is a positive. Found public transportation in Houston very lacking, which before buying a car created problems for him commuting to work and for his children, who lacked access to school bus transportation in their initial housing unit.
3	No specific comments on Houston in particular.
4	“Transportation [in the United States] is bad, and [in] Houston [it] is worse . . . [and] if you’re talking about the whole of Texas, it’s very bad. You’re wasting like 2 to 3 hours a day.”
5	Found Houston has much diversity, which is also why he chose to come to Houston originally. Felt ethnic groups “coming to Houston go together [in order] to stay together—Arab people included.” However, he believed that “living as a group constantly” is not conducive to integration.
6	“Houston is a big city; but not THAT big.” Knew nothing about Houston before coming there; her family elected to come because their neighbors had decided to go there. Felt Houston posed transportation problems, and remembers walking to the store for 30 or 45 minutes at a time with her family before owning a car.
7	Was able to purchase a car within two months after arriving, but struggled with transportation around Houston before that time and mostly felt compelled to ask friends for rides rather than rely on public transportation.

8	Liked that Houston is very diverse. It is “different cultures combined together that makes things unique.”
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