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Rescaling resettlement: how meso-level actors shape refugee policy

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Dissertation

**RESCALING RESETTLEMENT: HOW MESO-LEVEL ACTORS SHAPE
REFUGEE POLICY**

by

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DEDICATION

To Louisa

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RESCALING RESETTLEMENT: HOW MESO-LEVEL ACTORS SHAPE REFUGEE POLICY

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the processes and outcomes of the United States' refugee resettlement policy. Specifically, I ask: how are refugees selected? How are refugees processed abroad? And how are refugees incorporated once they arrive? Drawing on statistical analysis of previously unreleased government data, 150 interviews, and nineteen months of ethnographic fieldwork across the transnational chain of resettlement, this study examines the logics of practice and patterned interactions—among refugees, civil society, and state agencies—that shape outcomes of resettlement. The predominant framework to understand resettlement posits a relatively straightforward reintegration of refugees into national citizenship regimes. In contrast, this dissertation demonstrates how constructions of refugees as “ideal beneficiaries” produced through meso-level social processes shape the distribution of scarce humanitarian resources and the experiences of refugees. I also show that refugees respond to these constructions in complex ways, sometimes internalizing them and sometimes challenging them, thereby creating social dynamics and subjectivities not accounted for by the predominant framework.

I develop the above argument across three empirical chapters, each examining a distinct stage of resettlement: selection, processing, and reception. To explain how refugees are selected, I draw attention to a transnational social system of constructing “clean cases.” These are cases that can be identified and processed in stable and predictable ways to meet US admission demands under complex constraints. This system concentrates spaces around a relatively small number of groups, undermining humanitarian ideals of distributional equality. Examining social dynamics of processing, I find that frontline practitioners in Uganda grapple with refugees’ expectations of attaining resettlement and the reality of limited spaces and long, uncertain wait times. Practitioners respond by creating physical barriers and administrative procedures that force refugees to wait and be patient. These findings challenge straightforward notions of resettlement as “solution,” showing instead that processing involves coercion and compounds traumatic waiting. Lastly, at sites of reception, I find that local actors have rescaled federal resettlement policy, but that policies diverge across Atlanta and Pittsburgh because of their distinct histories. I term these local policies “urban incorporation regimes,” and show how they valorize different aspects of refugees’ identity, leading to place-based modes of identification.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDC	Center for Disease Control and Prevention
CRS	Critical Refugee Studies
DFID	United Kingdom's Department for International Development
DHS	United States' Department of Homeland Security
EO	Executive Order
GTD	Global Terrorism Database
HHS	United States' Department of Health and Human Services
HIAS	Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
IIAC	Immigrant and International Advisory Council
I/NGO	International/Non-Governmental Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JFCS	Jewish Family and Community Services
OPM	Uganda's Office of the Prime Minister
PRM	US Department of State's Refugee Bureau
R&P	United States' Reception and Placement Program
RSC	Resettlement Support Centers
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USCIS	United States Citizenship and Immigration Services
VolAgs	Voluntary Agencies

CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

RESCALING RESETTLEMENT: HOW MESO-LEVEL ACTORS SHAPE REFUGEE POLICY

Introduction

Eighty million people are currently displaced worldwide. Of these, twenty-six million are classified as “refugees” under international law—the highest number since World War II (UNHCR 2020b). Moreover, half of the global refugee population has been in exile for five or more years, meaning that millions of people across the globe are living in protracted states of legal exclusion (Milner and Loescher 2011).¹ In response, there are renewed calls for expanding access to third-country resettlement (UNHCR 2018), which involves states inviting refugees to travel and then providing them permanent residency and a pathway to citizenship (see UNHCR 2011). Indeed, resettlement offers refugees one of the only safe, viable, and legal routes out of long-term exile. At the same time, less than one percent of refugees are resettled each year, and those selected confront long, indeterminate waits abroad for processing. Meanwhile, the few who travel abroad face challenging journeys of incorporation in their new homes. The prominent position of resettlement as a “durable solution” to refugee displacement thus calls for greater attention to the complex social dynamics of selection, processing, and reception.

Taking the case of the United States, which has historically admitted over two-thirds of refugees resettled globally, this dissertation therefore asks: how are refugees

¹<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/protracted-refugee-situations-explained/#How%20many%20refugees%20are%20living%20in%20protracted%20situations>

selected for resettlement? How are refugees processed abroad? And, how are refugees incorporated once they arrive in countries of resettlement?

According to official policy, resettlement is a humanitarian program aimed at providing protection to particularly vulnerable refugees across the globe by reintegrating them into national citizenship regimes (UNHCR 2011). In other words, resettlement aims to transform “refugees” into “national citizens.” Much of the existing scholarship adopts this binary framework, casting the refugee and national citizen as relatively homogenous categories and examining the extent to which resettlement policy achieves its stated goal of transitioning refugees across these political statuses.

On the one hand, a sizable body of sociological literature examines the extent to which resettlement policy facilitates the effective reintegration of refugees into national citizenship. Often operating within the segmented assimilation paradigm dominant in the sociology of immigration at large (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, and Haller 2005; Portes and Zhou 1993; Waters et al. 2010), the predominant conclusion is that resettlement policy provides refugees an advantage over immigrant groups with similar social and economic profiles (Bloemraad 2006; Brown 2011; Hein 1997; National Academies of Sciences 2015; Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Rumbaut 1989). Others, however, find that resettlement policy is inadequate, leading refugees to experience marginalization and exclusion in their new countries, therefore undermining their full reincorporation into national citizenship (Gowayed 2019b; Kibria 1995; Tang 2015).

On the other hand, political scientists and legal scholars examine the extent to which resettlement meets its humanitarian objectives of refugee protection abroad. Some argue that resettlement is an effective tool of humanitarian protection, even as it provides refuge to a relatively small number of people each year (Garnier 2014; Loescher 2001b; Sandvik 2010). Others, however, argue that resettlement falls short of its stated objectives, whether due to the constraining influence of national interests on the UNHCR's humanitarian objectives (Chimni 2004; Gibney 2004; Loescher and Scanlan 1986), or due to the technical difficulty of effectively identifying vulnerability and need across the global refugee population (Betts 2017). A team of researchers at Oxford University, for example, recently criticized the effectiveness of resettlement, instead offering a "better" system for identifying needs and allocating refugees based on algorithms and matching formulas (Jones and Teytelboym 2017).

Existing scholarship on resettlement policy therefore proceeds from the assumption that those tasked with implementation are oriented by the goals and objectives outlined in official policy and discourse. It is this assumption that provides the bedrock for analyses and assessments of resettlement policy and the impact of policies on refugees. A broader body of sociological research, however, troubles this assumption by turning attention to meso-level social processes and practices that mediate large bureaucracies and their outcomes. These accounts reveal that practitioners are often oriented by logics and objectives that depart significantly from those stated in official policy and discourse, shaping outcomes and experiences in surprising ways (for example: Brown 2020; Gupta 2012; Krause 2014; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Mountz 2010).

Inspired by work examining how meso-level processes mediate the outcomes of formal policies, this dissertation examines how resettlement policy is actually implemented within specific spaces of selection, processing, and reception. In other words, I aim to grasp who exactly is implementing resettlement policy, what logics of practice they employ to make decisions and distribute – often scarce – humanitarian resources, and what implications these logics and practices have for refugees and the outcomes of their resettlement. To do this, I draw on data collected from a mixed-methods, multi-sited study of the United States’ refugee resettlement program. Data was collected between 2016 and 2019. As will be discussed in more detail below, methods include statistical analysis of previously unreleased State Department data; content analysis of Congressional debates and government and I/NGO reports and documents; expert interviews with policymakers and practitioners at local, national, and global scales; and ethnographic fieldwork in Kampala, Uganda, a global hub of refugee processing; and, Pittsburgh and Atlanta, two US cities that have received significant numbers of refugees over the past several decades but differ in their responses.

I selected the United States to conduct this study given the size and scope of its refugee resettlement program. Indeed, since the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, which formalized a federal resettlement policy, the United States has admitted over two-thirds of all refugees resettled globally. Its program has also been the most diverse, both in terms of the places refugees are selected from and the places that refugees are relocated to. The United States has also been the largest funder of the UNHCR and the agency’s resettlement activities, and has in general been a global leader in establishing priorities,

building global capacity, and providing expertise and best practices for other resettlement countries (Martin and Ferris 2017). As a result, a study of the US program provides broader insights into the structure and practice of refugee resettlement. From the perspective of refugees awaiting resettlement, studying the US program is also consequential as it accounts for the sizable majority of resettlement spaces, making questions of selection, processing, and reception particularly important.

My data reveals that selection, processing, and reception are guided by practices and logics that are either not expected by or diverge from the stated objectives of resettlement policy. Specifically, I trace the production of refugees as particular “ideal beneficiaries” through social processes embedded at meso-level scales. These constructions shape the distribution of scarce resources and experiences of refugees in ways not anticipated by accounts foregrounding national-level policies. I also show that refugees respond in complex ways, at times internalizing these constructions and at other times challenging them, thereby creating novel social dynamics and subjectivities obscured by existing accounts. Following the abductive mode of inquiry (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), each empirical chapter develops the above argument through the analysis of a nested puzzle or problematic that emerged through the course of fieldwork.

Chapter 2 examines a puzzle revealed through my analysis of refugee selection. Despite official discourses around distributional equality and selection based on individual protection needs, I found that resettlement spaces are concentrated around a relatively small number of refugee populations. To explain this puzzle, I trace the

contemporary system of selection through a series of tensions following the end of the Cold War. This system involves desk officers embedded within the US government and UNHCR working with key processing stakeholders to produce “clean cases.” These are cases that can be identified, referred, and processed in ways that satisfy demands for predictable and stable admissions on limited budgets and under complex institutional constraints. This system of selecting refugees shapes the allocation of scarce resettlement spaces in ways independent from official assessments of need and vulnerability, diminishing the likelihood that certain populations will receive resettlement at all.

Chapter 3 turns to refugee processing. Drawing on fieldwork in Kampala, Uganda, I identify a central tension in refugee processing between the high value attached to resettlement by refugees and the reality of scarce spaces and long processing times. In response, local practitioners develop policies that effectively force refugees to wait and accept the temporal rhythms of processing. Refugees internalize norms of waiting and patience, but also come to see African frontline practitioners – rather than resettlement countries – as their primary barriers to resettlement. In expanding the analytic gaze from those refugees resettled to those waiting or left behind, this chapter troubles official framings of resettlement as “solution.” Instead, the administration of resettlement abroad involves coercion and produces new forms of traumatic waiting and liminality. The final part of this chapter examines a highly ambivalent discourse around resettlement at the refugee community level and traces two emergent social projects that seek to turn refugees away from resettlement and toward locally-oriented objectives and concerns.

Finally, Chapter 4 examines the puzzle of place-based refugee identifications in Pittsburgh and Atlanta. These findings are surprising, as extant scholarship expects broadly similar identifications across subnational space given refugees' shared legal status and managed incorporation through a federal resettlement bureaucracy. I explain place-based differences by reference to what I call "urban incorporation regimes," which valorize different aspects of refugees' identity. These forms of valorization are different in each place, however, because the broader urban context shapes which actors respond to refugees, as well as how they view refugees and the ideal outcomes of their resettlement. This chapter therefore points to the importance of urban context in shaping the implementation of resettlement policy and social meaning of refugee status.

In sum, this dissertation calls for greater attention in refugee scholarship to the meso-level social dynamics and organizational practices that mediate and shape the selection, processing, and reception of refugees. Attention to this level of analysis reveals that those tasked with implementing resettlement policy are guided by constructions of refugees as ideal beneficiaries that depart from the straightforward dyad of refugees/national citizens emphasized in existing scholarship. In selecting refugees for resettlement, practitioners coordinate to construct "clean cases" that produce imbalances in refugees' access to this scarce humanitarian resource. At sites of processing, frontline bureaucrats enact policies that coerce refugees into waiting and patience. Finally, at sites of reception, urban incorporation regimes mediate access to material and symbolic resources in ways that valorize different aspects of refugees' identity.

In the remainder of this introductory chapter, I provide further details about the structure and organization of refugee resettlement before examining the neglect of meso-level factors and social dynamics in existing accounts of resettlement. I locate this neglect particularly in the broader Refugee Studies paradigm, which positions the “refugee” as a relatively homogenous political and social category produced through exclusion from nation-states. I then move on to outline the research questions, design, and methods in more detail, as well as the mode of data analysis deployed in this study. A final section then provides a more elaborated outline of each chapter and locates their central argument in relevant meso-level theory.

What is Refugee Resettlement?

Although the managed relocation of displaced people has a long history (Gatrell 2013; Lyons 2013; Qualls 2020; Taparata 2019), the contemporary system of resettlement can be traced to the formation of the international refugee regime following the end of World War II (for histories, see Betts, Loescher, and Milner 2013; Loescher 2001a).

Europe’s postwar landscape was marked by millions of “war refugees,” many of whom were stranded in Displaced Persons camps. A series of multilateral agreements led to the formation of the UN Convention on the Status of the Refugee in 1951 and the formation of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) as the sole international organization responsible for conducting refugee status determinations. Subsequently, the UNHCR was mandated to administer one of three “durable solutions” for refugees: (1) the *voluntary*

repatriation of refugees to their country of origin following the abatement of conflict; (2) the *local integration* of refugees into the country they first claimed asylum; or (3) the *resettlement* of refugees to a “safe-third country,” generally in the Global North, who agrees to provide refugees legal permanent residency and a pathway to citizenship.

Resettlement was the preferred “durable solution” for refugees following World War II (Betts et al. 2013; Gatrell 2011; Loescher 2001a). As well as managing the Displaced Persons camps, the UNHCR helped process and transport over a million displaced Europeans to some thirty-seven countries across the Americas, Australasia, Europe, and the Middle East between 1947 and 1955. Initial programs focused on rebuilding postwar economies and were often quite selective (Gatrell 2011:10–42). Resettlement soon took on a more explicitly humanitarian framing as labor-based selection left many refugees in camps that were elderly, infirm, or disabled. Efforts to resettle these so-called “hardcore refugees” led to 1955 being declared World Refugee Year, an act that solidified the position of resettlement as a core *humanitarian* instrument of refugee protection (Gatrell 2011:77–210). Refugees had a mix of experiences upon arrival in resettlement countries, with a patchwork of government programs, business interests, ethnic organizations, religious groups, and NGOs responding to refugees and incorporating them into local economic, social, and political systems.

Over the seventy years following the emptying of Europe’s Displaced Persons camps, millions of refugees have been resettled through the UN system. For example, 200,000 Hungarians were resettled following the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956

(Zieck 2013); 40,000 Ugandan Asians were resettled during the reign of Idi Amin (Hawkins 1989); 650,000 Vietnamese were resettled following the US invasion of Vietnam (Espiritu 2014); over 250,000 Somalis have been resettled across the globe since 1990 (Besteman 2016); and over 200,000 Myanmarese refugees have been resettled from Malaysia and Thailand since 2004 (Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny 2011).

White settler societies have historically admitted the largest number of refugees, with the United States in particular admitting over three million since the federalization of the country's resettlement program under the 1980 Refugee Act. Over the past twenty-five years, however, resettlement capacity and access has significantly expanded and diversified. For example, the number of countries participating in the UNHCR resettlement program increased from sixteen in the early-1990s to thirty-three in 2019. Access has also diversified, moving from three or four geopolitically significant groups at any one time during much of the twentieth-century, to refugees from over seventy-five countries today. As such, resettlement is a global program and accounts for an important dimension of refugee migration.

The Social Organization and Administration of Refugee Resettlement

The practice of identifying, selecting, processing, transporting, and receiving refugees is complex and involves a great many actors from government agencies, I/NGOs, contracted organizations and businesses, volunteer organizations, religious charities, city officials, and refugee community organizations. These actors are distributed across the transnational chain of resettlement. The multi-sited and diffused

character of resettlement differentiates it from other areas of refugee policy such as asylum processing, where a small number of state agencies and contracted private entities work under centralized forms of authority to enact executive policy. To grasp the organizational complexity of resettlement, it is useful to take an example. Below, I provide a brief overview of the three central stages involved in resettling refugees to the United States: selection, processing, and reception (see Benson 2016; Darrow 2015b).

Before any refugee can be submitted for resettlement, the State Department's Refugee Bureau (PRM) is required to produce an annual document outlining admission quotas for five administrative regions. PRM establishes quotas and priorities in consultation with its key partners and based on global assessments of need (Department of State 2015). The UNHCR, which identifies the sizable majority of refugees resettled to the United States, has its own internal system of establishing needs and priorities from across the global population (UNHCR 2011). This work is coordinated out of its Resettlement Division headquarters in Geneva, which sits atop a global architecture of regional, national, and subnational offices. Since 1995, the UNHCR has held Annual Tripartite Meetings in Geneva between resettlement countries, UNHCR officials, and NGO partners to develop consensus around particular priorities (Garnier 2014). Once the Proposed Admissions Document is established by PRM, the US Congress has the chance to review and debate priorities and budgets during subcommittee hearings and call witnesses to give testimony and answer questions. Once approved, PRM then issues the final admissions document and key referral partners (primarily the UNHCR, but also contracted NGOs, and US Embassies) can begin submitting cases.

To identify and refer cases, deployed UNHCR and NGO staff review existing databases and conduct needs assessments to find cases that fit established criteria (UNHCR 2011). Once these cases are identified, resettlement officers located close to refugee populations prepare referrals, a process requiring expertise, area specialism, and coordination with government agencies and I/NGOs. Referrals then go through a series of secondary checks to mitigate against fraud. Once referrals are finally submitted, one of nine Resettlement Support Centers (RSCs) take up the case and take photos, collect biometrics, hold further interviews, and start the security screening process. Following this, refugees are then interviewed again by a US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) official in the processing country. USCIS officials closely assess the consistency of refugee narratives with case file histories (Sandvik 2011; Thomson 2012). If approved, refugees are subjected to security screening, involving seven US government agencies; and then undergo CDC-managed medical screening for diseases such as tuberculosis. Finally, refugees attend cultural orientation sessions which are generally three-day classes that inform refugees about what they can expect in the US.² In total, the process between initial selection and departure takes from eighteen to twenty-four months.

Once refugees are finally cleared, their travel to the United States is arranged by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and they are allocated to one of nine federally-contracted voluntary agencies (VolAgs) who are mandated to administer the US government's Reception and Placement (R&P) program (Darrow 2015b). These VolAgs

² <http://www.culturalorientation.net/providing-orientation/faqs>

have suboffices in around 180 cities and towns across the country that do the work of receiving and incorporating refugees at local levels. Many of these suboffices have deep roots in their regions of operation and have been supporting refugee reception since before the federalization of refugee resettlement. Staff at local VolAgs meet refugees at airports and administer the initial 90 day R&P program, which involves finding refugees housing, connecting them to core government services, enrolling them in English classes, and finding them their first job (Darrow 2015b, 2015a).

VolAgs also draw on funding beyond the initial R&P federal grants to provide broader and longer-term services to refugees. Beyond (and often alongside) these local VolAgs, a whole range of private citizens, religious organizations, municipalities, counties, libraries, school administrators, and so on enact policies and initiatives to “welcome” and receive refugees. Both the range of funding available to VolAgs and the strength and depth of local civil society engagement varies significantly across place (Darrow 2015a, 2015b; Hein 2006). Refugees can apply for legal permanent residency twelve months after arrival in the United States. It is at this point that refugees can be formally considered “resettled,” in the sense that they have now been reincorporated into permanent legal status (although, see Kwon 2012 for a discussion of the limits of permanent residency for refugees).

From Policies to Practices: The Missing Meso-Level

As can be seen, then, resettlement is a long and complex process that involves numerous state and non-state actors distributed across the globe. Moreover, the state and

non-state agencies and actors involved at each stage of resettlement are themselves internally heterogeneous (c.f. Chorev 2012b; Gupta 2012) and oriented to diverse organizational missions, social contexts, and professional norms (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The diversity of actors involved hence raises questions about the relationship between formal resettlement policy and the implementation of selection, processing, and reception. Implementation and policy formulation also involve complex, iterative interplays between global, national, and local settings, which scholars working in other contexts show changes bureaucratic norms and practices (Chorev 2012a; Halliday and Carruthers 2007). Resettlement furthermore brings together organizations and institutional logics embedded in the otherwise distinct fields of national immigration politics and global humanitarianism (Garnier 2014; Loescher 2001b). Indeed, while global humanitarianism is generally thought of in terms of mobilizing care for “distant others” (Stamatov 2013), resettlement collapses this distance and leverages state membership as a humanitarian good. The administration of resettlement would therefore seem to amplify the tension between national interests and humanitarian values that provides such fertile ground for sociological theory in other areas (e.g. Krause 2014).

Despite the manifold seams of differentiation and complexity mediating resettlement countries and refugees, sociologists have provided little insight into how the global field of resettlement and the relationships between different actors shape outcomes and experiences of resettlement policy. In other words, the question of how resettlement policy is implemented has received surprisingly little attention in sociology. Instead, when attention is focused on resettlement policy at all, scholars tend to reference

national- or global-level factors, emphasizing formal policy procedures and discourses rather than practice. An implication of this tendency is that social processes and practices of implementing resettlement policy embedded at meso-level scales are remarkably under-theorized in extant scholarship.

Below, I outline existing scholarship on refugee resettlement and draw attention to two primary reasons for the neglect of meso-level social dynamics and organizational factors. After discussing critical implications of the existing refugee studies paradigm, I then turn to how sociologists have theorized and accounted for this level of analysis in related areas of study.

Refugee Communities and the Question of Integration

The sizable majority of sociological scholarship on refugee resettlement focuses on the experiences of refugee communities living in countries of resettlement. This body of work generally proceeds from within the segmented assimilation paradigm dominant in the sociology of immigration at large (Portes et al. 2005; Portes and Zhou 1993; Waters et al. 2010). Scholars examine how factors such as refugees' family structure, ethnicity, or human capital profile pattern divergent rates and dynamics of incorporation (Hein 2006; Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou and Bankston 1994), therefore situating refugee communities alongside other immigrant groups. While some accounts pay only cursory attention to the structure of resettlement that refugees come through, most emphasize the unique policy context of refugee reception as an important factor impacting incorporation experiences. Interestingly, the organizations and agencies

tasked with implementing resettlement policy frequently appear in such accounts, but they are generally cast as local instantiations of formal, national resettlement policy.

Portes and Rumbault (2014:215–21), for example, emphasize the role of federally-contracted resettlement agencies in understanding the relatively fast labor market adaptation of resettled refugees compared to other immigrant groups in the United States who enter with similar economic and social profiles. Extending these findings, studies across North America and Europe (see Potocky-Tripodi 2004 for a review) argue that refugees' distinctive access to social service agencies and interaction with the range of religious, charitable, and NGO organizations that tend to emerge around sites of refugee reception constitute a source of social capital (as per the formulation of Coleman 1988) that can be transformed into access and opportunities in the labor market and other important institutional spaces of incorporation.

To take another example, Bloemraad's (2006) classic book, *Becoming a Citizen*, compares the different rates of political incorporation for immigrants and refugees across Canada and the United States. While differences are minimal in Canada, she finds significant differences in the US with refugees naturalizing and becoming civically involved at higher rates than immigrants. She accounts for this through reference to the federal resettlement bureaucracy in the United States, and refugees' broadly positive and supportive interaction with local resettlement agencies and civil society groups. Hein (1997) makes a similar argument, finding that the social service agencies responsible for administering federal resettlement policy in the United States encourage and support

refugees to form community organizations that then provide the social organizational platform encouraging and facilitating other forms of incorporation. Deepening these arguments, Brown (2011) has shown that everyday encounters with resettlement agencies and service providers lead refugees to see their legal status as a secure platform for belonging and claims making. She uses this insight to argue that refugee status denotes a distinctive state/subject relationship, undergirding a novel mode of political subjectivity.

As we can see, meso-level actors are central to scholarship on the outcomes of refugee reception policy. However, these actors are generally seen as *local instantiations of broader national policies and discourses*, and are therefore not theorized or examined in their own right. Even in accounts that do point towards possible variations at the meso-level, the theoretical framework deployed diminishes the potential autonomy of such processes. A good example comes from Hein's (2006) broad-ranging book on the experiences of Cambodian refugees across four US cities. Hein dedicates significant time to the social and organizational response to refugees in each city, but ultimately diminishes the potential significance of these dynamics by reducing them to a binary of "hospitality and hate" (Hein 2006:79–100). The effect is to render local dynamics as essentially variations of the same national process, therefore diminishing their explanatory role in understanding outcomes. Hein's rendering reflects a long-standing tendency in assimilation/integration theory of casting meso-level social processes as impacting the *rate* rather than *outcomes* of incorporation. This perspective is most vividly laid out in Robert Park's (1950:150) classical rendering of "assimilation" as,

...progressive and inevitable. Customs, regulations, immigration restrictions, and racial barriers may slacken the tempo of the movement; may perhaps halt it all together for a time; but cannot change its direction; cannot at any rate reverse it.

Accounts critical of segmented assimilation theory point to the limitations of national resettlement policies in providing effective refuge given broader social and institutional factors. In her landmark study, Kibria (1995) shows the importance of the Vietnamese refugee family structure to life in the United States. Preempting the rise of segmented assimilation theory, which theorizes social capital as the product of intrinsic ethnic characteristics, Kibria showed that the structure of Vietnamese families emerged in response to the inadequacies of the federal resettlement program and challenges of adaptation. Large family structures and the elevation of norms of collectivism allowed families to practice “patchworking,” drawing together and utilizing resources from the labor market and government programs that were “scarce and unstable in quality” (Kibria 1995:79). Developing this perspective, Tang (2015) draws on over a decade of community activism and research to show how fractious and disciplinary relationships with state agencies lead Cambodian refugees to experience a series of displacements following their resettlement to the United States. Refugees therefore feel deeply unsettled decades after their initial arrival. Similarly, Gowayed (2019b) shows that national political discourses and local experiences racialize Syrian refugees, therefore attenuating the apparent stability and security of the refugee status.

While the above accounts problematize straightforward notions of resettlement as effectively transitioning refugees into secure national citizens, these accounts situate their analyses either in processes that are themselves national (such as anti-refugee xenophobia

or the logics and structures of the US welfare state) or to factors external to the implementation of resettlement policy itself. As such, these accounts do not fundamentally challenge the view that resettlement policy is best understood as a national program to reincorporate refugees into national citizenship regimes.

Although working from an anthropological perspective, Aihwa Ong's (2003) study of the Cambodian resettlement experience is one of the few that decenters methodologically nationalist accounts of resettlement policy through attention to refugees' everyday interactions with "refugee agencies; the community hospital; the welfare office and related agencies; law enforcement; [and] the court system [...] who translate problematics of government into everyday operations" (Ong 2003:19). Working from a Foucauldian perspective, however, Ong reduces these actors to conduits of liberal-democratic and neoliberal social technologies of regulation aimed at transitioning Cambodian refugees into a coherent notion of the "good citizen-subject."

Sociology's Metrocentrism

A second way in which sociological accounts offer only a partial understanding of resettlement policy follows on from the above emphasis on refugee integration: i.e., sociology is largely silent about processes occurring beyond the national space of resettlement countries. Hence, while we know quite a lot about how wealthy liberal democracies regulate asylum (Abrego 2011; FitzGerald 2019; Gibney 2004; Menjívar 2006; Mountz 2010; Zolberg 2005), we know relatively little about how these same states regulate and manage access to resettlement abroad.

In short, the sociology of refugees suffers from an entrenched metrocentricism. This point has recently been made in an *American Sociological Review* piece (FitzGerald and Arar 2018) that laments the lack of crossover between the sociology of immigration and refugee studies. The paper also presents a number of other prominent sociologists of migration who have commented upon this lack of crossover. For example, they quote Stephen Castles (2003:14; quoted on 8.2) who lamented that “there is little sociological literature on forced migration and one certainly cannot find a developed body of empirical work and theory.” Instead, our understanding of resettlement beyond the national space of resettlement countries is shaped by the work of anthropologists, political scientists and legal scholars, and historians.

Anthropologists have tended to focus attention on questions of identity construction in resettlement processing, with scholars drawing particular attention to the ways in which notions of “vulnerability” become internalized by refugees through nested institutional performances and narrative practices during refugee status determination, resettlement interviews, cultural orientation sessions, and screening (Ikanda 2018; Jansen 2008; Thomson 2012). Anthropologists also more broadly examine the impacts on refugees of moving across distinct socio-cultural and institutional spaces, each with their own forms and technologies of subject-making (Besteman 2016; Ong 2003). In other words, anthropologists focus primarily on questions of personhood and subject formation, often leaving unexamined the meso-level of organizations and actors that mediate the implementation of resettlement policies.

Political scientists and legal scholars, on the other hand, have developed a sizable literature on the institutional and political histories of formal resettlement policies both at the level of states and the international system. Such accounts often foreground the historic role of the UNHCR and the relative weight of national interests and humanitarian values in shaping resettlement policies (Betts et al. 2013; Chimni 2004; Garnier 2014; Gibney 2004; Loescher 2001a; Sandvik 2010). Political scientists also debate why states accept refugees in the first place, with institutionalist accounts focusing on how liberal embeddedness constrains the democratic will to restrict refugees (Hollifield, Martin, and Orrenius 2014; Joppke 1998), international relations scholars focusing on geopolitics and multilateralism (Loescher 2001a), and critical scholars arguing that refugees are “resources” rather than “problems” for states, providing opportunities to spectacle-ize political disorder, claim sovereignty through recognizing refugees, and perform benevolence and humanitarianism (Espiritu 2014; Lippert 1998, 1999).

For their part, historians have provided in-depth accounts of specific resettlement programs and the institutional and political histories surrounding them (Gatrell 2011; Madoroko 2016; Mortland 2017; Qualls 2020). Even as they provide rich discussion of refugees’ passageway through various socio-institutional constellations and organizational spaces, the overarching focus of these accounts tends to be on big picture political and social processes rather than the role of meso-level actors in shaping outcomes and experiences of resettlement.

The relative neglect of in-depth theoretical engagement with the implementation of resettlement policy within meso-level spaces is perhaps not surprising given the dominant framing of refugees in academic scholarship. According to extant accounts, refugees emerge through nationalist ontologies tied to the post-Westphalia nation/state/citizen compact – as a modern figure that troubles the “national order of things” (Malkki 1995). Most famously, for example, Hannah Arendt centered the refugee as the archetypal political subject of modernity’s contradictions, as an individual lacking “the right to have rights” (Arendt 1951). For Arendt, the situation of the refugee was a rebuke of theories of inalienable human rights, showing instead that rights stem from membership to, and struggle within, (national) political communities (see Somers 2008 for a discussion). Extending Arendt, Agamben (1995) positioned the refugee as the archetypal figure in his theory of “bare life” (Agamben 1998), as a category of personhood excluded from the nation-state and therefore governed under a constant “state of exception.”

The broader Refugee Studies paradigm reinscribes the central divide between refugees and national citizens, drawing especial attention to the legal systems, classificatory schema, and technologies that states and international organizations deploy to produce and secure this divide (Bakewell 2000; De Genova 2013). What emerges in these accounts is a framework that distinguishes between two relatively fixed and homogenous political statuses: the refugee and the national citizen. Hence, while humanitarian agencies may have “sovereignty” over refugee populations in exile, this sovereignty is circumscribed and shaped by the national order, with these agencies

primarily oriented to containing and immobilizing refugees in places of exile (Ashutosh and Mountz 2011; Barnett 2001; Hyndman 2000; Pallister-Wilkins 2015; Pandolfi 2003). In other words, the modern refugee emerges through the socio-legal and normative prism of the nation-state, and the passageway of refugees from exile to national citizen – as inferred by the process of resettlement – is closely tied to national policies.

Reflecting the above, and despite efforts to the contrary (Jensen 2018; Mountz 2010), studies of refugee bureaucracies have been stubbornly state-centric. Beyond scholarship that accounts for the role of independent judiciaries (Goodwin-Gill and McAdam 2007) or human rights advocates (Benhabib 2004; Soysal 2012) in expanding or contracting the concept of the refugee or protections for asylum, few studies examine how the various state and non-state actors involved in regulating refugees shape the outcomes and experiences of refugee policy. The inattentiveness to implementation reflects a broader tendency in immigration scholarship, with numerous, theoretically sophisticated accounts of national immigration policies (FitzGerald and Cook-Martin 2014; Ngai 2014; Zolberg 2009), but very few in-depth accounts of how meso-level actors and processes impact policies and the subsequent relationship between migrants, states, and legal statuses.

Sociological Literature on the Meso-Level

The lack of theoretical attention to logics and practices of policy implementation in accounts of refugee resettlement is all the more surprising given the wealth of scholarship in sociology that demonstrates and theorizes how meso-level processes shape

a whole range of social phenomenon and policy outcomes – especially with regard to bureaucracies (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Field theory, for example, has been a popular theoretical paradigm in sociology. Although a contested conceptual terrain (Barman 2016; Go and Krause 2016), field theory draws our attention to the “meso-level domain” and fundamentally “embraces a relational explanation [of] social action, by focusing on actors’ structural location and their position vis-à-vis others within a bounded arena” (Barman 2016:442). Scholars working within this paradigm have provided fundamental insights into a sizable array of social phenomena, such as the causes of intra-imperial differentiation in the policies of colonial states (Steinmetz 2008); why humanitarian relief agencies select particular projects over others (Krause 2014); how taxonomies and sectors are created in societies (Barman 2013); or why activists engage in particular campaigns (Bartley 2007).

Similarly, scholars have revised understandings of national and international bureaucracies through attention to transnational networks (Chorev and Babb 2009; Goldman 2008; Keck and Sikkink 1999) or the iterative interplay between global norm-making and local implementation (Chorev 2012a; Halliday and Carruthers 2007). Attention to meso-level factors has also helped recast our understanding of the relationship between states, citizens, and subjects in far more relational and contingent terms (Auyero 2012; Gupta 2012; Somers 1994a, 1994b). For their part, social organizational scholars show that the infrastructures mediating policies and large-scale programs with individuals create different outcomes irrespective of formal policy or underlying motivations and values (Healy 2000, 2004; Krause 2014; Schofer and

Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001). Notwithstanding theoretical and conceptual differences, the above accounts all show that social processes embedded at meso-level scales fundamentally shape the outcomes and experiences of policies and programs.

Scholarship foregrounding meso-level social processes are also well-primed to observe and understand the differentialist outcomes of policies and bureaucracies (e.g. Brown 2020; Jensen 2018; Steinmetz 2008). Indeed, while realist approaches to the refugee category have been significantly revised and complicated (FitzGerald and Arar 2018), existing constructivist approaches tend to assume a relatively fixed and homogenous refugee category emerging through national exclusion and racialization (Agamben 1995; De Genova 2013; Malkki 1995). Meso-level accounts, on the other hand, offer the potential for a more relational and contextual take on the classification of refugees, which insist that we inductively explore how refugees take form as beneficiaries and subjects in particular spaces and contexts, and how these understandings and frameworks come to guide a variety of social activities.

In her recent study of the implementation of the US government's Indian Child Welfare Act, for example, Brown (2020) found that institutional and social context shaped whether state officials framed "Indian" as a racial or rather citizenship category. These classificatory decisions had important implications for the administration of the Act and for Native children directly that could not be understood through reference to formal state policy. In line with constructivist approaches to migrants that focus on nested institutional interactions with immigration bureaucracies (Chauvin and Garcés-

Mascareñas 2014; Galli 2020; García 2019; Menjívar and Lakhani 2016), accounts focused on meso-level processes may provide insight into variegated sites of refugee construction.

Meso-Level and Immigration Theory

Before moving on, it is important to briefly note that attention to processes embedded at meso-level scales have in fact driven important innovations in migration scholarship. Starting in the mid-1990s (see Faist 1997), a number of sociologists and anthropologists revised core accounts of the structure and outcome of international migration that centered on either systems or individuals (see Castles 2013; Delgado Wise and Covarrubias 2008; Massey 1999). Instead, migration researchers began to look at how the structure of the family (Massey 1999:36–37), transnational social fields and spaces (Faist 2000; Levitt and Schiller 2004; Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1997), and a “migration industry” composed of brokers and organizations (Fernandez 2013; Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sorensen 2013; Kim 2018) shape dynamics and outcomes of international migration. Attention to this level of analysis helped scholars understand why state efforts to control migration (Basok 2000; Castles 2004; Massey, Durand, and Pren 2014) or forge cohesive national identities (Glick Schiller, Caglar, and Guldcrandsen 2006; Sassen 2002; Soysal 1994; Waldinger 2015) often fail in their intentions and are only ever partial in their effect.

While the above scholarship has generally not turned its attention directly to immigration policies, a nascent body of research driven primarily by analyzes of

undocumented immigrants in the United States has drawn attention to the role of municipal and county officials, school and police administrators, and a whole raft of other local actors in modulating the effects and experiences of state policies and therefore legal statuses (Andrews 2018; García 2019; Lewis and Ramakrishnan 2007; Marrow 2009; Steil and Ridgley 2012; Varsanyi 2011). Refugees have been peripheral to this scholarship (although Watson 2019), however, as the importance of subnational actors is seen to reside in immigrants' lack of legal status, therefore theoretically reducing subnational immigration dynamics to a political binary of inclusion or exclusion (see Nicholls 2019 for a critical review). In other words, refugees' legal status is assumed to mark their inclusion and security, therefore suggesting that subnational dynamics are unimportant in shaping experiences of the refugee status.

Research Questions & Design

The above discussion therefore raises a set of questions about how resettlement is actually implemented and how the relationship between diverse state, subnational, and non-state actors across the transnational chain of resettlement shape the outcomes of policy. Nested within this broad question of processes and outcomes are a set of more specific questions regarding why some refugees are selected for resettlement over others; how practitioners manage resource scarcity in their everyday processing of cases abroad; and how refugees are received and incorporated once they arrive in countries of resettlement.

I examine these questions through a mixed-methods, multi-sited case study of the US refugee resettlement program, focusing specifically on three critical stages: the selection of refugees for resettlement at the global level; the processing of refugees abroad; and the reception and incorporation of refugees in two US cities. Methods include statistical analysis of previously unreleased State Department data; content analysis of Congressional debates, government and I/NGO reports and documents, and secondary policy analyses; expert interviews with policymakers and practitioners at local, national, and global scales; and ethnographic fieldwork in Kampala, Uganda, a global hub of refugee processing; and, Pittsburgh and Atlanta, two US cities that have received significant numbers of refugees over the past several decades but have differed in their responses.

Given the particularities of each stage of the resettlement process, each chapter in this dissertation draws on a different set of data, therefore involving different modes and rationales of collection and analysis. A more specific discussion of these modes and rationales is therefore included in each chapter. Here, however, I describe and justify the key sites of this research and provide an overview of my research design and methods of data collection and analysis.

The Case of the United States

Given that over twenty countries regularly participate in the UN's refugee resettlement program, why focus only on the United States? The primary reason is that the US has admitted the vast majority of refugees resettled globally and has played a

critical role in shaping the global resettlement regime (Martin and Ferris 2017). Indeed, since the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, which formalized a previously *ad hoc* federal policy, the United States has admitted over two-thirds of all refugees resettled globally. The United States has also been the largest funder of the UNHCR and the agency's resettlement activities, and has in general been a global leader in establishing priorities, building global capacity, and providing expertise and best practices for other resettlement countries (Martin and Ferris 2017). As such, a case study of the US program provides broader insights into the structure and practice of refugee resettlement.

From the perspective of refugees, studying the US resettlement program is also consequential as it accounts for the sizable majority of spaces, making questions of selection, processing, and reception particularly pertinent. Finally, from a pragmatic view, the sheer scale of the US resettlement system provides multiple points of entry to conduct research and assess the logics of practice guiding resettlement work in specific sites. Indeed, while not discussed extensively in this dissertation, the scale and extent of the US resettlement system provides the infrastructural bedrock for other resettlement countries to participate, allowing these countries to focus resources on refugee reception rather than selection and processing making it hard to "observe" the work of, for example, British or Canadian resettlement officials. Possible limitations of the focus on the US case will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 5.

Studying Refugee Processing in Kampala, Uganda

To study refugee processing, I conducted four months of fieldwork in Kampala, Uganda, beginning in early-2018. Methods include fifteen expert interviews with resettlement practitioners; forty semi-structured interviews with refugees; observations outside, in the waiting room, and in a back office of a UN-commissioned processing agency; and qualitative fieldwork in Katwe and Nsambya, two neighboring Congolese communities in southwest Kampala.

Kampala has become a global hub of resettlement processing due to the prioritizing of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo living across Africa's Great Lakes region. As we'll see in Chapter 3, the Congolese were established as a global resettlement priority in 2012, and have since been one of the largest populations constituting global resettlement streams. Around sixty-thousand Congolese refugees have been resettled to the US since 2012, making it the single largest program over this period. Given these factors, thousands of Congolese were departing from Uganda each year when I was planning this research, and there was a sizable buildup of expertise and infrastructure to process these cases. Research in Uganda therefore provided an enhanced opportunity to observe processing and interview practitioners.

Fieldwork in Two Resettlement Gateways: Pittsburgh and Atlanta

To study the implementation and outcomes of refugee reception, I conducted fifteen months of fieldwork in Pittsburgh and Atlanta. Fieldwork was conducted in two phases. First, I conducted three months of preliminary research in each city between September 2016 and March 2017. This period spanned the election of Donald Trump in

November 2016 and subsequent Executive Orders suspending resettlement and banning immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries in January 2017. This preliminary stage of research suggested differences in how resettlement policy was being implemented in both places. Beginning in November 2017, I therefore conducted a second phase of research, spending five and four months in Pittsburgh and Atlanta respectively. During this time, I volunteered at a service provider in each city; embedded myself in the organizational landscape of refugee reception; conducted “go-alongs” (Kusenbach 2003) with refugee community leaders during their community work; and conducted forty semi-structured interviews with refugees living in Pittsburgh [N = 21] and Atlanta [N = 19] from Bhutan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Myanmar, Sudan, and Somalia. Refugees from these countries constitute over fifty percent of all refugees resettled to the United States over the twenty-first century and are present in large numbers in both cities—with the exception of Eritreans who are overrepresented in Atlanta. I also developed closer relationships with two families in each region from Bhutan and Congo, providing more everyday insights into refugee experiences in each context.

As Chapter 4 details, Pittsburgh and Atlanta provide compelling cases for comparison given that key similarities in their engagement with the federal resettlement program allow me to identify critical points of divergence in the implementation of local reception policies. Resettlement began in both contexts in the late-1980s as part of the federal government’s efforts to diversify resettlement locations in response to growing conflicts around the concentrations of Cold War-era refugees in a small number of

metropolitan regions (for context, see Portes and Stepick 1993; Singer and Wilson 2006). Federal officials and national VolAgs identified a number of suburban municipalities in Pittsburgh and Atlanta that had large, under-utilized, and affordable apartment complexes ideal for established patterns of resettlement. Resettled refugees represented the first international migrants to come to these municipalities in generations. There was thus little in the way of established immigrant-services, and local officials had little experience working with or responding to international immigrants. As expected (de Graauw, Gleeson, and Bloemraad 2013), refugees' arrival was initially met with indifference if not hostility. Over the following decades, however, local actors developed a set of policies and infrastructures to "welcome refugees."

At the same time, each region differs in important ways. First, Pittsburgh is a "legacy city" (Singer, Hardwick, and Brettell 2008:3) that was a hub of immigration in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Krause 1978), but has seen nominal new immigrant settlement since the 1950s. The region has also lost half of its population and has only recently begun to emerge from a half century of deindustrialization. Atlanta, on the other hand, is a "new immigrant destination" (Singer and Wilson 2006:13) that had few immigrants for much of the 19th and 20th century but has seen its immigrant population boom since the 1990s (McDaniel, Rodriguez, and Kim 2017). This boom has been driven by a vibrant and diverse mixed-economy and has correlated with a sizable increase in the region's population and subsequent metropolitan development.

An Ethnographic Approach

To conceptualize and coordinate this study, I draw on tools developed within the tradition of multi-sited (Marcus 1995) and institutional (Devault 2006; Smith 2005) ethnographies. Such tools are well suited to apprehend the cultural scripts, social technologies, and logics of practice guiding the implementation of resettlement policy, as well as the outcomes of such logics in structuring the experiences and opportunities of refugees. Drawing inspiration from previous multi-sited ethnographies of immigration bureaucracies (Feldman 2011b:180–99; Mountz 2010:55–92; Shore 2013), I understand ethnography broadly to infer a specific approach to research rather than a specific method (i.e., participant-observation) (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:37).

On the one hand, I was interested in grasping and observing the social action of resettlement practitioners *in situ*, in order to “evaluate what they actually do, as opposed to what they say they do” (Shore 2013:7). This is essential in order to get past routinized institutional scripts and also to assess how resettlement policy is actually implemented in practice. It is also important in order to grasp how policy implementation establishes social relationships between refugees and practitioners that might impact the lived experience and practice of resettlement (c.f. Auyero 2012; Gupta 2012; Mountz 2010).

On the other hand, I aimed to gain a cultural understanding of the “social, semantic and cognitive worlds inhabited by” (Shore 2013:7) those tasked with implementing resettlement policy and those subject to it. Gaining such insights requires a flexible approach to methods, which is especially important given that some of the key

sites shaping the world inhabited by resettlement practitioners are unobservable to researchers, and that connections are highly mediated rather than direct. In this regard, I take inspiration from Feldman's (2011a) notion of "nonlocal ethnography," aimed at grasping the discourses, boundary objects, schemata, and technologies that produce coherent outcomes across transnational fields even in the absence of patterned social interactions in specific places.

Reflecting the above discussion, I collected three main sources of data: statistical and archival; interview; and observational. I briefly outline my approach to each below.

Statistics & Archives

As I outline in more depth in Chapter 2, I built a database reflecting all refugees resettled to the United States between 2002 and 2017 (the last year of available data). Merging UNHCR population data and previously unreleased State Department data, I was able to create a dataset disaggregated by refugees' country of origin and (importantly) refugees' country of asylum. This allowed me to tease out factors shaping refugee selection stemming from both refugees' country of origin and factors in the processing country. To examine this dataset, I also included a range of descriptive variables aimed at assessing the characteristics of those resettled versus those not. For example, I used Principle Component Analysis (Vyas and Kumaranayake 2006) to construct an index of vulnerability, therefore placing the global refugee population on a single scale to assess selection dynamics. I used Stata to analyze data.

I deployed statistics within a broader ethnographic framework, aimed at gaining greater insight into the rationales and logics guiding practices and decision making. Indeed, statistics allowed me far greater precision in my site selection but also in my interviews, where practitioners frequently deployed routinized professional and institutional scripts. Statistical data and analysis of official documents and reports allowed me to get behind these scripts. For example, desk officers in charge of establishing resettlement priorities would regularly say that only the most vulnerable and in need receive resettlement. Equipped with my database, I was able to provide specific instances that troubled such narratives, such as the over-representation of Congolese refugees compared to Sudanese refugees discussed in Chapter 2.

Drawing on such evidence also bolstered my credibility with experts and helped guide conversation into more technical details. A good example of this was an interview with a State Department official. At the beginning of our interview he took out several government-issued public information sheets about the process of resettlement and the different roles of agencies. Such documents provide a standardized presentation of what is in fact highly uneven and variegated processes (Mountz 2010:87–90). I asked several questions of clarification that revealed my more precise understanding of resettlement dynamics. The interviewee smiled at me, put the documents back in the folder, and said “I can see you’ve done your homework! I don’t think you want the usual spiel.” Following this, we had a far more open and informed discussion.

Beyond this statistical database, I've also put together a large archive of official documents and materials surrounding refugees. These include the transcripts of US Congressional hearings; government reports from the Department of Health and Human Services and US Government Accountability Office; government and policy reports on refugee resettlement at state, country, and municipal levels; UNHCR and I/NGO commissioned and in-house policy reports and practice documents; and, finally, a collection of pamphlets, flyers, library and high school book projects, photo essays, news articles, county and municipal government transcripts, official speeches, and so on. Collectively, these materials provide a broad ranging insight into the transnational architecture of refugee resettlement, and especially the diverse ways in which refugees are framed, encountered, and governed across contexts. I drew upon this archive frequently to guide interviews, choose research sites, and cross-reference data and inferences.

Interviews

A second main source of data comes from interviews. In total, I conducted 150 interviews spread across sites of selection, processing, and reception. Some interviews provided insights transferable across contexts, although most were specific to the stage of resettlement under review. Interviews focused on two main population groups: experts [N = 65] and refugees [N = 80]. The remainder of interviews were conducted in response to unexpected meetings with individuals who were formally outside the resettlement system but who had valuable insights given their unique position (e.g., a prominent human rights advocate who had directly observed three different resettlement programs). Given that

interviews focused on specific stages of resettlement, each of the following chapters provides a discussion of the sample population used in that chapter, as well as a discussion on recruitment, access, translation, and pertinent interviewee characteristics. It is important, however, to briefly define what I mean by “experts” and “refugees,” and also to discuss overarching interview principles with each group.

I define experts as any individual tasked with implementing resettlement policy and/or distributing humanitarian resources. This includes desk officers, government agency officials, senior staff within the UNHCR system, county government employees, frontline practitioners, NGO workers, and so on. The question of who exactly implements resettlement policy is complicated given the broadly neoliberal governance and structure of the 1980 Refugee Act. Indeed, devolution, privatization, and managerialism are critical components of resettlement (Benson 2016; Darrow 2015b). To take one example, the US government defines “cities, church groups, and private citizens” as important “implementing partners” in its resettlement policy. Similarly, refugees are often referred for resettlement through a “deployment scheme,” which involves subcontracted agencies working within the UNHCR system to refer refugees and manage cases. As such, I took an inductive approach to defining “experts,” which emerged from each specific stage of policy implementation.

My expert interviews followed in a tradition with roots in the sociology of knowledge (Bogner, Littig, and Menz 2009; Krause 2014:177–82). The central tenet here is that I am interested in how experts’ action stems from the institutional and social

context of their work rather than their individual biography. Interview guidelines followed a semi-structured format aimed at elucidating how and why experts implemented and forged policies and the value and subjective understanding they ascribed to their work, to refugees, and to the ideal outcomes of resettlement. Although interviews at each stage of resettlement followed a template, I also tailored components of each protocol to the specific interviewee based on my prior research and knowledge of the individuals' role and work.

With regard to refugee informants, this study focuses on the formal, legal category of the refugee as outlined in international law. While acknowledging the manifold problems with this category (Bakewell 2000; Menjívar 2006; Zetter 2007), “Convention refugees” (i.e. individuals who meet the statutory definition of the refugee as outlined in the UN Refugee Convention and ratified by US domestic law under the 1980 Refugee Act) are the only individuals eligible for resettlement, and it is therefore these individuals that come through the resettlement system.³ My interviews focused broadly on refugees' interactions with and views of resettlement policy. I was particularly interested in how refugees' position within specific institutional spaces and their interactions with the categories and hierarchies established through resettlement practice organized their social experiences (Lamont and Swidler 2014).

³ The only exception to this are those provided access to the United States on the basis of special Congressional amendments to the 1980 Refugee Act, which relax eligibility conditions. As Chapter 2 outlines, these amendments generally cover religious minorities from the former Soviet Union and Iran.

Guided by a broader tradition of examining the outcomes of immigration policies through attention to immigrants' political subjectivity (Abrego 2011; Brown 2011; Galli 2020; Jensen 2018; Menjívar and Lakhani 2016), I was particularly interested in how patterned and nested interactions in specific institutional and organizational spaces led refugees to see themselves as particular types of political subjects and to make certain claims of institutions and organizations. My interview guidelines therefore examined who refugees made claims to, their landscapes of responsibility, how they view themselves in relationship to other immigrant and non-immigrant groups, and their perceptions on citizenship, membership, and concepts of integration. I did not ask questions about refugees' experiences of displacement. Such information was not directly pertinent to this study, and I did not want interviewees to relive potentially traumatic experiences.

Observations

A final source of data comes from observations. Where possible, my observations focused in institutional and organizational spaces where policy was implemented, negotiated, and experienced. In other words, I focused on the types of work being done in these settings (Smith 2005). This was relatively straight-forward at sites of refugee reception given the openness of resettlement agencies and service providers to researchers (for example Brown 2011; Darrow 2015a, 2015b; Fee 2019; Gowayed 2019a; Koyama 2017 all conducted fieldwork through resettlement agencies). As such, I volunteered in refugee-serving agencies in Pittsburgh and Atlanta, where I observed everyday interactions between service providers and refugees. Observing selection and processing was more difficult, however. As others have found (see Feldman 2011b;

Mountz 2010; Shore 2013; Thomson 2012), conducting observations within state and UNHCR-managed offices is difficult due to entrenched cultures and practices of secrecy and opacity.

My ability for observing resettlement practice was further curtailed by the broader context of my research. At least since the 1980 Refugee Act, the resettlement program has gone largely “under the radar,” with public debates generally focused on the place of refugee communities in the broader social formation and nation *after* their arrival (Portes and Stepick 1993). The high profile, international debate surrounding the Syrian “refugee crisis,” however, put resettlement under the spotlight – a fact practitioners often lamented. I started planning my fieldwork in early-2016, when the Obama Administration issued the highest admissions ceiling in over three decades and prioritized Syrians in particular. Indeed, 2016 continued a trend of increasing global capacity for resettlement. With the election of Donald Trump, however, this trend abruptly shifted. In his first year of office, Trump essentially shut the resettlement program, with very few refugees admitted. Over subsequent years, Trump set a very low number of admissions and further cut international aid budgets. The sum effect was office closures and layoffs across the chain of resettlement.

Compounding the challenging context, one of the largest corruption scandals around refugee governance in Africa was exposed several months before arriving in Uganda. A series of audits and reports found that senior members of the Ugandan government had built a network of conspirators across government and NGO agencies

(including senior staff in the national UNHCR office) to over-count refugees in order to embezzle funds. At the center of the scandal was bus rides between initial sites of processing to settlements in the north and southwest of Uganda that in fact had never happened. Ugandan media came to call the riders on these buses “ghost refugees.” Under pressure by donor governments, the Ugandan government handed over control of refugee registration to the UNHCR and integrated its data management with the Agency’s *proGress* database.

Upon my arrival in Uganda, the UNHCR and national government were engaged in a large scale reverification exercise to gain an accurate count of refugees in the country. Refugees were asked to re-verify their cases, leading to significant problems as those who had moved to different areas of the country now had to travel back to rural areas where they first claimed asylum. Reverification found substantial over-counting, as well as incidents of resettlement fraud, as families that had supposedly been resettled turned up to verify their cases. Moreover, international donors such as USAID and DFID were conducting intensive audits of organizations in Uganda. In response, the UNHCR and Ugandan state closed refugee settlements to researchers and visitors.

The combined effect of the US political context and Ugandan corruption issues was that resettlement was in a state of “crisis” during my research. As such, a number of planned research activities fell through, such as an arrangement to observe resettlement processing in one of the refugee camps in western Uganda. Interviews also fell through as staff either resigned, moved around, or were unable to attain clearance from higher-ups.

Those interviews that did occur were often cagey and tense. Indeed, soon after arriving in Uganda, I found out that there was a rumor circulating among refugee-serving NGOs that DFID (the British government's international aid and development agency) had sent a young man to Uganda posing as a student researcher to audit organizations receiving funds. It was not clear to me whether the rumor started because of my presence or rather whether it was a coincidence. Regardless, such anxieties constrained my access to data, and especially my ability to directly observe resettlement activities.

I employed a number of techniques to overcome these issues. First and foremost, I relied increasingly on interviews rather than observations. I found particular luck in networking among retired officials or those who had now left the resettlement sector. Many of these individuals were affiliated with national policy centers at universities such as Georgetown in DC or Makerere in Kampala, or worked for other I/NGOs or state agencies. These interviews were far more candid. Another strategy was to participate in spaces and forums where experts and officials met with one another. For example, I conducted participant observation at three national conferences on local immigrant incorporation held in Philadelphia (2016), Syracuse (2017), and Louisville (2018). These conference are critical sights in which "common sense" around refugee and immigrant incorporation work is crafted, refined, and distributed. Similarly, I spent time in a number of clubs and restaurants popular with "expats" in Uganda, in order to develop more informal relationships with Uganda-based practitioners.

I also developed insights from observing refugee experiences of navigating selection and processing infrastructure. In Kampala, for example, I spent significant time accompanying refugees on their walks to and from the office of the UNHCR's main urban implementing partner. This approach was inspired by methods of "street phenomenology" (Kusenbach 2003), which are well attuned to gaining insights into spatial practices and the lived experiences of social architecture. During such times, I had interactions with refugees while they met others on the walk and while they waited outside to gain entry. I was also able to gain access to this office on several occasions for interviews with protection officers and other staff. As a result, I was able to observe interactions between refugees and service providers in waiting rooms and other official spaces, while also gaining access to back office areas where I was able to observe bureaucratic practice in action.

Positionality

Before moving on, it is important to reflect upon my position in the field and how this impacted the sorts of data I collected and also the sorts of relationships I entered into during fieldwork. Given the scope of my research, the salient dimensions of my identity as a researcher shifted considerably across contexts. For example, my whiteness and Britishness often provided enhanced access to certain institutional spaces and experts, while simultaneously constraining and shaping my interactions with refugees. Below, however, I highlight the role of nationality, race, and gender in impacting my positionality and hence research across each space.

First and foremost, my position as a white male significantly shaped my interactions both in Uganda and the United States. For refugees in particular, much of their journey through the resettlement system has been punctuated by periodic and/or more sustained interactions with white Europeans and North Americans who hold significant power over their lives and access to resources. For example, the father of a refugee family I lived with in Atlanta would regularly use the term “white people” to describe anyone in a position of power and was frequently surprised and suspicious when we encountered nonwhite people in such positions. My presence in humanitarian spaces therefore likely elicited certain forms of refugee performativity shaping the types of data generated (Darling 2014). This issue was amplified in situations where initial contact with interlocutors was made in formal organizational settings.

Moreover, my nationality loomed large during research. Uganda, for example, was a protectorate of the British Empire, and British people have an ambiguous position in the postcolonial state. Like other East and Central Africans, Ugandans and Congolese frequently referred to me as “mzungu,” which acted as a kind of master status for people with white skin. As such, I was always seen as an outsider during fieldwork. Similarly, many of the refugees I interviewed and interacted with were either from countries that had been colonized by Britain or had been displaced by wars in which postcolonial Britain had a role. As Espiritu (2014) has eloquently argued, the humanitarian framing of refugees often functions within imperialist projects of whiteness to buttress claims of moral and social superiority. Such framings coerce and compel refugees into subject positions of vulnerability and victimhood, which are apolitical and disempowering. To

counteract such dynamics, I spent many hours having conversations with interlocutors about these connected histories, a discursive process that in some ways opened up spaces of reflexivity and greater intimacy. I also spent large amounts of time eating and attending family and community events with my interlocutors. These forms of commensality provided a context for intersubjective exchange and a platform for relationship building. In particular, the research “script” was often reversed in these settings, with my interlocutors asking me questions about my position and experiences.

Furthermore, although I am an immigrant to the United States, I was often read by refugees in the US as American, which shaped my interactions. As Dina Nayeri (2019) has shown, gratitude is an animating dimension of the refugee experience permeating relationships with others and with the state. In my engagement with refugees, I would often share my own experiences as an immigrant and Green Card holder. I also participated in citizenship test preparation classes. While our immigration and settlement pathways are very different, I found that my position as an immigrant provided a platform to have conversations less bound by discourses of gratitude toward Americans and the US state.

A final point to note is that many of my interactions were shaped by my gender. Refugee communities in particular were characterized by gendered regimes that generally split social spaces along gendered lines. Formal interviews with women often elicited discomfort, and I was generally unable to access predominantly female social spaces. Instead, many of my interactions with women took place in more formal institutionalized

settings, such as when I drove groups of refugees to job interviews, participated in citizenship classes, and conducted participant observation in a refugee sewing cooperative in Uganda.

Finally, I often felt deeply conflicted about my research encounters with refugees, especially in Kampala. In many ways, refugees are “captive populations” (Block et al. 2013) who are compelled through a variety of legal, social, and economic conditions to occupy and attend specific spaces and be open to interviews, research, and a variety of other interventions. Not wishing to take advantage of this situation or exacerbate feelings of disempowerment, I took great effort to ensure those participating in this research could provide informed consent. Such concerns also shaped the sorts of questions I asked and the sorts of data I ultimately collected. Indeed, rather than proceed from the assumption that refugees are “problems” or somehow “deficient,” which often emerges from humanitarian or state-initiated interventions, I turned my gaze inward to examine the practices and cultural scripts of resource holders (Devault 2006; Smith 2005). Where possible, I also sought to give voice to refugees’ oppositions to dominant framings, therefore centering refugee agency in my accounts.

Data Analysis

The method of data analysis employed in this study broadly follows the abductive approach laid out by Timmermans and Tavory (2014; 2012). This approach involves researchers developing a “cultivated position” in the field through extensive and ongoing engagement with existing theory, and then looking for surprising and unexpected findings

that emerge through fieldwork that conflict with existing expectations. The researcher is then encouraged to pursue unexpected findings in order to drive novel theory building. As we will see in the chapter outline below, each of the empirical chapters in this dissertation is therefore structured around a particular “puzzle” or problematic that emerged through fieldwork. To identify and research these puzzles, and in-keeping with the suggestions of Timmermans and Tavory, I drew on grounded theory principles of collecting, analyzing, and coding data, and especially the emphasis on iterative rounds of coding and memoing (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). As suggested by Glaser and Strauss, I collected, coded, and analyzed data simultaneously during fieldwork, using insights from this iterative process to make decisions about who to speak to, what to ask them, and where to observe social phenomenon.

To take an example, I conducted three months of preliminary fieldwork in Pittsburgh and Atlanta. During this time, I was struck by the markedly different ways in which resettlement practitioners and refugees framed the position of refugees in the broader locality and conceptualized the ideal outcomes of their resettlement. These interpretive frames seemed to be place-based. Existing theory suggests that refugees are framed in relatively standardized ways at the national level given their formal legal status and managed incorporation through a federal resettlement bureaucracy (Bloemraad 2006; Brown 2011), with pertinent differences expressed along axes of social and economic differentiation (Hein 2006; Portes et al. 2005; Zhou and Bankston 1994). I therefore designed a second round of research in both places explicitly aimed at interrogating the social origin of these place-based differences in predominant framings of refugees and

refugee identification. During the break between research trips, I also wrote a paper exploring initial inferences (Watson 2019) and gained feedback on ideas in workshops and at conferences.

Chapter Outline

Situating this dissertation within a broader body of work examining how meso-level social processes and organizational dynamics mediate the outcomes of formal policies (e.g., Brown 2020; Gupta 2012; Healy 2000; Krause 2014; Meyer and Rowan 1977), the following empirical chapters examine how refugees are selected, processed, and incorporated by practitioners across the transnational chain of resettlement. As outlined above, each chapter focuses on a specific puzzle or problematic that emerged during research on each stage of resettlement. Ultimately, I find that practitioners distribute and condition access to scarce humanitarian resources in ways that construct notions of refugees as “ideal beneficiaries.” Critically, I contend that these constructions emerge through social processes embedded in particular meso-level social contexts: whether it be the transnational context of refugee selection; the local context of the resettlement processing office; or the urban context of refugee reception.

At its core, the findings in this study challenge the methodological nationalism of the Refugee Studies paradigm and calls for greater analytic attention to how meso-level social dynamics produce refugees and the outcomes of their migration. The origins and outcomes of these constructions are obscured by the predominant framing of refugees as a relatively fixed political category produced through exclusion from nation states; as

well as the predominant framework deployed in resettlement scholarship that examines how refugees are transformed into national citizens. Moreover, this dissertation shows that refugees respond to these constructions in complex and contradictory ways, at times internalizing them and at other times challenging them. Each empirical chapter in this dissertation develops the above argument through a specific examination of selection (Chapter 2), processing (Chapter 3), and reception (Chapter 4).

Chapter 2 examines how refugees are selected for resettlement to the US. I show that an effort to make resettlement responsive to individual needs across the global refugee population following the end of the Cold War conflicted with the challenge of identifying and processing refugees in practice. The result was falling admissions throughout the 1990s and early-2000s, threatening to undermine the federal resettlement system. Drawing on social organizational theory (Healy 2000; Krause 2014) and accounts of the socially-generative effects of quantitative measures (Espeland and Sauder 2007), I show that senior officials embedded in the US government and UNHCR responded to growing anxiety around admissions, numbers, and quotas by building a system of selecting refugees that administratively constructs “clean cases.” Clean cases are those that can be identified and processed abroad to meet the demand for stable and predictable admissions to the United States under substantial institutional constraints.

Constructing clean cases involves iterative and nested negotiations between a variety of state and non-state actors and the subsequent buildup of infrastructures around specific populations in order to assure uninterrupted, efficient, and predictable referrals of

refugees for resettlement. As such, any one given program reflects a distinct constellation of values and interests, and refugees' access to resettlement is substantially shaped by infrastructures. This reformed system stabilized admissions to the US and allowed over a million refugees to be resettled since the turn of the twenty-first century. At the same time, however, it undermines humanitarian notions of distributional equality and rescue that otherwise animate refugee resettlement. Importantly, however, these deviations from humanitarian ideals are not straightforwardly due to preexistent national interests, but rather practices of selection that have emerged to resolve tensions within the transnational field of resettlement. The final part of the chapter draws on a comparative example (Congolese and Sudanese refugees) to demonstrate these arguments.

Chapter 3 turns to an analysis of refugee processing dynamics in Kampala, Uganda. I find that the frontline administrators and agencies charged with processing refugees for resettlement grapple with a central tension between the high value placed on resettlement among Congolese refugees and the reality of limited spaces and widespread "need." In response, practitioners have developed a range of policies to mitigate and manage refugee expectations. These policies essentially involve establishing administrative and physical barriers that force refugees to wait, be patient, and accept the temporal rhythms of resettlement processing (c.f., Auyero 2012). Conceptualizing these policies through Gupta's (2012) notion of structural violence, I show that everyday experiences with these novel forms of waiting compound refugees' sense of liminality and exclusion in Uganda, and lead refugees to see the African, and largely Ugandan,

frontline service providers charged with processing cases – i.e., rather than resettlement country policies – as their primary barriers to resettlement.

The final part of the chapter explores a highly ambivalent discourse around resettlement at the refugee community level. This discourse posits resettlement as beneficial to the small number of individuals who are selected, but deleterious to the community at large. I then trace two social projects that aim to dissuade refugees from accepting resettlement and instead reorient their hopes and aspirations to local concerns. By expanding the analytic scope from resettled refugees to those waiting aboard, this chapter troubles straightforward notions of resettlement as “solution,” showing that the implementation of policy involves coercion and compounds experiences of traumatic waiting. I also show that interactions with resettlement processing leads certain refugees to develop a surprising ambivalence about receiving it, reflecting similar findings about the variable desirability of refugee status in other settings (Jensen 2018:135–46).

Having examined selection and processing, Chapter 4 turns to the implementation of refugee reception policy. The chapter’s entry point is a surprising finding revealed through fifteen months of fieldwork in Pittsburgh and Atlanta. I found that refugees articulated place-specific modes of identification. In Pittsburgh, refugees emphasize their ethnic identity, membership to ethnic groups, and contributions to the region’s cultural diversity. In Atlanta, on the other hand, refugees cast the ethnic group as an illegitimate platform for belonging. Instead, they emphasize their legal status as refugees, which they use to differentiate themselves from other immigrant and non-immigrant groups in the

region. These findings are surprising given that existing scholarship anticipates relatively standardized identification practices owing to refugees' managed incorporation through the federal resettlement bureaucracy (Bloemraad 2006; Brown 2011).

To explain the surprising finding of place-based differences in refugees' identification and articulations of membership, Chapter 4 shows that local actors have essentially rescaled resettlement policy. Critically, however, the social and institutional histories of Pittsburgh and Atlanta mean that different actors respond to refugees in each context, and these actors *see* refugees and the ideal outcomes of their resettlement in different ways. To conceptualize the institutional and cultural logics of local resettlement policies, I advance the term “urban incorporation regimes,” and show how each regime mediates access to symbolic and material resources in ways that valorize different aspects of refugees' identity. In making these arguments, Chapter 4 extends a nascent body of work exploring how place-based factors mediate outcomes of immigration policies and legal statuses (Andrews 2018; Burciaga and Martinez 2017; García 2019).

In the Conclusion (Chapter 5), I summarize the key findings of this dissertation and reflect on what these chapters, taken as a whole, tell us about refugees, resettlement, and immigration policies at large. This chapter also identifies a number of critical limitations of this study and discusses possible future research directions.

CHAPTER TWO – SELECTION**CONSTRUCTING CLEAN CASES: A SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONAL
PERSPECTIVE ON REFUGEE SELECTION***Abstract*

Resettlement is a highly valuable and yet exceptionally scarce humanitarian resource provided to one percent of refugees each year. But how are refugees selected? Surprisingly, we do not have an adequate answer to this question. Sociological scholarship, however, suggests that refugees will be selected on the basis of one of two primary criteria: humanitarian values or national interests. Drawing on expert interviews, analysis of government debates, and descriptive statistics covering all refugees resettled between 2002 and 2017, this chapter examines these two hypotheses. Ultimately, I find that resettlement is characterized by distributional imbalances that cannot be explained by the underlying “needs” of the global refugee population or likely measures of US national interests. To develop an alternative account, this chapter draws attention to meso-level organizational factors and the socially-generative effects of measures and evaluations.

Specifically, I show that a push to resettle refugees based on individual needs following the end of the Cold War conflicted with the social organization of resettling refugees in practice. The result was declining admissions and growing concerns about the long-term viability of the US resettlement system. Practitioners and stakeholders therefore became increasingly focused on meeting annual admission targets, and built a reformed system of selection based on the administrative construction of “clean cases.”

These are cases that can be identified and processed abroad in efficient and predictable ways to meet admission demands under limited funding and operational constraints.

While this system has allowed for the resettlement of over a million refugees since the turn of the twenty-first century, it also undermines ideals of “distributional equality” and “rescue” that underpin official discourses of resettlement and its value as an instrument of refugee protection. Critically, however, these departures from humanitarian ideals stem from the transnational social system of constructing clean cases rather than the pre-existent interests of the US state or the inherent characteristics of refugees.

Introduction

“Resettlement is not a solution for all the world’s refugees but it is a life saving measure to ensure the protection of those most at risk and whose lives often depend on it.”

- *Grainne O’Hara, UNHCR’s Director of International Protection.*

“We tell ourselves that we’re saving peoples’ lives. But we’re not. [Resettlement’s] a numbers game. It’s about budgets and keeping numbers up. It’s just too selective by design.”

- *Senior Resettlement Practitioner, interviewed May 2019*

As we explored in the previous chapter, refugee resettlement is a highly valuable humanitarian resource that offers the only viable, safe, and legal route out of exile for many of today’s refugees (Fee and Arar 2019; UNHCR 2018; UNHCR 2020b). Despite its value, however, less than one percent of the global refugee population are resettled in any given year, such that “only a small fraction of those at risk [find] a safe and lasting

solution to their plight” (UNHCR 2020b:10). Resettlement is thus a highly valuable and yet exceptionally scarce humanitarian resource, raising the critical question of how this resource is distributed (c.f. Calabresi and Bobbitt 1978; Krause 2014; Redfield 2008).

The opening quote from Grainne O’Hara, Director of the UNHCR’s International Protection Division, represents the official explanation for how scarce resettlement spaces are distributed. According to O’Hara, whose division identifies global priorities, resettlement is not a general solution for refugees, but rather a “life saving measure [for] those most at risk and whose lives often depend on it.” Resettlement therefore goes only to those most “in need.” The view of resettlement provided by O’Hara predominates in official discourse, regularly appearing in state and NGO documents and frequently offered up by desk officers and practitioners. The US State Department, for example, submits a document to Congress each year in which it repeatedly states that resettlement is for those refugees “most in need” (e.g., US State Department 2018). Similarly, organizations like Amnesty International or the International Red Cross frequently emphasize that resettlement is a protection tool for those “most at risk of harm.”⁴

Surprisingly, however, researchers have not adequately interrogated official discourse around resettlement. This neglect stands in contrast to the sizable literature examining how countries regulate the provision of asylum at or within its borders (Feldman 2011b; Jensen 2018; Menjívar 2006; Mountz 2010; Squire 2009). This body of

⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2016/03/why-does-refugee-resettlement-change-lives/>

work challenges claims of liberal humanitarianism in asylum policy and instead shows that states restrict access to asylum and punish asylum seekers through routine acts of state violence (Abrego 2011; FitzGerald 2019; Menjívar 2006; Mountz 2010). When these scholars do address resettlement, they do so in order to critique state constructions of the good/deserving refugee verses bogus/undeserving asylum seeker (Gibney 2004; Menjívar 2000; Zetter 2007), therefore leaving official claims around refugee selection for resettlement unexamined. On the other hand, accounts that focus more directly on resettlement foreground annual quotas and admission numbers, whether to infer or compare the “openness” or liberalism of different countries (Hollifield et al. 2014; Joppke 1998); or to examine the decline of resettlement spaces following the end of the Cold War (Chimni 2004). Both approaches fail to address how scarce resettlement spaces are actually distributed across the global refugee population.

This chapter addresses this gap in our understanding through a case study of the United States’ contemporary refugee admissions program. Since the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, which formalized a federal resettlement system, the United States has admitted roughly seventy percent of all refugees resettled globally. Coupled with its funding of the UNHCR, the large numbers resettled by the US means that it has played a key role in establishing priorities and shaping the composition of global resettlement streams (Martin and Ferris 2017). I draw on three sources of data to study this program. First, I use previously unreleased administrative data reflecting all refugees resettled to the US between 2002 and 2017. During this period, the United States admitted roughly sixty-eight percent of all refugees resettled globally, which translates to around a million

refugees. A second source of data comes from twenty-one expert interviews with practitioners and stakeholders involved in resettlement (*see Appendix A for a list*). A third source comes from analyses of annual Congressional hearings on the Executive Branch's proposed refugee admissions from 1988 until the present.

Using these sources of data, the first part of this chapter assesses two likely explanations for how scarce resettlement spaces are distributed. The first stems from official discourse and examines whether resettlement is, in fact, a humanitarian rescue program for those most in need. As we will see, the sizable majority of refugees resettled to the United States between 2002 and 2017 come from the most vulnerable refugee populations around the globe. In fact, the share of spaces going to this population increases over the study period. Closer attention, however, reveals that certain refugee groups are overrepresented in resettlement channels while others equally in need are underrepresented. Such concentrations cannot be understood through reference to refugee vulnerability alone. I therefore draw on accounts in the sociology of immigration to examine a second hypothesis, which suggests that distributional imbalances stem from the constraining effect of US national interests and immigration politics. Assessing this expectation, however, shows that likely measures of US interests cannot adequately explain imbalances in selection.

Drawing inspiration from social organizational perspectives of humanitarian action (Healy 2000, 2004; Krause 2014; Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001) and accounts of the socially generative effects of quantitative measures (Berman and

Hirschman 2018; Espeland and Sauder 2007), the second section therefore offers an alternative explanation that foregrounds the mediating transnational social system that shapes how refugees are identified, referred, and processed in practice. As we will see, this system works by administratively constructing “clean cases.” These are cases that can be predictably and efficiently identified and processed to meet annual US admissions demands under complex institutional and operational constraints. Constructing clean cases involves iterative multilateral negotiations among key state and non-state processing stakeholders, and the buildup of infrastructure around particular populations to ensure sustained and predictable referrals and departures. As I will show, while over a million refugees have been resettled through this system during the twenty-first century, the process of constructing clean cases means that resettlement departs from humanitarian ideals of “distributional equality” and “rescue.”

A final section concretizes the above argument through a comparison of Congolese refugees in Uganda and Sudanese refugees in Chad. While a strong case can be made for the latter’s greater need for resettlement, the former group has received significantly more resettlement spaces. Drawing on interviews with resettlement officials and practitioners in the region, I show that this imbalance is produced through the social organizational features of refugee resettlement. Specifically, I show that the greater access to resettlement for Congolese refugees living in Africa’s Great Lakes region stems from the ability of stakeholders to ensure stable and predictable admissions from the population and therefore meet the US state’s high annual demands for refugees.

Understanding Refugee Resettlement

The contemporary history of resettlement stems from the multinational efforts to empty the Displaced Persons camps that dotted the landscape of post-WWII Europe (Gatrell 2011; Loescher and Scanlan 1986). The UN's Refugee Agency (UNHCR) was created at this time to manage the camps and process resettlement. Refugee resettlement subsequently became one of the UNHCR's three "durable solutions" to refugee displacement, considered for those unable to return home and unable to find effective refuge in the country that they claimed asylum (UNHCR 2011).

Resettlement involves identifying a refugee abroad and then inviting them to travel to a "safe-third country" (i.e., neither their country-of-origin nor the country in which they originally claimed asylum), which offers to provide legal permanent residency and a pathway to citizenship. Because it involves handpicking refugees and processing them abroad, resettlement is substantively different from asylum-seeking, which involves an individual making a claim for protection at or within the borders of the state. Asylum-seeking is subject to punitive restrictions and controls (FitzGerald 2019), making resettlement one of the few ways in which refugees can safely access protection.

Resettlement is coordinated out of the UNHCR's Geneva-based Resettlement Division, which sits atop a global network of regional, country, and field offices (see Garnier 2014). Staff and trained officials at these sub-offices are instructed to identify resettlement needs through the Agency's Resettlement Handbook (UNHCR 2011). This Handbook outlines a range of "identification tools and systems" to conduct needs

assessments (UNHCR 2011:215–16), including a seven-category definition of vulnerability covering protection needs stemming from, among other factors, complex health conditions, persecution in countries-of-asylum, or imminent security concerns. The Handbook also informs practitioners to identify “a refugee’s *objective need* for resettlement [irrespective of] the desire of any specific actors, such as the host State, resettlement States, other partners, or UNHCR staff themselves” (UNHCR 2011:216). Through its global bureaucracy of needs assessments, the UNHCR publishes an annual “Global Resettlement Needs” document to guide resettlement planning with states and NGO stakeholders during annual meetings held in Geneva (e.g. UNHCR 2020b).

Despite being one of the UNHCR’s durable solutions, however, there is no “right” to resettlement in international law (Sandvik 2010). Instead, resettlement is reliant on the number of places that states provide each year as well as the legal framework states establish to admit refugees. Resettlement therefore sits at the intersection of global humanitarianism and state immigration policies, making it a peculiar form of humanitarian action. Indeed, resettlement is frequently caught in the crosshairs of those calling for greater national prerogative over selection and those calling for greater humanitarianism. In the midst of the Syrian refugee crisis, for example, detractors in Europe and North America lambasted the resettlement of Syrian Muslims as indicating the usurping of national sovereignty by the UNHCR. On the other hand, pro-refugee advocates contended that the slow response of resettlement countries reflected an entrenched anti-Muslim bias and called for the UNHCR to have greater authority to refer cases. Matters are further complicated by the limited spaces offered each year. Despite

the UNHCR identifying millions of refugees as in need of resettlement (UNHCR 2020b), states have provided an average of 92,000 places annually since 2000. The scarcity of spaces therefore requires triaging, which necessarily involves discriminatory logics of selection (Calabresi and Bobbitt 1978).

Public debates about whether state interests or humanitarian values guide resettlement reflect scholarly debates about the UNHCR and refugee system at large (see Loescher 2001b). One group of scholars contend that the UNHCR's symbolic authority over refugee issues, concentration of specialized knowledge and expertise, and control over sizable bureaucracies and data systems has granted it relative autonomy to pursue its value-oriented mission (Garnier 2014; Loescher 2001b; Sandvik 2010). This perspective sits broadly within a neo-institutionalist paradigm that casts international organizations as vehicles of universalistic values with the capacity to shape the policies of nation states (Meyer et al. 1997). The power of international organizations such as the UNHCR is further extended by networks of human rights and refugee advocates who draw on liberal-humanitarian values and norms to compel states to protect the rights of noncitizens and pursue humanitarian objectives (Keck and Sikkink 1999; Soysal 1994).

On the other hand, however, critical accounts generally reject the notion that international organizations pursue value-oriented missions or are autonomous from hegemonic state interests (Chorev and Babb 2009; Goldman 2008). This critique has been particularly forceful in the realm of migration, where international organizations such as the UNHCR are seen as substantially constrained by the power of nation-states

and norms of popular sovereignty (Barnett 2001), with others arguing that these agencies more directly enforce and extend state agendas to control and contain asylum seekers and refugees (Ashutosh and Mountz 2011; Barnett 2001; Pallister-Wilkins 2015).

For its part, scholarship on resettlement has not provided much clarity on the question of selection. Instead, the sizable majority of resettlement scholarship focuses on the reception and placement side of the equation, whether through analyses of reception policy (Benson 2016; Darrow 2015b) or refugee experiences (Besteman 2016; Kibria 1995; Portes and Rumbaut 2014). On the other hand, accounts that do focus more directly on the admittance rather than reception of refugees tend to foreground the number of spaces provided rather than questions of distribution. Reflecting the general tenor of public debate, immigration politics scholars focus on annual quotas and ceilings to assess the relative openness or liberalism of different countries (Hollifield et al. 2014; Joppke 1998), or look to the decline in resettlement numbers following the end of the Cold War as indicating a paradigm shift in refugee humanitarianism toward containment and exclusion (Chimni 2004). Departing from a focus on numbers, others examine shifts in institutional logics following the rise of human rights discourses in the 1990s (Garnier 2014; Sandvik 2010); or how resettlement connects to world-making projects of state formation, nation-building, and imperialism (Espiritu 2014; Lippert 1998). The focus on numbers and logics, however, provide little insight into how highly valued and yet scarce resettlement spaces are actually distributed in the contemporary period.

To overcome this gap in our understanding, this chapter provides a mixed-methods case study of the US resettlement program. At least since the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, the US has admitted the sizable majority of refugees resettled globally and has been the largest funder of the UNHCR. As a result, the US has played a critical role in establishing global resettlement priorities, therefore shaping the composition of global resettlement streams (Martin and Ferris 2017). While admissions have been small over the past several years due to the nativist presidency of Donald Trump and pandemic-related travel restrictions, President Joe Biden's commitment to resettle 125,000 a year suggests a return of the United States as a world leader in resettlement.

Drawing on a unique dataset, expert interviews, and analysis of congressional hearings, the first empirical section of this chapter examines the two primary expectations concerning the distribution of resettlement spaces inferred above, i.e., that refugees are selected on the basis of humanitarian values, or that refugees are selected on the basis of national interests. As we will see, neither humanitarian values nor national interests adequately explain refugee selection. While the United States has generally resettled refugees from among the most vulnerable populations in the world, my analysis reveals that certain populations receive large resettlement numbers while others with equally pressing claims for resettlement receive comparatively fewer spaces. Likely measures of US national interests cannot adequately explain these imbalances.

Moving beyond values and interests, I contend that the selection of refugees is shaped by the mediating social system through which refugees are identified, selected,

and processed. I trace the formation of this system through a set of tensions following the end of the Cold War. In short, emerging demands for individualized needs and risk assessments conflicted with the existing system of selecting refugees constructed during the Cold War-era. This system developed through strong Congressional support and decades of large-scale, largely indiscriminate refugee processing from a small number of geopolitically-significant, geographically-concentrated populations. The tension between the Cold War-era system of resettlement and emerging demand for individualized identification and processing saw admissions decline during the 1990s and early-2000s, generating concerns about the future of the national resettlement system. In response, the US State Department worked with its main stakeholders (especially the Department of Homeland Security, US Citizenship and Immigration Services, and the UNHCR) to reform the resettlement system around the goals of meeting “annual ceilings,” stabilizing the “admissions pipeline,” and resolving the issue of “unmet quotas.”

As we will see, the reformed system of resettling refugees essentially works by administratively constructing “clean cases.” These are cases that can be efficiently and predictably identified and processed to meet US admission demands with limited funding and under complex operational and institutional constraints. Constructing clean cases involves a two-step process. First, senior desk officers across the US and UNHCR attain agreements among US government agencies, host states, UNHCR country and regional offices, and refugee leadership structures for the resettlement of particular populations. Attaining assurances involves an iterative process of nested and multilateral negotiation, therefore structuring resettlement programs around context-specific constellations of

interests and values. Second, the US works with the UNHCR and other processing agencies to build up infrastructure (expertise, bureaucratic technologies, and physical infrastructure such as roads, secure interview sites, and medical facilities) around selected populations to ensure predictable and efficient identification, processing, and departures.

The reformed system of selecting refugees stabilized the US “admissions pipeline” and facilitated the resettlement of over a million refugees over the twenty-first century, therefore providing a “durable solution” to many who may otherwise still be in exile. At the same time, the process of constructing clean cases undermines the humanitarian ideals of “distributional equality” and “rescue” that underpin official discourse around resettlement as an instrument of refugee protection. There are three reasons for this. First, refugee groups that pose elevated political and operational barriers to selection receive less resettlement spaces. Practitioners refer to such groups as “hard to reach cases.” Second, the infrastructure central to constructing clean cases generates a path-dependency in admissions and selection, concentrating spaces in certain populations and processing countries. Finally, attaining assurances and building infrastructure takes time, meaning that many refugees in “need” wait in exile for years before they are even considered for resettlement. Critically, however, these departures from humanitarian ideals stem from meso-level organizational factors and social dynamics, rather than the pre-existent interests of the US state or intrinsic characteristics of refugees (whether their social and economic profile or inherent vulnerability).

In making the above argument, this chapter draws on social organizational theory (Healy 2000, 2004; Krause 2014; Schofer and Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001), which foregrounds the social systems that enable, constrain, and mediate humanitarian action in practice. Healy (2000), for example, departs from conventional accounts rooted in national cultures or individual motivations to explain cross-national differences in the rate of blood donations as a result of different social systems of blood *collection*. Similarly, Krause (2014) points to the field of global humanitarianism to explain how and why relief agencies select particular projects over others. She finds that relief agencies construct “good projects” that allow them to differentiate themselves from others and therefore accrue symbolic capital and funding. The search for “good projects” takes on a logic of its own, guiding action in ways independent from stated ideals and expert assessments of need (Krause 2014:16). Interestingly, Krause draws attention to a critical implication of the search for “good projects,” as “[s]ome recipients are easier to help than others, and those who are hardest to help often receive no help at all” (Krause 2014:37). The construction of “clean cases” works in a similar way, shaping the allocation of scarce resettlement spaces and increasing barriers to resettlement for certain populations.

While social organizational theory helpfully situates the outcomes of resettlement within the transnational social system mediating refugees and the US state, this body of work provides less guidance as to why practitioners came to see and resolve problems within the organizational field through the category of clean cases. To explain this, I complement social organizational theory with Espeland and Saunder’s (2007) work on “reactivity,” which describes how resource-holders and decision-makers engage in new

social activities and transform organizational fields in response to quantitative forms of measurement and evaluation (see also Berman and Hirschman 2018). As we'll see, key resettlement stakeholders and senior officials were growing increasingly concerned following the end of the Cold War that unmet admission targets and declining annual ceilings would undermine the long-term viability of the US resettlement program. These concerns led to a focus on quantitative measures such as ceilings, numbers, and targets. The category of clean cases emerged in this context as a way to resolve tensions in the resettlement system and create a predictable and efficient process of resettling refugees that would stabilize the "admission pipeline." Indeed, we'll see toward the end of this chapter that practitioners are often self-conscious about the implications of the contemporary resettlement system, often referring to it as a "numbers game."

In what follows, I first outline the three sources of data used in this study and discuss my methods of analysis. I then move on to operationalize and assess the humanitarian values and national interests accounts, showing that they are ultimately unable to explain contemporary dynamics of selection. The following section then outlines my alternative account, before a concluding section draws out the broader implications of this argument for our understanding of refugee resettlement and humanitarian action in general.

Data & Methods

The legal and administrative framework for resettling refugees to the United States stems from the 1980 Refugee Act, which formalized a previously *ad hoc*

resettlement program and created the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) within the Department of State (see Benson 2016). The Act also ratified international refugee standards, meaning that all UNHCR-classified refugees are eligible for resettlement. Each year, the Executive branch works with the UNHCR and other key partners to establish an annual admissions quota broken down into five administrative regions – Africa, East Asia, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Near East and South Asia – and an “unallocated” quota for submissions across the global refugee population. The UNHCR, US Embassies, and other NGO partners are mandated to refer cases based on these quotas, and then a US Citizenship and Immigration (USCIS) official is required to interview each resettlement candidate and assess their claim to protection and eligibility under domestic law – including health, criminal history, and security concerns.

The vast majority of refugees resettled to the United States over the study period came through the system outlined above. It should be noted, however, that a relatively small number of annual admissions are accounted for by special amendment bills passed in Congress. These bills provide the authority to relax eligibility requirements under the 1980 Refugee Act and also to process applicants from within their countries-of-origin. Three main bills have impacted refugee flows over the study period: the 1987 McCain Amendment, 1990 Lautenberg Amendment, and 2004 Specter Amendment. These bills provide special eligibility status to, in order, Vietnamese who had been in reeducation camps after the war; persecuted Jews and Christians in the Soviet Union or Southeast Asia; and religious minorities in Iran. These programs are largely administered on an

application basis. Although interrupted during Donald Trump's presidency, religious minorities from Iran, for example, could travel to Vienna and apply for resettlement at the US embassy there.

But how and why are specific refugees selected for resettlement over others? Studying this question in an empirically-grounded way is a challenging task as the UNHCR is notoriously secretive about the resettlement process and does not provide detailed information on the underlying rationale guiding particular decisions (Garnier 2014; Sandvik and Jacobsen 2016; Thomson 2012). Moreover, the Agency does not provide comprehensive data on its assessment of resettlement needs, instead publishing an annual Global Resettlement Needs document (e.g., UNHCR 2020b) that highlights particular priorities that the Agency has a plan to or wants to resettle. Further still, the necessity of protecting refugees' identity means that there is no individual-level data either on refugees or those selected for resettlement. Secrecy, opacity, and data aggregation is also reflected in US administrative data. To overcome measurement challenges and gain a comprehensive, empirically-grounded understanding of resettlement, I draw on three sources of data.

First, I have created a database reflecting all refugees resettled to the US between 2002 and 2017. This period spans the first year of admissions following 9/11 up to the last year of Barack Obama's refugee quota (FY16-17). 2017 was the last available year of data at the time of collection for this project. Given the unavailability of individual-level data, the foundation of this database is UNHCR population statistics, which reflect the

country-of-origin and country-of-asylum of all refugees administered by the UNHCR. In what follows, I refer to these administrative units as “groups.”⁵ For example, one “group” is Syrian refugees living in Turkey, while another “group” is Somali refugees living in Kenya. Drawing on US State Department data, I then added the number of refugees resettled from each group to the United States – this data was secured by special request to the State Department and has not previously been analyzed by researchers. For example, one observation indicates that 1,928 of the 3,424,237 Syrian refugees living in Turkey were resettled to the United States in 2017 compared to 3,578 of the 281,692 Somali refugees living in Kenya. In total, the dataset reflects 923,051 cases of resettlement spread across 94,853 observations and 7,267 unique groups.

The benefit of disaggregating resettlement by the country in which a refugee is selected and processed is that it allows the unit of analysis to shift from a national refugee population spread across multiple countries, to a component of the population residing in a specific host country. This is the unit of administration used by officials and, in the absence of individual-level data, it provides a more fine-grained insight into resettlement dynamics. For example, 9,377 refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo were resettled to the United States in 2017. At this time, the UNHCR registered Congolese refugees in 111 different countries-of-asylum, but the US only resettled Congolese from twenty-two, with over seventy percent selected from just three countries: Uganda,

⁵ The language of “groups” should not be mistaken to infer any inherent sense of “groupness” present in the populations concerned. Indeed, the majority of “groups” discussed here are internally heterogeneous across a range of demographic and ethnic markers.

Tanzania, and Rwanda. To more fully understand the resettlement of Congolese refugees, we therefore need to assess the particular factors that distinguish Congolese refugees in Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda from other populations. My data allows me to do this.

Once constructed, I gathered additional data to measure the role of humanitarian values and national interests in shaping the distribution of resettlement spaces. Ideally, all variables would be assessed in a single framework, therefore providing insight into how different factors impact the likelihood of a given group's resettlement. The patchiness of refugee data mitigates against this, however. For example, an important measure of national interests is the social and economic profile of different refugee groups. Indeed, immigration scholarship strongly predicts that such factors will impact refugee selection. The UNHCR does not, however, release comprehensive demographic data on its refugee population, meaning that I rely here on US administrative data that covers *only those refugees selected for resettlement*. Given such issues, I instead use descriptive statistics to go through each hypothesis in a stepwise fashion, examining whether particular measures adequately explain inclusion or exclusion from US resettlement streams. I operationalize humanitarian values and national interests in the next section and present measures.

The second source of data comes from twenty-one expert interviews. Interviewees were selected based on their role in developing and/or implementing US resettlement policy, and included senior staff across the US State Department, US Citizenship and Immigration Services, the Department of Homeland Security, UNHCR, and US-headquartered NGOs. I also interviewed several practitioners with extensive experience

“in the field” about their experiences identifying, processing, and referring resettlement cases for the US government. These practitioners were currently based in sub-Saharan Africa, although they had experience across multiple operational contexts.

A significant portion of interviewees were “desk officers,” who managed a specific region of operation for the US government or UNHCR. Desk officers were primarily based in Washington D.C., Geneva, or US Embassies in specific countries. As Krause argues in her study of humanitarian agencies, desk officers play a critical “mediating role between strategic planning [...] and the day-to-day management of operations in the field” (Krause 2014:178). A number of the interviewees had held positions across institutional spaces and were therefore able to provide a broad picture of the resettlement sector. Seven interviewees had left the resettlement sector and were either retired or working in academia. Interviewees were identified due to their prominent position in the resettlement sector and/or through referral. All but six interviewees spoke on “background,” meaning that they did not want to be identified. To honor this request and protect anonymity, I do not directly refer to these interviews in the text. For the readers’ benefit, *Appendix A* lists the institutional location of each interviewee.

A final source of data comes from Congressional hearings of the Executive Branch’s annual admissions. According to the 1980 Refugee Act, the Administration is required to submit and explain its assessment of resettlement needs to Congress. This “Proposed Resettlement Admissions” document outlines an operating budget and the year’s quota broken down into five administrative regions – Africa, East Asia, Europe

and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Near East and South Asia. According to the law, Congress is mandated to approve the Executive's proposal, and representatives from the Administration as well as other stakeholders are called on to explain and justify quotas and budgets during hearings. These hearings therefore provide a rare insight into the justifications and rationales guiding the selection of refugees for resettlement. They also provided guidance in identifying key interviewees.

In what follows, I first examine the role of humanitarian values and national interests in shaping the distribution of scarce resettlement spaces. As we'll see, neither adequately explain dynamics of selection. A subsequent section then outlines an alternative framework to understand refugee selection that empathizes the transnational social system of producing "clean cases."

Assessing Humanitarian Values

The UNHCR defines resettlement as a solution of "last resort" for those unable to return home or find effective refuge in their country of asylum. In other words, resettlement is used to "rescue" refugees suffering under acute human rights deprivations and individual vulnerabilities (UNHCR 2011). We would therefore expect that the UNHCR's authority over refugee humanitarianism would lead the composition of resettlement channels to roughly reflect the distribution of needs in the underlying population. To assess this expectation, we need a measure of resettlement needs. Unfortunately, the UNHCR does not provide comprehensive data on its needs

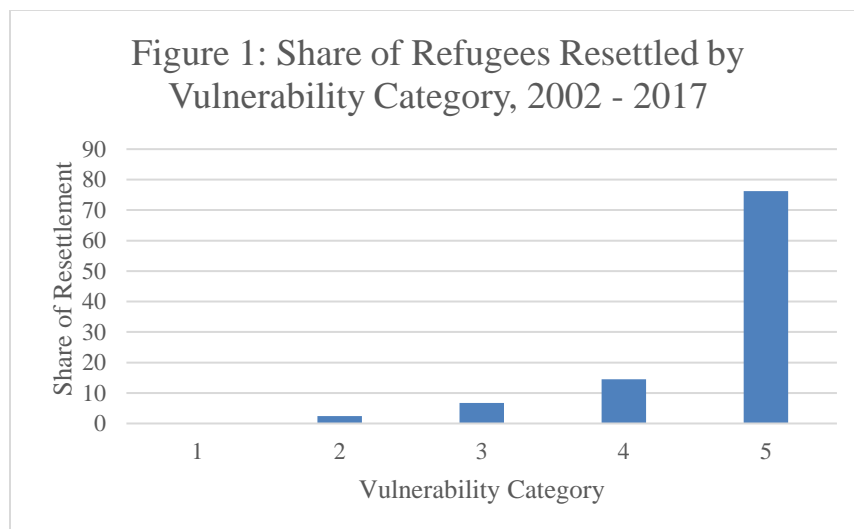
assessments.⁶ Instead, I have created a “vulnerability index score” for each refugee group in my dataset. The vulnerability index measures pertinent conditions in each group’s country-of-origin and country-of-asylum, such as the size of the refugee population, how long it has been in exile, whether the country of asylum has ratified international refugee laws, the political and social conditions in each country, and the prevalence and severity of conflict. Beyond a refugee’s ability to return or locally integrate, the conditions of a given country are also associated with other individual needs. For example, a country that has experienced persistent and damaging conflict may have depleted state infrastructures that make it difficult for refugees with urgent health needs to get treatment. Similarly, refugees who live in countries that have not ratified international refugee law may face heightened restrictions accessing livelihoods and services.

Based on the above, six variables were used to construct the vulnerability index (VI). A description of these variables and their sources are outlined in *Appendix B*. I used Principal Component Analysis to create the VI score (Vyas and Kumaranayake 2006) and then split refugee groups into one of five categories ranging from least (1) to most (5) vulnerable. Each category contains roughly 15,000 observations.

Figure 1 examines the share of resettlement spaces that went to refugees from each vulnerability category between 2002 and 2017. As we can see, the sizable majority (ninety-one percent) of those resettled over the study period come from categories four and five, with category five accounting for seventy-four percent. Most refugees resettled

⁶ The author was unable to get access to this data despite repeated efforts.

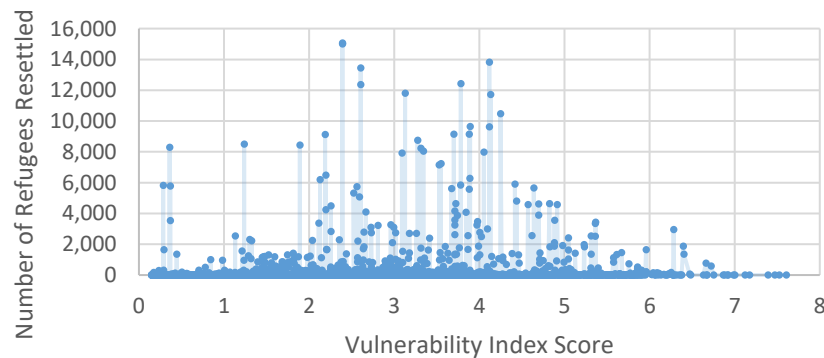
to the US therefore come from the most vulnerable refugee populations. Indeed, vulnerability and resettlement are highly correlated across the series ($r(69,554) = .89, p < .001$), with the small numbers coming through categories two and three mostly accounted for by special Congressional amendments that provide access to religious minorities from Ukraine (processed in Ukraine) and Iran (processed in Austria). Although not shown here, the share of places going to the most vulnerable populations increases over the study period, with refugees from Category 5 accounting for fifty percent of resettlement spaces in 2002 and seventy-seven percent in 2017. This finding seems to affirm the expectation that growing UNHCR selective authority since the end of the Cold War has led to a humanitarian turn in resettlement (Garnier 2014; Sandvik 2010).



A closer look, however, complicates this expectation. Figure 2 shows the distribution of resettlement spaces for all observations in vulnerability categories four and five based on their underlying VI score. This reflects 29,361 observations and ninety-one percent of all refugees resettled over the study period. On the one hand, the relationship

between vulnerability and resettlement remains positive and significant, albeit with a reduced Pearson's correlation coefficient ($r(27,359) = .094, p < .001$). On the other hand, however, the graph reveals that a small number of observations account for large numbers of resettlement spaces. Examining these observations, we in fact see that refugees from just five countries-of-origin spread across fourteen countries-of-asylum constitute over seventy percent of those resettled to the United States from categories four and five. In order of size, from largest to smallest, these are Myanmarse refugees in Thailand and Malaysia (164,117); Iraqi refugees in Jordon, Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey (94,293); Bhutanese refugees from Nepal (93,915); Somali refugees in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda (86,455); and Congolese refugees in Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi (38,441). This level of concentration is surprising given official discourses around distributional equality and selection on the basis of individual needs.

Figure 2: Number of Refugees Resettled from Vulnerability Categories Four & Five



The graph also reveals that resettlement spaces are clustered in the middle of the VI index, troubling official claims that resettlement goes to “the neediest.” Indeed,

truncating the data to look only at those refugees with particularly high levels of vulnerability ($VI > 3$), we see that the relationship between vulnerability and resettlement loses significance ($r(3,426) = .034, p = .062$). This segment of the data accounts for almost half (445,658) of all resettlement spaces distributed globally from 2002 to 2017. The effect of these distributional imbalances is that groups with pressing protection needs such as Sudanese refugees in South Sudan (0 resettled) or Chad (882), Somali refugees in Yemen (7), Myanmarese refugees in Bangladesh (25), Angolan refugees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (12), Afghan refugees in Iran (0) or Pakistan (6,150 for a population of over 1.5 million), Sri Lankan refugees in India (0), Palestinians living in Egypt (7), or Colombians in Venezuela (0) receive almost no resettlement spaces at all.

The gap between humanitarian ideals of “distributional equality” and selection was in fact frequently raised during expert interviews. The program director of an NGO contracted to identify and refer cases for submission put it like this [interview 11],

The main goal of resettlement is distributional equality: essentially, do all refugees in need have access to resettlement? I’m not saying they receive it. I’m saying do they have access to it [...]. [W]e just can’t say that we achieve this goal. So, for example, ten percent of [refugees in] Mali get resettled each year, but only one percent [in] Chad. I don’t think there’s any way you could say that people in Mali need resettlement more than in Chad.

A senior UNHCR official based in North America [interview 3] repeated this sentiment.

Using similar language to the NGO director quoted above, he defined a “humanitarian system [as] one where everyone who needs resettlement has access to it – not necessarily gets it, but has *access* to it.” He went on to lament that “Unfortunately, we just can’t say this is the case at the moment, and so a lot more advocacy is needed to get us there.”

Assessing National Interests

Above, we've seen that reference to humanitarian values cannot adequately account for imbalances in the distribution of resettlement. In this section, I examine the expectation that US national interests shape the distribution of scarce resettlement places. Scholars contend that at the heart of immigration politics and policy is a distinction between desirable and undesirable immigrants. While refugees, along with family migrants, are generally considered "undesirable" (Hollifield et al. 2014; Joppke 1998) and therefore subject to restrictions and exclusions (FitzGerald 2019), immigration scholarship points to three primary ways in which the logic of desirability/undesirability might impact the distribution of resettlement spaces: US foreign and domestic policy interests; the social and economic profile of refugees; and racialized discourses of security and threat.

While partial support can be found for each hypothesis, a comprehensive assessment suggests that they are inadequate to explain contemporary dynamics of refugee selection. As this section shows, the majority of refugees resettled to the US come from populations with little clear or specific foreign or domestic policy relevance and have social and economic profiles that would otherwise make them "undesirable" and even "threatening" within the contemporary logics of US immigration politics.

Foreign and Domestic Policy

Historically, a broader agenda to repel "unwanted/undesirable" migrants, such as refugees, has been counterbalanced by US foreign policy interests (FitzGerald and Cook-

Martin 2014; Tichenor 2002). Indeed, for much of the twentieth-century, the US used resettlement as a foreign policy tool to shore up stability for allies (mostly in Western Europe), encourage “emigration and freedom” from Communist states (e.g., the Soviet Union or China), support anti-Communist allies (e.g., in Cuba or Nicaragua), or redress displacement caused by US military interventions (e.g., Hungarians or Vietnamese). The title of Loescher’s classic 1986 book, *Calculated Kindness*, succinctly articulates this dynamic (see also Gibney 2004). In contrast, resettlement was rarely considered for refugees in the Global South who lacked geopolitical significance (such as most refugees in Africa) or persecuted by allied governments (e.g., El Salvadorians or Nicaraguans) (Chimni 2004; Menjívar 2006). While the Cold War has ended, the United States continues to wage wars and engage in antagonistic international relations often animated by oppositional discourses of “freedom” verses “totalitarianism.” We may therefore expect that foreign policy interests shape refugee selection.

On the one hand, the prominence of Iraqi refugees in resettlement channels between 2008 and 2017 suggests that geopolitical considerations remain important (Micinski 2018). Iraqis were resettled in response to the mass displacements caused by the US-led invasion and to honor (and encourage) commitments to Iraqi nationals who worked with US government agencies. As with the Cold War-era program for Southeast Asian refugees, veterans associations and Foreign Service officials played an important role in securing Congressional support for the resettlement of Iraqis – a support that led Donald Trump to remove Iraq from the list of majority-Muslim countries whose citizens were banned from entering the US. The US has also resettled a substantial number of

Iranians over the study period, equaling around 30,000 arrivals since 2002. This group represents religious minorities (primarily Christians and Bahá'í), who are provided preferential access through the 2004 Specter Amendment discussed earlier.

On the other hand, however, the sizable majority of refugees resettled over the study period have little clear geopolitical significance to the US. For example, almost fifty percent of all refugees resettled to the US between 2002 and 2017 come from one of Bhutan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Sudan, or Somalia. These programs are complimented by a range of smaller ones especially in Africa, which saw refugees from Burundi, the Central African Republic, Eritrea, and Sierra Leone resettled to the United States. None of these groups represent *clear and specific* foreign policy interests that differentiate them from other possible candidates. Taking the Bhutanese case as an example, the US took 94,000 refugees from camps in Nepal despite no clear foreign policy stake. As one official involved in the program put it, the country who benefited most from this resettlement was the Bhutanese government, who had expelled a sizable portion of their population and was under pressure to allow returns.

Another way of looking at this is through comparison of asylum rates, which scholars have shown are shaped by geopolitical considerations (Gibney 2004; Menjívar 2000:77–114). For example, while the US provided asylum to those leaving the Soviet Union and Cuba during the 1970s and 1980s, Salvadorian and Guatemalan asylees displaced by US-backed regimes were denied refugee status – and have subsequently lived in the US on a range of insecure legal statuses (Menjívar 2006). We would therefore

expect resettlement numbers to roughly mirror asylum numbers. The data does not bear this out, however. For example, the US has actively encouraged and rewarded Chinese defection with refugee status,⁷ and Chinese nationals constitute over thirty percent of all positive asylum claims.⁸ Yet, despite large numbers of asylum-seekers from China, the US has resettled an average of thirty-five UNHCR-recognized Chinese refugees per year since 2002. Egyptians follow Chinese in levels of asylum claims, and yet only seven Egyptian refugees have been resettled per year. In contrast, the US has resettled tens of thousands of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bhutan, and Myanmar over this period. Not only are these refugees absent from the US asylum system, they are largely absent from the European system too, reflecting their relatively settled position in countries-of-asylum.

While refugee selection is inconsistently explained by US foreign policy interests in a refugees' country-of-*origin*, selection may be determined by relationships with host countries. Hosting large refugee populations can be disruptive for states, straining their economies and generating political instability (Rüegger 2019). We may, therefore, expect the US to resettle refugees as an expression of solidarity with allies or to stabilize the economies of trading partners. Such an expectation is in line with world-systems theory, and the managerial function that hegemonic states play in expanding and stabilizing capitalist markets (Chase-Dunn 1999). Historically, the US used resettlement in this way

⁷ <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1993-07-01-1993182046-story.html>

⁸ <https://www.axios.com/china-political-asylum-immigration-one-child-policy-c45cee7f-8f52-43e6-b0d5-b69d82842ef0.html>

to support political and economic stability in Europe, from the origin of resettlement after the end of World War II (Gatrell 2011), to the large-scale program for Bosnians from Germany in the 1990s (Gibney 2004).

One way of exploring the importance of US/country-of-asylum relations is by examining the correlation between resettlement numbers and bi-lateral trade data. Levels of bi-lateral trade reflect US interests in economic stability and political alliances with host states. Bi-lateral trade, however, is negatively associated with resettlement ($r(72,058) = -.024, p < .001$), undermining the expectation that US/country-of-asylum relations drive selection decisions. Indeed, two times as many refugees (489,902) were resettled from low-volume trading partners compared to medium (225,597) and high (208,552); and ninety percent of refugees from high-volume trading partners were resettled from just two countries: Malaysia and Thailand. This means very low levels of resettlement from high-volume trading partners hosting large refugee populations such as China, India, Germany, and Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, resettlement from low-volume trading partners has been higher and more diverse. For example, the largest admissions program over the past several years has been for refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, processed in Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania – all low-volume trading partners.

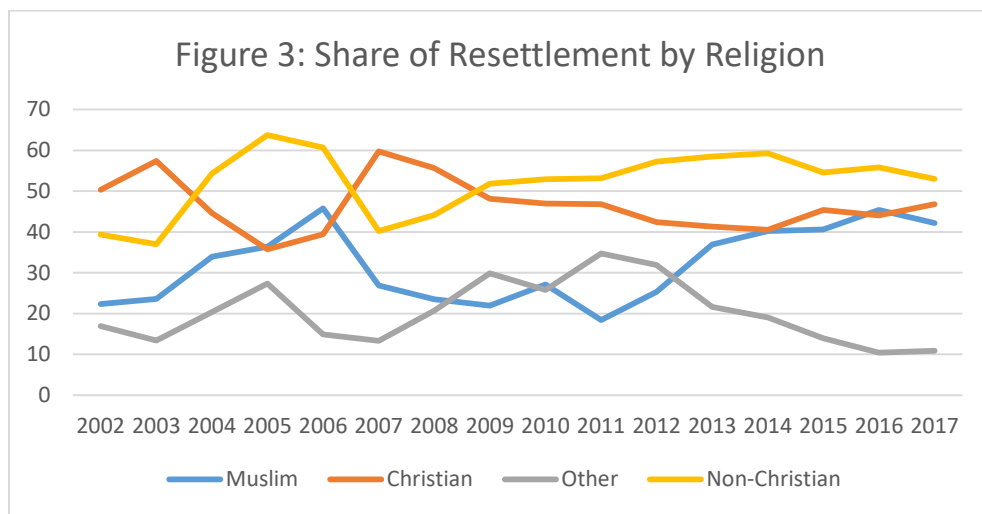
Social and Economic Profile of Refugees

There is now a large body of scholarship arguing that liberal democracies, such as the United States, select immigrants based on their racial, religious, and economic

characteristics (Bashi 2004; Chimni 2004; Ong 2006; Simon-Kumar 2014; Walsh 2008). We may expect this tendency to also shape the desirability/undesirability of refugees, therefore impacting selection. Indeed, scholarship focused on refugee resettlement in the twentieth-century provides numerous instances of just this. For example, very few African refugees were resettled to the United States during this time despite Africa having the largest refugee population by region (Chimni 2004). Similarly, core tenets of the international refugee system, especially the principle of *non-refoulement*, stem from the exclusion and forced return of Jews fleeing anti-Semitism in Europe (Wyman 1985). The resettlement of European refugees from Displaced Person's camps was tied to rebuilding postwar economies, and schemes therefore favored young, able-bodied refugees, with programs targeting those with particular skills (such as coal mining, farming, or medicine). As a consequence of these programs, 253,000 DPs were stranded in European camps in 1955, the great majority of whom were middle aged or older, had paralysis, missing limbs, or tuberculosis (Gatrell 2011:10–46; Wyman 1998:202).

We may therefore expect social and economic selectivity to impact the contemporary resettlement system. Unfortunately, it is not possible to compare those selected against those not as the UNHCR does not provide relevant information on its entire population. Instead, I examine the social and economic characteristics of those admitted, drawing on administrative data from the World Refugee Admissions Processing System. Assessing this data for refugees admitted between 2002 and 2017 suggests that the social and economic characteristics of refugees are a poor predictor for access to resettlement. Although region is a rough proxy for racial ascription, a first point

to note is that the majority of refugees resettled to the United States during the study period come from African and Asia. In fact, Africa represented the largest source region for refugees resettled to the United States over fiscal years 2003 to 2007 and in 2016 and 2017. Moving on from racial ascription, *Graph 3* reflects the share of resettlement spaces by religion. As can be seen, non-Christians have constituted the majority of refugees in all but four years – two of which were immediately after 9/11.



Of particular note, the graph indicates several years in which Muslim refugees equaled or exceeded Christians. This dynamic is surprising given the anti-Muslim discourse animating immigration politics following 9/11 (Selod 2015). Despite this, Somali Bantu refugees, a Muslim ethnic minority population, were the largest group resettled to the United States between FY2004 and FY2006. Coupled with the program for Meskhetian Turks, an ethnic-minority group dispersed across the former Soviet Union, Muslims predominated resettlement channels in 2005 and 2006. Beginning in Obama's second term, we see a rough parity between Muslims and Christians lasting

until his last refugee quota in FY2017. The Muslim refugee population during this period was predominated by Iraqis, Somalis, and, in FY2016 and 2017, Syrians.

Finally, reference to the economic profile of refugees also seems inadequate to explain dynamics of refugee selection. The majority of refugees resettled to the United States over the past two decades arrive at working age and with low levels of native-language literacy – indicating low levels of formal education. For example, of the 104,000 Somalis resettled to the United States since 2002, less than 25% were literate in their own language. Similarly, 38% of the 94,000 Bhutanese resettled over this period are native-language literate. Levels of education were actually boosted for this population *after* the head of a voluntary agency convinced the US to fund high school education for the population given the intention to resettle them [*interview 8*]. Although these measures say nothing of those refugees not selected, they suggest that a refugees’ capacity to become economically “self-sufficient” is not a strong predictor of selection.

The United States is in fact touted by resettlement practitioners for its lack of “integration criteria” and its openness to refugees regardless of their integration prospects. As a former field officer processing Congolese cases [*interview 5*] told me,

We always liked the [United] States the best [because] you knew that they’d accept anyone. Compare this to the Canadians or Europeans! They’d come in and say, do you have any Congolese doctors? Anyone with skills?

This view is echoed by US officials, who compare the US program favorably to the Canadian and European programs. For example, a government desk officer [*Interview 7*] remarked that “we don’t cherry-pick like the Europeans do.” They went on, “Even if

[refugees] struggle during the cultural orientation program, we don't screen anyone out. It's important that we lead by example to keep integration criteria to a minimum."

Security and Threat

Beyond logics of desirability, scholars also expect that immigrant selection will be shaped by constructions of threat (Lahav and Courtemanche 2012; Squire 2009). In the US context, such constructions are tied up with anti-terrorism policy and discourse. After 9/11, immigrant processing was incorporated into the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and made a national security issue. One of the most consequential changes in this period was the definition of "material support for terrorist-related activities" as a cause of inadmissibility under the Patriot and Real ID Acts of 2003 and 2006. As has been well-documented, DHS instructed immigration officials to apply the material support test stringently, leading to overly-broad applications (Nazeer 2006). We would expect the securitization of immigration to shape how refugees are selected for resettlement.

On the one hand, such concerns clearly exclude certain groups from consideration. For example, there is a sizable number of Afghan refugees in Iran who have been in exile for many years and have no realistic prospect of return. The Afghan Mujahedeen is active in the refugee population, however, and as one commentator put it, "they're simply not going to be resettled." While security concerns might exclude certain groups, reference to anti-terrorism politics and policies provide less guidance as to why certain groups *are* selected. In fact, the State Department has issued exemptions and

amendments on material support requirements to facilitate the admission of groups identified for resettlement. For example, a sizable proportion of Chin refugees from Myanmar were deemed to have provided “material support” to the Chin National Liberation Army. Likewise, over sixty percent of Colombians in Ecuador had material support issues compromising their eligibility. The Secretary of State relaxed material support tests for both in order to facilitate their resettlement [*Interview 8*].

It could be argued that cases such as Chin-Myanmari and Colombians reflect the specific interaction of terrorist threat with Islam in US immigration discourse (Selod 2015). In other words, we’d expect anti-terrorism concerns to be particularly consequential for Muslim refugees. The empirical record, however, shows a number of initiatives aimed at resettling Muslim refugees from areas with high levels of internationally-recognized terrorist activity. The 77,000 Muslim Iraqis resettled between 2008 and 2015 offer a clear example. Over this period, Iraq occupied the number one position on the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) list in each year except 2012. Similarly, 103,000 Muslim Somalis have been admitted since 9/11. Somalia has consistently ranked either fifth or sixth on the GTD, and the UN works under the highest security level in Kenya due to the activity of *Al-Shabaab* and other militia in-and-around the camps. Rather than barring Somalis, however, the State Department established an alternative site to conduct resettlement interviews that ensured the safety of processing staff [*Interview 8*] (Van Lehman 1999). Similar steps have been taken to increase the resettlement of Sudanese refugees in Chad and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh [*Interviews 8, 9 & 16*].

The foregoing discussion shows that neither humanitarian values nor national interests can adequately explain dynamics of refugee resettlement over the past two decades. While the United States generally resettles refugees from amongst the most vulnerable populations in the world, selection is surprisingly concentrated around a relatively small number of groups. This means that certain refugee populations receive large resettlement numbers while others with equally pressing claims for resettlement receive comparatively few. Reference to the interests of the United States cannot explain this imbalance. As we've seen, the majority of refugees resettled over the study period serve little clear and specific foreign or domestic policy objective and have social and economic profiles otherwise "undesirable" and even "threatening" within the contemporary terms of immigration politics. Drawing on social organizational theory (Healy 2004; Krause 2014) and accounts of the socially-generative effects of quantitative measures (Berman and Hirschman 2018; Espeland and Sauder 2007), the next section therefore offers an alternative explanation that foregrounds meso-level organizational dynamics.

Specifically, I show that a push to resettle refugees based on individual needs following the end of the Cold War conflicted with the social organization of identifying, referring, and processing refugees for resettlement in practice. The result was declining admissions and concerns about the long-term viability of the US resettlement system. Practitioners therefore became increasingly focused on meeting annual admissions, such

that *numbers and quotas* emerged as a predominant way in which stakeholders thought about and approached the resettlement system. Working within this context, and under pressure to meet annual targets, practitioners built a reformed resettlement system that operates through the administrative construction of “clean cases.” These are cases that can be identified, referred, and processed abroad in efficient and predictable ways to meet US admission demands under complex institutional and operational constraints.

As we’ll see in more detail below, constructing clean cases involves a twostep process of attaining support for particular programs among key state and non-state processing stakeholders, and then building infrastructure around these populations to ensure efficient and predictable referrals and departures. The administrative construction of clean cases has allowed the United States to resettle over a million refugees since the turn of the twenty-first century. At the same time, this system of selection undermines the humanitarian ideals of “distributional equality” and “rescue” that underpin official discourses of resettlement and its value as an instrument of refugee protection. As we’ll see, however, these departures from humanitarian ideals stem from the social system of construction clean cases, rather than the pre-existent interests of the US state or the intrinsic characteristics of refugees.

I develop the above argument in the next section, first tracing the formation of the contemporary system of refugee selection through a set of tensions following the end of the Cold War, and then outlining the process and implications of constructing clean cases in more detail. A final section then uses this framework to explain the imbalance in

resettlement spaces between Congolese refugees living in Uganda and Sudanese refugees living in Chad.

Beyond Values and Interests: Rebuilding the Admissions Pipeline

For much of its twentieth-century history, the refugee resettlement program was essentially an arm of Cold War foreign policy, with large, relatively open programs concentrated on a small number of geopolitically-important groups (Gibney 2004; Loescher and Scanlan 1986). With the end of the Cold War, however, refugees lost their geopolitical value and the programs that sustained the resettlement system were coming to a close, resulting in declining admissions (Chimni 2004; Gibney 2004). For example, 25-35,000 Vietnamese refugees were resettled each year from 1981 to 1993. By 1997, this number had dropped to 7,000, and it continued to decline thereafter to around 3,000 by 2002. A debate therefore ensued about the future of the resettlement program.

At the center of debate was the national resettlement system. This system had been built over the preceding decades by the federal government in conjunction with predominantly faith-based voluntary organizations (“VolAgs”). It allowed tens of thousands of refugees to be resettled each year in towns and cities across the country. Moreover, this system allowed resettlement to be done with relatively minimal federal input, as refugees could be relocated to areas with available work and cheap housing, and VolAgs had forged local support structures that supplemented federal funds (Benson 2016; Darrow 2015b). The national infrastructure, however, is structurally tied to

admissions such that declining numbers following the end of the Cold War threatened its sustainability.

A broad set of actors wanted to maintain the national system. State Department officials, for example, wanted to maintain this system in order to respond adeptly to emerging foreign policy priorities. Businesses exerted pressure through the Department of Labor, as refugees had become central to key industries, especially in food processing and packaging. For their part, the VolAgs contracted to do resettlement work wanted, in the words of a former director, “to keep the business going,” and drew on advocates in Congress across the political spectrum. Collectively, then, there was a broad consensus among key stakeholders to find new resettlement priorities in order to keep the national system intact. Reflecting this sentiment, the Director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, Lavinia Limon, remarked to Congress in 1998 that,

[It'll be an issue] if the numbers continue to go down [...] right now we have a program where we can resettle people anywhere in the United States. Recently that became not possible. But [...] that is really the goal I think, to be able to keep that national program.

Practitioners estimated that annual admissions of around 70-90,000 would be sufficient to keep this system in place. But with the declining geopolitical significance of refugees, how should this annual ceiling be met? Or, in other words, who should be selected for resettlement?

During this period, refugee and human rights advocates campaigned the Clinton Administration to reorient selection to “global needs.” Advocates argued that refugees should be selected based on humanitarian notions of individual vulnerability and human

rights deprivations. As part of their campaign, advocates toured congressional representatives around camps in Africa and Asia, and these representatives put pressure on the Administration to shift toward humanitarian metrics of selection (see Boas 2007). Members of the Black Congressional Caucus were among those to visit the camps, and subsequently leveraged their elevated position during the early years of the Clinton Administration to advocate for greater levels of resettlement for refugees from Africa [*interviews 1, 6, 9 & 13*]. These calls grew in strength following the starkly different responses of the Clinton Administration to European refugees displaced following the breakup of Yugoslavia and African refugees displaced after the Rwandan Civil War. A senior State Department official, now retired, recalls a particularly tense conversation during a UN meeting with African state officials:

We'd been hearing it for a while: why does Africa have the lowest resettlement numbers and yet the highest refugee population? Our view, which was the UNHCR's view, was that resettlement was not the best option on the continent due to strong regional asylum provisions. But the whole Yugoslavia situation was really a tipping point. We were essentially accused of racism, of excluding Africans. That really wasn't the case at all. But, this narrative took hold and had a big effect on our thinking at the time.

Paradoxically, the support for maintaining a 70-90,000 resettlement quota and transitioning toward humanitarian metrics of selection also stemmed from the growing contention around asylum-seeking during the 1980s and 1990s (Menjívar 2000:77–114). During Congressional hearings, Republican representatives frequently drew a comparison between “bogus” asylum-seekers driven by economic rationales and “real” refugees suffering under human rights deprivations. Representatives argued that tough border controls on “bogus” asylum seekers was central for gaining popular consent for expanding access to “real” refugees. Proponents of this position saw the structure of

refugee resettlement as offering the clearest and most effective way of ensuring that US refugee policy benefited those who really needed protection.

In response to these diverse pressures, the Clinton Administration enacted a series of reforms in 1995 to rebuild the “admissions pipeline” based on principles of distributional equality and human rights logics of individual need, insecurity, and vulnerability. To achieve this end, the US looked increasingly to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), which, US officials believed, had the existing infrastructure and expertise required to identify and refer cases based on need from across the global refugee population [*Interview 14*]. The State Department’s Refugee Bureau (PRM) also worked with the UNHCR to identify new groups from across the globe with particularly compelling protection needs.

It quickly became clear, however, that the new system of resettlement was not working. Admissions continued to be predominated by declining Cold War-era programs, temporarily offset by the large number of refugees resettled from the Former Yugoslavia. Moreover, the UNHCR referred very few cases for resettlement to the US despite its increased selective authority and role in filling admissions. Between 1995 and 2000, for example, the UNHCR referred less than 1,000 of the four million registered refugees each year from Africa undermining the goal of expanding access to resettlement. And finally, despite identifying a number of new priorities across the globe, referrals through these priorities lagged. To take an example, PRM worked with the UNHCR to identify a

priority population of Liberian refugees in Ghana, but actual UNHCR referrals from this population were far lower than expected and the program was prematurely closed.

In response to the difficulties meeting quotas, the Clinton Administration decreased the annual ceiling several times over the 1990s. Congressional hearings focused extensively on the underlying causes and consequences of these decreases and the issue of unmet quotas. For example, during a committee hearing over the Clinton Administration's Proposed Admission for FY2000, Senator Edward Kennedy stated that,

Many of us have been concerned by the continuing decline in refugee admission ceilings in recent years, falling more than 40 percent from 132,000 in 1993 to 78,000 in 1999 at a time when the number of refugees dislocated by civil war and global turmoil has increased [...]. Reductions in our refugee admission ceilings have sent the wrong signal to nations that engage in persecution [...]. It also sends the wrong signal to refugees—that they are not welcome here.

Such comments were common during sub-Committee hearings of the period, reflecting the extent to which the resettlement program came to be framed in terms of how many refugees the US was resettling, and the extent to which practitioners were able to meet ceilings and quotas.

Issues with the newly reformed post-Cold War system came to a head in 2000 when the Administration missed its annual quota by twenty-thousand places, resulting in myriad problems for the national resettlement system. The situation worsened following the events of 9/11, which saw admissions drop to 27,120 and 28,376 in '02 and '03 respectively. While the Bush Administration funded the voluntary agencies on the basis of the 70,000 ceiling to stave off office closures, a new system of identifying and selecting refugees was urgently needed. To rebuild the admissions pipeline, the Bush

Administration issued a consolidation and review period to discover problems in the current system and a way forward. Two primary issues were identified, each of which point to complexities in the social organization of identifying, referring, and resettling refugees across the globe in practice.

UNHCR Reluctance and Operational Complexity

The first issue was that regional and national UNHCR offices and staff (i.e., below the executive office in Geneva) were reluctant to perform the increased role in resettlement that the US envisioned. The limited supply of resettlement places meant that UNHCR officers faced a triaging issue with little guidance as to who to refer. In response, field officers simply refused to submit cases. A US official sent to the UNHCR by PRM to investigate the cause of low referrals recalls that [*interview 14*],

From '95, the [new referral system] hinged on [UN]HCR, but their staff were out there and they didn't want to submit cases. They were in these camps surrounded by thousands of people in dire need of all sorts of support and we were asking them to submit 100, 200 cases. They simply didn't want to do this cherry picking and so they didn't refer anyone.

In other words, field staff faced a triaging issue with little guidance as to who to refer due to the universalistic, humanitarian ideals guiding selection – a particular form of what Calabresi and Bobbit (1978) term “tragic choices.”

Coupled with issues of triaging, the UNHCR had an institutional culture that was at best ambivalent about resettlement (Fredriksson and Mougne 1994). For most of the twentieth-century, the UN's Refugee Agency was marginalized from the process of identifying resettlement needs and establishing priorities. Staff compared their resettlement work to that of a “travel agent,” simply processing cases selected by states

with little regard for assessments of need (*ibid*). In some parts of the world, most notably Africa, UNHCR officials had no experience with selective third-country resettlement at all and didn't consider it as part of their protection plans [*interviews 4 & 6*]. Instead, the Agency had built a system of refugee management alongside regional states and the African Union that was relatively independent of donors.⁹

There was also an institutional memory of the UNHCR's role in the Southeast Asian refugee crisis, where relatively open-ended programs in Thailand, Malaysia, and Hong Kong generated large-scale irregular migration in the region, contributing to some 400,000 deaths in the South China Sea. The Agency's role in these programs provoked intense criticism among staff (Fredriksson and Mougne 1994), and created the idea that resettlement programs have a "pull effect" encouraging intra-regional migration, and therefore exacerbating humanitarian crises. UNHCR Country Directors were cautious about stimulating such effects [*interviews 4, 6, & 8*]. Similarly, Country and Regional Directors favored large-scale repatriation (Loescher 2001b) and saw resettlement as undermining a refugee's right to return. Finally, the Agency's reliance on the good favor of host states for their operations led to a reluctance to initiate resettlement, which implies a condemnation of host countries' asylum policies (Barnett 2001 for a broader discussion). The level of resistance toward resettlement was such that a number of

⁹ The UNHCR was the first UN agency in Algeria (1957), Tunisia (1957), Morocco (1958), Angola (1961), Guinea-Bissau (1962), and Mozambique (1964).

Country Directors *actively* impeded resettlement operations in their region [*interviews 4, 8, & 9*].

Compounding and interacting with UNHCR reluctance, the global resettlement infrastructure inherited from the Cold War era was ill-equipped to identify, select, and, crucially, process refugees from around the globe on the basis of individual protection needs. The existing infrastructure was instead built around the large-scale resettlement of a small number of geographically-concentrated groups (especially in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia). For example, the 1980 Refugee Act requires that each individual resettlement candidate is interviewed and processed by a US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) officer. Since the Act, USCIS has used US-based asylum officers to conduct interviews rather than specifically-trained staff. Officers volunteer to conduct “circuit rides” for several weeks at a time before returning to their regular, US-based position. To process the volume of individual cases required to meet annual US quotas, officers have to conduct tens if not hundreds of interviews a day. The geographic concentration of cases and open eligibility criteria during the Cold War period made this relatively straightforward as USCIS officers would travel to one or two processing locations and conduct standardized interviews. During the Southeast Asian programs, resettlement took on an almost industrial character, with refugees transported to a number of US military bases and processed *en masse* (see Espiritu 2014; Mortland 2017).

A system of selection based on individual needs and distributional equality, however, required USCIS officers to process cases across large geographic expanses and

to adjudicate complex refugee claims stemming from contexts they had little familiarity with. Moreover, the Refugee Processing Centers (RPCs) critical to the performance of resettlement were also highly concentrated. RPCs play a key role in pre-screening selected cases, preparing refugee case files, and organizing medical tests. They also coordinate USCIS circuit rides, which require transporting and housing refugees, organizing accommodation for officials, and preparing adequate facilities for interviews. In 1995, there was only one RPC in the whole of Africa (Kenya) despite a continent-wide quota. Likewise, there was only one single USCIS officer (also based in Kenya). This compared to RPCs in each of Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Singapore due to the legacy of programs for Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians. Similarly, given special regulations for Cuban admissions, there wasn't a single RPC in the whole of the Latin America and Caribbean region. Complications were compounded by low levels of automation, reliance on pen and paper, and demands to work in places without electricity or computers [*interview 14*]. A senior official associated with the RPC in Nairobi recalls trunks of paperwork being transported between offices by Jeep and planes.

The political and institutional responses to 9/11 only exacerbated these existing challenges. Whereas USCIS officers previously focused on rooting out fraud (generally concerning family composition), the institutional repositioning of immigration within the Department of Homeland Security after 9/11 emphasized a security logic [*interview 9*]. Assessing security risks requires access to country-of-origin criminal and security databases, a challenging and at times impossible requirement given the contexts that refugees are fleeing from. Similarly, security requirements on USCIS interview sites

became stringent, requiring sentry towers, policed perimeters with remote sensors, and bullet and blast proof walls and glass [*interviews 8 & 9*]. In parts of the Middle East, the State Department's Security Division would only allow interviews to occur out of already cramped embassies, meaning that officials could only conduct a few interviews each day. This process was in sharp contrast to the preferred one that saw thousands interviewed in short, multi-location circuit rides. Moreover, this emphasis on security made interviewing refugees across diffused operational contexts extremely challenging.

Constructing Clean Cases

Having diagnosed falling admissions and unmet quotas as a result of UNHCR reluctance and infrastructure unfit for individual needs and risk assessments, PRM worked with its stakeholders to rebuild the admissions pipeline. The reformed system of selecting refugees essentially works by administratively constructing "clean cases." These are cases that can be identified, referred, and processed in an efficient and predictable way to meet US admission demands under the complex institutional and operational constraints outlined above. Importantly, what makes a case "clean" has less to do with the individual characteristics of a given refugee (whether their social and economic profile or inherent vulnerability) and more to do with social organizational features of resettling refugees in practice.

Clean cases are constructed through a twostep process. First and foremost, senior officials within the UNHCR and US Refugee Bureau (PRM) attain assurances from key processing stakeholders that they will facilitate stable and predictable referrals and

departures from particular populations. This stage involves multilateral and iterative negotiations among stakeholders such as host and origin country governments, UNHCR regional and country offices, US government agencies such as US Citizenship and Immigration Services and the Department of Homeland Security, NGOs, and refugee leadership structures. For example, PRM needs to ensure that the State Department Security Division will provide appropriate clearances for USCIS interviews. Similarly, officials need to ensure that host countries will provide those selected exit visas, and that processing and interview staff will have unimpeded access to refugees. An individual familiar with this process described it to me as the “wink and nod system,” which involves senior officials floating specific groups to processing stakeholders to ascertain any likely problems before initiating a next round of negotiation and planning.

The outcome of this nested, iterative, and multilateral process of negotiation is that resettlement has increasingly come to operate as a bargaining chip to secure broader refugee population management goals for states and the UNHCR. Practitioners have come to refer to this as “strategic resettlement” (UNHCR 2011:54–57), which infers that any one resettlement program has some “secondary benefit” beyond the individual refugee resettled. An example of strategic resettlement would be resettling a specific ethnic subgroup of a population to convince a country of origin to repatriate other members of the group. For example, the UNHCR prioritized the resettlement of Burundian refugees who married locals during their exile in Tanzania. The Burundi government refused to accept the return of these refugees because of concerns of divided ethnic allegiances [*interview 13*]. Resettling these cases opened up a largely successful

repatriation program. Strategic resettlement may also open up possibilities for increased rights for those refugees that remain. For example, the UNHCR prioritized the resettlement of Myanmar Christian refugees in exchange for Malaysia offering work permits and freedom of movement rights to Muslim Myanmar refugees – especially Rohingya.

The second critical step in constructing clean cases is preparing particular populations for identification, referral, and departure. For example, once a population is selected for resettlement, the UNHCR conducts mass re-verifications to ensure that case files and biometric data are up to date and in line with US processing requirements. Moreover, clean cases are produced through investments in processing infrastructure (bureaucratic technologies, facilities, and expertise). For example, PRM coordinates with the Department of Homeland Security to use standardized processing criteria and/or abridged referral forms that significantly reduce processing times and information requirements. Similarly, the State Department invests in physical infrastructure such as roads, secure interview sites, or medical facilities that allow large scale, efficient, and uninterrupted referrals and departures.

Undermining Distributional Equality and Rescue

The reformed system of selection has been successful on its own terms. Most notably, refugee admissions stabilized after reforms, such that by 2008 the US was regularly meeting its 70-80,000 annual ceiling, and the UNHCR – previously reluctant to conduct resettlement work – was referring more cases than the US and other resettlement

countries had spaces for, therefore creating backlogs that could fill quotas for subsequent years. Although not addressed directly in this chapter, this system allowed the US to build out global resettlement capacity, as new countries could simply participate in these large programs at limited expense, instead focusing resources and attention on incorporating refugees post-resettlement.¹⁰ As a result, global resettlement capacity increased throughout this period from around 92,000 spaces offered by thirteen states in 2001, to almost 200,000 spaces offered by thirty states in 2017. At the same time, however, the reformed system undermines core humanitarian ideals of “distributional equality” and “rescue,” which otherwise animate official discourse around resettlement as a humanitarian protection mechanism. There are three reasons for this, each stemming directly from the process of constructing clean cases.

First, certain refugee groups pose enhanced political and operational barriers to selection, meaning that it is harder to attain assurances from processing stakeholders for their orderly and predictable selection and processing. These groups therefore receive less resettlement spaces. This fact is strongly implied by the “wink and nod” system mentioned above, as well as the statements of a number of practitioners who informed me that desk officers are reluctant to push cases that pose complex political or operational challenges given the constant pressure to find cases and meet referral demands [*interviews 4 & 8*]. For example, ongoing political tensions between Bangladesh and resettlement countries have undermined the capacity to resettle Rohingya refugees, such

¹⁰ As one UNHCR official said to me, “Canada spends on integrating refugees what the United States spends abroad. But if the US wasn’t doing this, I think you’d see a very different program in Canada.”

that only twenty-five refugees were resettled between 2002 and 2017. Similarly, logistical issues such as poor quality roads, geographically-dispersed refugee populations, or elevated security concerns undermine the capacity to attain agreements from government agencies to complete sufficient circuit rides or clear USCIS officers for interviews. Practitioners refer to such groups as “hard to reach cases.” This notion came up frequently during fieldwork and interviews to explain distributional imbalances in resettlement between groups that otherwise have similar levels of need. For example, practitioners frequently used the language of hard to reach cases to explain the very low levels of resettlement for refugees in certain African countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo or the Central African Republic.

Importantly operational challenges do not outright disqualify groups, as the US state has proven willing to invest in infrastructure to resettle certain priority populations. For example, when Kenya threatened to push Somali refugees out of the country, the United States promised increased resettlement for this population. It quickly found that it could not operate in the camps, however, due to security concerns and access issues. In response, the US built a large processing facility in Kakuma Refugee Camp and bussed refugees from Dadaab to Kakuma for processing. As a senior official in the State Department at the time put it to me,

It was more expensive, but this is how we could meet the needs. So these are the sorts of considerations: how much resources do USCIS have to do this work? What’s the security situation and infrastructure? How many people can actually go and how long can they stay? There’s all of these considerations.

This quote powerfully and succinctly brings together questions of “need” with questions of “numbers,” revealing how these two logics operate in tandem to shape refugees’ access to resettlement. The quote also, however, reveals that groups posing elevated barriers to resettlement require increased investments, and that such investments infer a set of considerations that have little directly to do with the underlying “needs” of a particular population.

Second, the infrastructure central to constructing clean cases generates a path-dependency in refugee selection, which concentrates spaces in certain populations and countries of asylum. This is primarily because, once built, infrastructures provide the platform for stable and predictable admissions. Moreover, infrastructures lead to path-dependencies because of the administrative rationalizations that justify expensive investments, and also the ways in which infrastructure shapes how states and other humanitarian actors “see” populations. The fact that Myanmarese refugees have been the largest source country for resettlement to the US over the past two decades is a case in point. Myanmarese refugees began to arrive in Thailand and Malaysia at roughly the same time that the US program for Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians living in these countries was coming to a close. There was therefore already an unusually high level of processing infrastructure in place (including Refugee Processing centers in both Thailand and Malaysia) and US officials had strong and close relationships with Thai and Malaysian government officials. Moreover, key US stakeholders, especially the religious charities that played a pivotal role in Cold War-era resettlement, were still active in the

camps when Myanmarese began to arrive and became closely (and emotionally) involved in these newly arriving refugees.

A similar dynamic surrounded stories about the origins of the large resettlement program for Somali Bantu refugees from Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. Four interviewees narrated a story about a US official who worked out of the Kenyan RPC, which was opened to facilitate the resettlement of the Sudanese Lost Boys in the 1990s. The officials' son frequently played soccer on the street with young kids from the camp. One afternoon, she went to pick him up and got speaking with a few of the Somali children, who turned out to be Somali Bantu. She found out about their marginalized situation in the camps, and subsequently led an effort to prioritize their resettlement. This story points to the powerful ways in which infrastructures lead to path dependencies.

Third and finally, the iterative and multilateral process of attaining assurances for resettlement coupled with the buildup of infrastructures and expertise takes time. As a result, the process of constructing clean cases means that many refugees in “need” wait in exile for years before they are even considered for resettlement. Senior officials often lamented this fact during interviews. Discussing the ideal of resettlement as a “humanitarian rescue program” for those refugees most in need, one official [*interview 14*] conceded that resettlement is “really not a rescue program. Sadly, it’s just not. It’s not an open arms program.” They went on to say that “It’s very selective exactly because of the logistics. It takes years to establish agreements and set up the required infrastructure, and then it can take over two years to actually get resettled to the United States.” As a

result, they said, “you’re looking at seven or eight years in exile minimum before your case is even considered. So no, it’s just not a rescue program.” Reflecting on how the initial objectives of the reform period had changed over the years, an official [*interview* 9] closely involved in resettlement since the mid-1980 made a similar comment:

Back in [the 1990s], our focus was really on diversity, on making sure resettlement was available to as many in need as possible. That’s just not the case anymore. It’s a numbers game now. It’s about budgets, it’s about keeping numbers up [...]. We tell ourselves that we’re saving peoples’ lives. But we’re not. It just takes too long, requires too much planning, and it’s too selective by design. It’s really not saving [refugees].

The description of resettlement as a “numbers game” came up several times during my fieldwork to explain – and lament – the departure from humanitarian ideals of distributional equality and rescue. This characterization graphically reflects the ways in which the post-Cold War concern with numbers, ceilings, and quotas generated a set of reactions among practitioners that led to the construction of a resettlement system fixated on meeting annual admissions and filling annual quotas (c.f. Espeland and Sauder 2007).

Interestingly, a number of practitioners rationalized the process of constructing clean cases through attention to the temporal rhythms of processing and issues of volume. For example, an individual who’s worked across the US government and UNHCR for over three decades lamented the distributional imbalances in resettlement and the fact that resettlement rarely served to “rescue” those in urgent need. They went on to say, however, that,

[W]hat I truly believe, in my heart of hearts, is that we’re transforming the lives of a lot of people every year. [...]. So, I think about it as a kind of trade off: we may not be identifying the neediest, but when we hit that annual target set out by Congress, we’re

maximizing the effect of this program. We're making sure that as many refugees as possible are resettled.

Numerous interviewees articulated a similar narrative, reflecting an emergent set of professional norms animating the work of resettlement and guiding activities in the field.

Clean Cases and Distributional Imbalances: An Example

This final section provides a comparative example that illustrates how the process of constructing “clean cases” produces distributional imbalances. While Congolese refugees living in Uganda have received 11,210 places since 2004 (equivalent to 0.8% of the Congolese refugee population in Uganda) only 63 Sudanese refugees have been resettled from Chad (0.02%). These two refugee groups come under the same regional quota and are managed by the same US Refugee Bureau (PRM) desk officer. What, then, explains the uneven distribution of resettlement spaces across these two groups?

According to the humanitarian account, this imbalance reflects an underlying difference in resettlement needs. This claim does not hold up. While both groups are in the most vulnerable category of refugees (Category Five), Sudanese refugees living in Chad have a higher index score (averaging at 5.2 compared to 5). In fact, the latter, displaced from the Darfur region of Sudan, are among the most marginalized refugees in Africa, essentially warehoused in camps located in remote, semi-arid areas of the country. Life in these camps is almost entirely sustained by international aid, which has been diminishing over the past ten years resulting in food rationing. Moreover, this group live under constant security threat and have very limited prospects of returning to Sudan. Congolese living in Uganda, on the other hand, generally live among Ugandans in

“settlements,” are given arable land to farm, are able to “self-settle” in urban areas, and have access to public institutions such as schools, courts, and hospitals. Indeed, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, recently described Uganda’s refugee policy as “among the most progressive in the world.”¹¹

The imbalance in resettlement spaces between Congolese and Sudanese refugees was raised during a conversation with the PRM desk officer who oversees both contexts [*Interview 12*]. The official first outlined the heightened vulnerabilities that trigger resettlement, focusing particularly on camp-based refugee hosting in which refugees are “living segregated from the local population [and] not able to work or to move around freely.” To draw out the point, the PRM official went on to compare the more open system in Uganda to the situation in Chad,

...refugees inevitably get more settled and look more and more like true Ugandans, in that they have land, they have businesses, they’ve gone to school, they’ve integrated and they have a multi-generational kind of life here. You can compare this to the situation in Chad where you have refugees living in segregated camps, completely dependent on aid, and facing endemic funding shortfalls.

Pushed on why, then, Congolese receive higher rates of resettlement compared to the Sudanese refugees living in segregated camps in Chad, the official went on to say that,

You really haven’t seen many [Congolese] being able to make that leap to be truly independent operators [...]. There’s really not many refugees or family members of refugees that have truly excelled in Uganda, I mean, they haven’t joined the middle classes. You look at Kampala where you can really see a growing middle class, you don’t see Congolese among that.

¹¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2018/1/5a716d994/grandi-praises-ugandas-model-treatment-refugees-urges-regional-leaders.html>

Ascent to the middle classes is a strong measure of local integration, applicable to few refugees around the world. Given the scarcity and exceptional value of resettlement spaces, the relative overrepresentation of Congolese refugees in Uganda compared to Sudanese in Chad suggests that alternative factors beyond humanitarian need shape the distribution of resettlement places.

To understand why Congolese have received more resettlement spaces than Sudanese, we need to turn to the social system of selecting refugees in practice. As we've seen, this system concentrates resettlement spaces around a relatively small number of refugee groups that can support stable and predictable admissions over multiple years. Given these institutional constraints, the Congolese emerged as an ideal group for resettlement. This point was put clearly by a senior official who has worked across the US government and UN system. Asked why the Congolese have received such large resettlement numbers over other groups with similar protection needs, the official [*interview 9*] remarked simply that it was about "Numbers, politics, and meeting the ceiling. It's that simple." They went on to say [*emphasis added*],

Obama's final ceiling was 110,000. To process so many cases in a year is tough, so you need lots of *clean cases* and tons of operational capacity [...]. [We use a measurement] called 'movement time.' This is the time between [US]CIS interview and departure. Congolese are going through in 4 to 6 months! That's unheard of. That's medical, security screening, wait period, everything. You don't see that with Iraqis or Somalis. Forget about Syrians, it's almost impossible. They're just as needy, no one's doubting it. But, as I say, it's a numbers game at the end of the day and the Congolese program gets us those numbers.

A practitioner "in the field" charged with referring Congolese refugees for resettlement to the United States reflected a similar view [*emphasis added*]:

We have really high annual referral targets, and so we're often working hard to hit these targets, sometimes six or seven days a week just trying to get files in order [...]. To meet my targets I'm looking for *clean cases* where I can just do some checks and then submit. From my experience, I can say that the Congolese program has been one of the best for this, and it shows a real progression from where we were five, ten years ago.

A significant reason for the fast movement time and availability of clean cases among the Congolese refugee population is that PRM has built infrastructure to ensure high-volume referrals. For example, PRM has funded the construction of large processing facilities in Uganda and Tanzania that have medical centers, rooms for departing refugees, secure interview sites, and even attached accommodation for USCIS interviewers. Commenting on these facilities, a PRM representative [*interview 12*] said,

We just finished one in Tanzania. It's the state-of-the-art way to do this. You can do concurrent pre-screening, USCIS interviews, IOM medical interviews, cultural orientations, all in one place [...]. The idea is that we can build reception centers that are more than a hut, and we will use it for more than ten years. So [that center] will pay for itself by the end of next year. That's where we should be putting more money. So we've [also done this in Uganda.] We've built a big medical center for IOM where they can do it all at once, including we have a five day waiting period where we can check if anything comes up before they leave, and so we can house refugees at that center, do out final checks, do all the medical stuff there, do the final vaccinations there, all in one place. [This is something] I'll do when I go to travel. I think, will we be doing a lot of more resettlement in this country in the foreseeable future? Is it worth building something here? Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't.

The final few sentences of the above quote reveal that the infrastructural investments required to produce clean cases will simply not be triggered unless assurances can be attained that, once in place, resettlement will sustain numbers across multiple years. Similarly, the quote displays how the logic surrounding investments in infrastructure results in path-dependent resettlement dynamics, as investments are expected to “pay for themselves” by stabilizing the US admissions pipeline over multiple years.

We can now return more directly to the puzzle of why Congolese receive more resettlement spaces than Sudanese. Put simply, the operational and political context in Uganda allowed PRM and senior UNHCR officials to build out infrastructure and attain assurances for stable admissions. In other words, the Congolese were more easily constructed as “clean cases.” Indeed, the US has open and generally good diplomatic channels with Uganda, decreasing concerns over potential interruptions to processing. Furthermore, US staff can operate in Uganda with minimal restrictions due to the security context (especially in the west and southwest where Congolese refugees are), and processing partners can easily travel to refugee settlements and organize transit for refugees to processing facilities. Finally, the Department of Homeland Security and USCIS allowed abridged referral forms for Congolese, reducing the need for complex individual case management and data-gathering, in turn reducing the need for extensive training and specialized staff.

In contrast, Sudanese refugees in Chad pose significantly greater operational and political challenges. Despite calls for increased resettlement by the UNHCR Country Office in Chad, the Security Section in the State Department refused to issue clearances for USCIS officers to conduct interviews near the camps due to security concerns. Furthermore, on-the-ground agencies face difficulties operating in the region and moving potential candidates in-and-out of camps for interviews or screenings. Indeed, international operations in Chad operate under UN peacekeeping forces and national military escorts. Such contexts significantly increase the demands on infrastructure.

The critical point here is that the imbalance between Congolese refugees and Sudanese stems from the social system of constructing clean cases, rather than, directly, national interests or the intrinsic characteristics of either population (either their social or economic profile or inherent vulnerability). In fact, PRM invested significant sums to build secure processing infrastructure in Chad to increase Sudanese resettlement [interviews 9 & 12]. This led to a small number of referrals in 2016. However, an agreement between Chad and Sudan led to an abrupt halt in referrals and a suspension of processing. Reflecting on this situation, a senior official suggested that the US was unlikely to pursue Sudanese resettlement from Chad in the future:

It's just been too complex and expensive. Darfurs are what we'd call 'hard to reach' refugees, and we've had to invest a lot of time and resources into this program with very little results. Especially given our relationship, or I guess I should say lack of relationship with Sudan, I don't really see this program being viable moving forward.

The ongoing discussion shows that irrespective of underlying needs or US national interests, the selection, identification, and processing of refugees in practice places certain constraints and limitations on refugee selection, resulting in distributional imbalances. In particular, refugees' access to resettlement is mediated by infrastructures that are themselves unevenly distributed across the refugee population. To understand why certain refugees are resettled and others are not, we therefore need to examine the transnational social process of constructing clean cases.

Conclusion

Soon after taking office in January 2021, Joe Biden reiterated his campaign commitment to increase resettlement to 125,000 a year over the course of his presidency.

Contextualized by statement's such as "American's back," Biden couched his support for large resettlement numbers within his broader emphasis on American exceptionalism and the United States' moral position within and responsibility to the world. A month later, on February 4th, he signed Executive Order 14013, titled "Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration," which laid out a series of administrative actions to rebuild the "badly broken" resettlement system inherited from Trump. Around the same time, Biden sent a proposal to Congress to increase the FY2020-21 quota from 15,000 to 62,500 citing the need to "help meet the unprecedented global need" for resettlement. Biden's actions met a chorus of praise. A New York Times editorial, for example, applauded Biden for removing Trump-era barriers blocking the resettlement of "the world's neediest people."¹² Similarly, UNHCR head Filippo Grandi praised Biden, citing the need for urgent action to address the large number of refugees living in "life-threatening circumstances" and "situations of extreme vulnerability."¹³

The findings of this chapter complicate official and popular discourse around refugee resettlement. Looking beyond the number of refugees resettled or the logics deployed to justify and frame resettlement in official discourse, this chapter has shown that access to resettlement is concentrated around a small number of refugee groups, that most refugees are in exile for years before they are resettled, and that certain refugee

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/03/us/politics/biden-immigration-refugee-policy.html>

¹³ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/press/2021/2/601c56524/biden-move-refugee-resettlement-save-lives-unhcr.html>

populations have restricted access to resettlement irrespective of their underlying need. In other words, the system of selecting refugees to the United States undermines humanitarian ideals of “distributional equality” and “rescue.” Crucially, however, departures from humanitarian ideals do not stem straightforwardly from the constraining interests of the United States or the inherent characteristics of refugees. Rather, they stem from a system of selecting refugees that constructs “clean cases.” The focus on clean cases emerged to resolve tensions within the transnational field of resettlement that undermined the US’s capacity to meet demands for stable and predictable admissions. In other words, the focus on clean cases emerged to resolve field-level problems and tensions, rather than as expressions of the straightforward interests of the US state or other powerful actors.

In making the above argument, this chapter calls for greater scrutiny of the underlying logics of practice that guide the distribution of scarce resettlement spaces. Thus far, scholars have largely taken official discourses around refugee selection for granted, instead critiquing binaries of the “good refugee” and “bad/bogus asylum seeker.” As we’ve seen, however, discriminatory logics sit at the core of decisions about who to resettle and therefore deserve further attention. Similarly, this chapter has shown the importance of infrastructure in refugees’ access to resettlement. Sociologists should pay close attention to the decisions that underpin infrastructural investments, and how such decisions come to structure longer-term inequalities and path-dependencies in the distribution of scarce resources. A connected topic for future inquiry is the category of “hard to reach cases.” This category of practice is central to official understanding of

distributional inequalities, but it remains to be examined what specific factors shape such categorizations or how longer histories of resource allocation and investment impact refugees' access to scarce resources. A final area of future research raised by this chapter involves the social process and outcomes of the administrative construction of clean cases. In particular scholars might examine how this process maps on to and/or produced refugees' subjective understandings of groupness in exile or after resettlement (c.f. Besteman 2012, 2016).

CHAPTER 3 – PROCESSING**“IT’S GOOD FOR THOSE WHO GET RESETTLED, BUT HOW DOES IT LEAVE US?” MANAGING REFUGEE EXPECTATIONS AND THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF WAITING***Abstract*

Refugee resettlement is a highly valued and yet exceptionally scarce humanitarian resource provided to less than one percent of refugees each year. Drawing on four months of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, this paper examines the social dynamics and outcomes of this resource scarcity for Congolese refugees living in Kampala, Uganda. This population were defined as a priority group for resettlement in 2012 and have since seen tens of thousands leave for countries in the West. I show that increased resettlement among the population has generated a set of hopes and expectations around attaining resettlement that shape refugees’ lives and temporal horizons. In response, the frontline staff tasked with processing resettlement cases have developed strategies to manage and mitigate refugees’ expectations. These strategies amount to establishing procedural and physical barriers that force refugees to wait and accept the temporal rhythms of resettlement processing. In turn, refugees come to see the largely African frontline staff – rather than resettlement country policies – as their primary barrier to resettlement. The final section of the paper draws out a highly ambivalent discourse around resettlement at the refugee community level, and outlines two social projects aimed at turning refugees away from resettlement and toward local objectives.

Incorporating the experiences of those waiting for resettlement abroad challenges straightforward understanding of resettlement as a “solution,” instead showing that processing involves forms of coercion, compounds refugees’ experiences of traumatic waiting and liminality, and exacerbates existing feelings of marginality and exclusion in Uganda. Stemming from these arguments, this paper positions the governance of refugee expectations and social dynamics of waiting as important areas of future research in the study of refugee experiences.

Introduction

Many of the world’s refugees are in what the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) calls “protracted situations” (UNHCR 2020a). This means that they have been in exile for at least five years and have little realistic prospects of return to their countries of origin or integrating in countries of asylum. Excluded from national citizenship regimes, refugees in protracted exile are managed through logics of exception and technologies of containment and immobility (Agamben 1998; Agier 2008; Collyer 2007; Hyndman and Giles 2011; Mountz 2010; Pallister-Wilkins 2015). They therefore come to live large parts of their lives in limbo, separated from society at large (Conlon 2011). A sizable literature examines the social, economic, health, and subjective outcomes of waiting for refugees, connecting such experiences to forms of structural violence and trauma (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Lawrence 2016; Loyd, Ehrkamp, and Secor 2018; Menjívar 2006; Menjívar and Lakhani 2016; Sanyal 2018).

For refugees in protracted situations of displacement, third-country resettlement can provide a vital lifeline, offering a safe and legal route out of long-term exile. A sizable body of literature examines the experiences of resettled refugees in countries of resettlement. Much of this literature examines the extent to which refugees effectively incorporate into their new contexts, suggesting that the solution offered by resettlement involves a long process worked out over generations and mediated by national policies and institutions (Bloemraad 2006; Brown 2011; Portes et al. 2005; Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou and Bankston 1994). Others, however, trouble the notion of resettlement as solution, instead drawing attention to institutional and social factors that thwart refugees' inclusion (Espiritu 2014; Gowayed 2019b; Kibria 1995; Tang 2015).

Notwithstanding significant debates in the literature on resettlement outcomes, existing scholarship shares a common elision: the experiences of those refugees not resettled and/or waiting for resettlement abroad is generally cut out of the analytic picture. This elision is surprising as less than one percent of refugees are resettled each year, meaning that the vast majority of refugees in protracted situations do not receive resettlement. Moreover, as we saw in the previous chapter, the social organization of resettlement means that limited resettlement spaces are concentrated in a relatively small number of discreet refugee populations. For these populations, resettlement can become a highly visible aspect of everyday life, as processing infrastructure is built, verification exercises and interviews are conducted, and refugees see friends, family members, and neighbors leave (Jansen 2008).

Drawing on fieldwork with Congolese refugees living in Kampala, Uganda, this chapter expands existing scholarship on resettlement outcomes and asks how this humanitarian program impacts the lives of refugees still living in countries of asylum. As will be discussed below, the Congolese refugee population in Uganda provides a good case to study such processes as it became a priority group for resettlement in 2014. As such, tens of thousands of refugees had left for resettlement by the time I arrived for fieldwork in 2018.

After outlining methods and introducing the case in more detail, the first empirical section of this chapter shows that the increase of resettlement among the Congolese refugee population in Uganda has generated widespread hopes and expectations about attaining resettlement and migrating to the West. The second section examines how the humanitarian agencies and staff tasked with managing resettlement on the ground encounter and respond to their mediating role between heightened refugee expectations, limited spaces, and slow, uncertain processing times. As we will see, these actors respond by establishing procedural and physical barriers between themselves and refugees, therefore forcing refugees to wait and accept the temporal rhythms of resettlement processing. A final empirical section outlines a highly ambivalent discourse around resettlement among refugees that in part responds to the social dynamics of processing and waiting. Specifically, I trace out two social projects aimed at reorienting refugees' temporal horizons from resettlement to more local objectives. The first casts resettlement as pollutive and corruptive of the individual; while the second project casts

resettlement as politically disempowering. Both aim to promote community over resettlement.

As the discussion and conclusion section elaborates, the findings presented in this chapter trouble straightforward notions of resettlement as a “solution.” Incorporating the experiences of those waiting for resettlement or “left behind” abroad reveals that resettlement processing involves forms of coercion and compounds refugees’ experiences of traumatic waiting and liminality. Moreover, the policies implemented by African, and largely Ugandan, frontline practitioners to resolve tensions between the value of resettlement and limited spaces leads refugees to see these actors – rather than resettlement country policies – as their primary barrier to resettlement. This exacerbates refugees’ animosity toward Ugandans and feelings of exclusion within the Ugandan state. Finally, this chapter draws attention to the social dynamics of processing and waiting embedded at meso-level scales as critical to understanding the outcomes of resettlement policy.

Methods

The data for this chapter comes from four months of fieldwork in Kampala, Uganda, conducted between February and May 2018. Data collection aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of how resettlement policy was being implemented and experienced in Uganda and can be split into three components. The first component was eleven expert interviews with resettlement practitioners. I conducted four of these interviews over Skype prior to arrival in Uganda, and then a further seven upon arrival.

Interviewees were selected because they had some formal role in the administration of the Congolese resettlement program, whether as desk officers, referral staff, or protection officers. Interviews focused on the process of resettlement, triaging practices and rationales, and how staff experienced their work and viewed refugees.

Ideally, I would have observed resettlement processing in practice. I had arranged to do this prior to arrival in Uganda, but the Trump Administration's drastic cuts to resettlement numbers led to a sizable reduction in staff and resettlement processing in Uganda by the time of my arrival. Humanitarian workers and agencies were also on edge during this period and were often anxious about engaging with researchers. The difficulty observing processing work directly was further compounded by a large corruption scandal that broke several months before my arrival in Uganda. This scandal led to the shuttering of refugee settlements to researchers and a large-scale reverification and auditing exercise. As a result, my insights into the process of resettlement stem from expert interviews, interviews with refugees navigating resettlement processing, and official and secondary literature.

The second component of data collection involved "go-alongs" (Kusenbach 2003) with refugees as they attended appointments and office hours at InterAid, the UNHCR's main urban implementing partner in Kampala. I regularly walked back-and-forth with refugees from their neighborhoods to the InterAid office, providing the opportunity for more extensive conversations and also happenstance meetings with others who were making the same walk. During these walks, refugees would often meet with one another

and discuss their experiences at the office. I also spent time with refugees while they waited outside the office. Although I was unable to conduct more extensive fieldwork within the office, I had the opportunity to spend a total of fourteen hours in a waiting room across five trips while waiting to interview staff. Interviewees regularly kept me waiting multiple hours and on two occasions rescheduled. These periods of time allowed me to observe the relationships between staff and refugees, and also to have chance meetings with those who were waiting to speak to case managers.

A third and final component was fieldwork in Katwe and Nsambya, two adjoining Congolese refugee neighborhoods south-west of central Kampala. As the next section outlines in more detail, these neighborhoods are centers of Congolese life in Kampala, with Katwe in particular known as “Little Congo.” To embed myself more fully in the life of the community, I initially affiliated with a refugee-led community organization based in the Katwe/Nsambya neighborhood. From here, I became familiar with the broader context and met people who later introduced me into community spaces beyond civil society and NGOs settings. In particular, I spent significant amounts of time attending Congolese churches and interacting within church communities. As we will see in Section Three below, churches are important nodes of Congolese community life.

Beyond ethnographic work, I also conducted forty interviews with Congolese refugees. These interviews took on a quasi-survey style, while building in the possibility for more open-ended discussion depending on the specific interaction. Interviews gathered data on three specific areas: demographic and livelihood information such as

year of arrival, family size, and work experience; outlooks and orientations to the future, primarily assessed through questions about goals, visions, and plans; and, finally, political subjectivity measured through questions about claims-making and views on integration, belonging, and citizenship. The majority of respondents were women, reflecting the demographic composition of the Congolese refugee population (which is roughly 70% female). The sizable majority of respondents had been in Uganda for at least five years, meaning that they were defined by the UNHCR as in a protracted refugee situation. Interviews varied in length from ten to seventy minutes.

	Female	Male
Total	26	14
Age Mean (Median)	28 (25.5)	30 (26.5)
Years in Uganda Mean (Median)	8 (6.5)	9 (7)

To assist in my research and help with interpretation, I hired a Congolese research assistant. Initially, I met with Fabrice twice a week to conduct interviews in Katwe and Nsambya. Led by Fabrice's personal networks, we walked to particular neighborhood sections each day to conduct interviews. During these walks, we would meet other Congolese and would interview them too. Examples of the latter include Congolese shop keepers and owners, a group of men who were fixing a collapsed river bank, and neighbors of people who we intentionally sought to interview. In this regard, I followed a convenience sample technique and I can therefore not say that my sample is

representative. Questions of representation are challenging in Kampala given that there are no reliable demographic statistics on the Congolese refugee population.

Thirty-two of the forty semi-structured interviews were interpreted by Fabrice, generally from Lingala or Swahili. Over the course of our walks, Fabrice and I became friends, and he increasingly invited me to social and community events – especially, but not exclusively, through his church. Fabrice also introduced me to a number of expert interviewees, such as senior figures in the Congolese Association of Uganda.

Alongside interviews with refugees, I also conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with people based in Katwe and Nsambya that had some formal position providing them a distinctive view on the social dynamics of resettlement processing. Interviewees included directors of prominent, community-based NGOs, pastors and church elders, senior figures in the Congolese Association of Uganda, and representatives of local Ugandan government. Although beyond the scope of the discussion here, this latter group play a critical role in mediating local conflicts such as rent disputes or civil disagreements.

Before moving on, it is important to directly address two issues that impacted my experience in the field and shaped my data collection. First and foremost, the Congolese population of Katwe and Nsambya had recently seen a number of research teams coming through. The increase of research stems from the international interest in Ugandan refugee policies, which essentially provide refugees the right to “self-settle,” access labor markets and other public institutions, and own property and businesses. In particular, a

team of Oxford University researchers led by Alexander Betts had been conducting large-scale survey research with refugees in Kampala as part of his ongoing international refugee economies project (Betts and Collier 2017). Toward the end of my research stay, another team of Oxford researchers had come to the Katwe/Nsambya neighborhood, and were walking around similar areas to me collecting survey data on tablets.

Given this context, I experienced a certain amount of exacerbation among the refugees I interviewed. At the crux of this exacerbation was a feeling that international researchers were coming in to take information, but nothing was changing for refugees on the ground (Block et al. 2013; Darling 2014). This generated a view of research as extractive. Indeed, at the end of each interview, I would ask refugees if they had any questions or would like to add anything. Twenty-seven interviewees asked some version of, “How will this research change the situation here?” or, more pointedly, “How will your research benefit me?” This question often led to a broader conversation about research and frustrations with international research teams.

In response, I sought to incorporate reflexivity into my research and form deeper relationships beyond interviews. For example, attending church services was an important way in which I could begin to redress the one-way, extractive character of research. Similarly, spending time in refugees’ homes and eating with families was important. Many of those I spoke to expressed bewilderment that researchers came to the neighborhood but so rarely interacted with them beyond collecting survey or interview data. Ultimately, however, I could not adequately respond to the ethical implications of

the question “How will this research benefit me?” given the unavoidable power imbalance between myself and refugees and the asymmetries of benefit stemming from the research.

A second and related issue effecting my research was that I was often seen as a potential source of resources (Block et al. 2013). This view shaped my interactions. For example, my eighth interview was conducted with a Congolese woman outside her house. During the interview, a man occasionally looked out at us from the window. Following the interview, I asked Fabrice about the interaction. He informed me that he was telling families that I wanted to speak with heads of households (a common administrative term in humanitarian governance), and that families were therefore sending young women out because they thought female-headed households would be more likely to receive support. I grappled with similar dynamics throughout my research, putting me in the peculiar position of doing the very thing I was studying: i.e., managing refugee expectations around the scope and outcomes of my research. To preempt such interpretations, I was very intentional in emphasizing my position as a researcher and not an aid worker. More ethnographically-oriented research also helped structure interactions beyond predominant humanitarian framings of provider/beneficiary.

Origins of the Congolese Resettlement Program

The contemporary Congolese refugee situation in Uganda stems primarily from the fallout of the Rwandan Civil War, which sparked a series of conflicts and tensions across Africa’s Great Lake’s region (broadly composed of Burundi, the eastern portions of

the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Uganda, and western Tanzania) that continues into the present day (Prunier 2008). The resource rich North and South Kivu regions of the eastern portion of the Democratic Republic of Congo have borne the brunt of these conflicts. This region was center stage during the Second Congo War (or “Africa’s World War”), which is considered to be the most deadly conflict since World War II, with some six million people killed and over two million displaced to neighboring countries.

Despite the war formally ending in 2003 with the formation of a transitional government under Joseph Kabila, the Kivus have seen endemic conflict in the subsequent years, resulting in large-scale forced displacement out of the region (Daley 2013; Young 2006). Given the thick rainforest separating the Kivus from western Congo and the capital, Kinshasa, as well as historical and ethnic connections across the postcolonial states of the Great Lakes, those displaced from eastern Congo have tended to travel eastward to Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, and western Tanzania – a reality captured succinctly by a common sentiment in Uganda that “problems in Kivu are problems for Kampala not Kinshasa.” There are therefore large, multi-generational Congolese refugee populations across the Great Lakes region, with the majority living in UNHCR-managed camps and settlements near the Congolese border.

Congolese refugees have limited prospects of return due to ongoing conflicts and generalized violence. At the same time, countries of asylum in the Great Lakes region have generally proven unwilling to provide long-term integration for Congolese. In

Burundi, Rwanda, and Tanzania, refugees are largely segregated in camps and reliant upon humanitarian aid. The situation in Uganda is somewhat improved. Under Ugandan law, refugees are formally integrated into the country's development plan, with a particular focus on developing Uganda's agricultural sector (Vemuru, Araya, and Tadesse 2016). As such, refugees are given access to fertile land in rural settlements alongside Ugandan nationals, and humanitarian and development agencies service these areas with resources, training, and development capital. This policy has been widely heralded by the international community as one of the most progressive in the world (e.g. Schwartz 2016; Titz and Feck 2017), with settlements becoming largely self-sustaining. In fact, settlement economies produce a surplus of agricultural goods that are sold to places like Kampala. As we will see below, however, substantive integration is out of reach for most.

Given the above set of circumstances, Congolese refugees are considered to be in, what the UNHCR defines as, a "protracted refugee situation" (Milner and Loescher 2011). This means that they have been in exile for at least five years with little prospects of return or local integration, and are therefore to be considered for third-country resettlement as per the UNHCR's "durable solutions" framework (UNHCR 2011; UNHCR 2020b). Despite this, however, Congolese refugees have historically been underrepresented in resettlement channels. During and following the Second Congolese War, for example, hundreds of thousands of Bosnians, Croatians, and Kosovans were being resettled, reflecting a broader unevenness in the response to displacement in Europe compared to Africa (Chimni 2004). Following the end of the programs for

Former Yugoslavian refugees, attention turned to the aftermath of the War in Iraq and displacement in the Middle East.

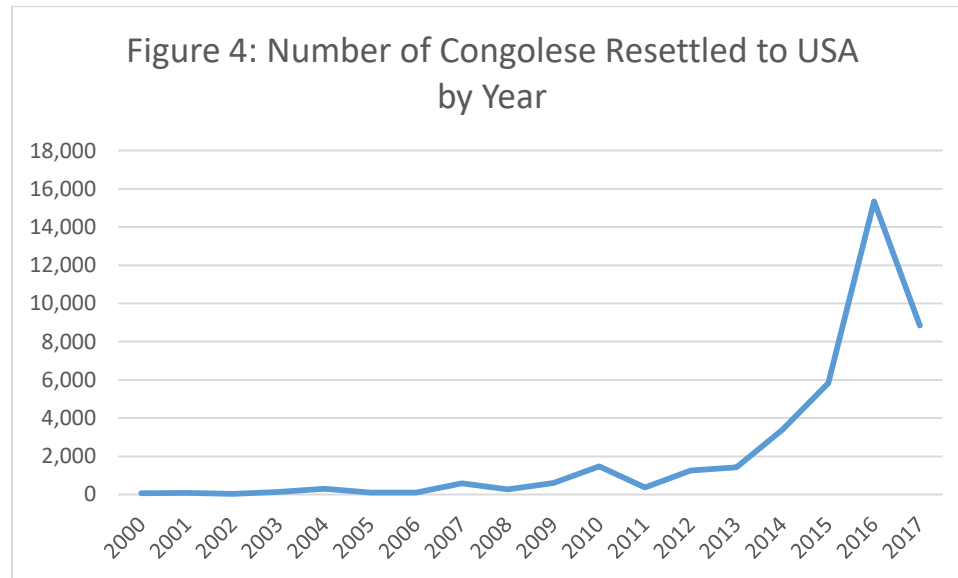
The neglect of Congolese refugees changed, however, in 2010 when the UNHCR's Rwanda Country Office issued a call for increased Congolese resettlement (the following details come from an interview with a US State Department desk officer). Responding to pressure from refugee leaders and growing tensions with Rwanda's president, Paul Kagame (whose role in the Second Congo War and continued conflicts in eastern Congo is a source of great animosity within the Congolese refugee population), UNHCR officials in the country contended that resettlement was the only viable option for Congolese refugees. After a round of negotiations, the UNHCR established a Congolese Core Group in 2012, chaired by the United States, tasked with developing a comprehensive solution to Congolese displacement in the Great Lake's region. The Core Group approach was relatively new for the UNHCR but had proved a successful platform to engage resettlement countries and secure resettlement commitments. For example, the US chaired the UNHCR's first core group on Bhutanese refugees in Nepal (UNHCR 2011:58). After a protracted negotiation, the US essentially secured commitments to resettle all 108,000 Bhutanese - with the US alone admitting ninety-five thousand.

The outcome of the Congolese Core Group was similarly substantial, with the US brokering a multilateral agreement to resettle sixty-thousand Congolese refugees over the next six years. Given low security concerns surrounding the population, as well as *prima facie* refugee status for Congolese on the basis of generalized violence and state

incapacity in the Kivus, the US State Department worked with its key partners to develop a relatively straightforward eligibility criteria covering all refugees from North or South Kivu who had claimed asylum prior to 2012 – later extended to 2016. To identify and select refugees, the UNHCR led a verification process to survey the Congolese refugee population, and then worked alongside international and national NGO partners to identify and submit cases that met standards for protection outlined in the Resettlement Handbook (UNHCR 2011). To facilitate processing, the United States invested in infrastructure such as roads, interview sites, and two large transit facilities in Tanzania and Uganda where final medical checks, interviews, case work, and wait periods could be completed.

Since the formation of the Congolese Core Group in 2012, just over sixty-thousand Congolese refugees have been resettled from the Great Lakes region, with the United States resettling some forty-thousand despite the reduction of annual admission under the presidency of Donald Trump. In fact, the Congolese program was the largest program worldwide between 2016 and 2018. As the graph below shows, the result has been a sizable uptick in resettlement among the Congolese population, therefore making resettlement a viable option for Congolese refugees. Given multilateral agreements and the resettlement infrastructure built in the Great Lakes, Joe Biden’s campaign commitment to increase resettlement to 125,000 a year will likely mean high levels of Congolese resettlement over the coming years. These numbers are particularly significant for a group who has low levels of preexisting presence in resettlement countries. Indeed,

Congolese refugees are not present in significant numbers in either asylum claimants or irregular migration streams across northern Africa and the Mediterranean.



Among the countries hosting refugees in the Great Lakes region, Uganda accounts for the largest share of US-bound Congolese refugees, with roughly two-thousand departing each year. Congolese have been the largest group resettled from Uganda since 2012, accounting for seventy-percent of annual departures. Somalis have been the second large group over this period, accounting for twenty-six percent of departures. Despite being the largest single resettlement program, however, an average of one percent of Congolese living in Uganda have been resettled each year since 2012. Of these, the sizable majority were resettled from Kyaka Refugee Settlement in western Uganda. The likelihood of resettlement for Congolese refugees living in other parts of Uganda, and especially urban refugees in the metro Kampala region, is therefore even lower. The

remainder of this chapter examines how this issue of resource scarcity plays out on the ground in Uganda.

To examine dynamics of refugee processing and resource scarcity, I look specifically at the situation of urban refugees in the metro Kampala region. While refugee settlements are incorporated into Uganda's national development plan, urban refugees have a far more ambiguous position in national policy (Bernstein and Okello 2007; Jacobsen 2006) – reflecting the UNHCR's broader ambivalence surrounding urban refugees (Crisp 2017). Uganda allows refugees to “self-settle” outside the settlements, and there's roughly 50,000 Congolese living in the metro Kampala area. The majority live in the neighboring municipalities of Katwe and Nsambya, southwest of Kampala City Center. Katwe is locally known as Little Congo, and has become an ethnic enclave for Congolese, with its own property market and commercial center providing access to Congolese retail, music venues, and restaurants. Collectively, these areas are known as the “Catholic Ghetto,” as land is owned by the Ugandan Catholic Church. Congolese tend to live in tenement style housing, and many of the homes are built in wetland areas, and are frequently subject to flooding. Although the Kampala City Authority levies taxes, public infrastructure is lacking and certain areas lack basic services such as trash collection or sanitation. Refugees and Ugandans therefore play an important role in collectively managing resources and infrastructures.

While urban refugees are in principle considered self-settled and hence ineligible for humanitarian aid, many of the large international agencies as well as a number of

smaller charities and initiatives offer services to urban refugees. The focus of these services are emergency cash support and economic self-sufficiency, achieved through a variety of livelihood programs and business supports (Jacobsen 2006). Refugees also have full access to labor markets, and they are eligible for public schooling and other public services on par with Ugandan nationals. In reality, however, the poor state of services mixes with ethnic protectionism and social and economic discrimination such that refugees are often marginalized if not excluded from Ugandan institutions (Lyytinen 2015). Congolese experience significant discrimination in Kampala's markets, and have therefore increasingly taken to "hawking," which is unlicensed and subject to aggressive policing under Kampala's "modernization" reforms. Beyond hawking, many of the Congolese I interacted with drew on income from occasional day labor work, informal work in the ethnic economy, small business ownership, cash supports from charitable organizations, and livelihood programming by international organizations.

The following sections are structured as follows. I first explore how the increase in resettlement has generated a set of hopes and expectations among Congolese refugees of attaining resettlement and migrating to the West. A second section then examines how these hopes and expectations conflict with the reality of resource scarcity, and how the practitioners responsible for mediating refugees' access to resettlement respond to this tension. A third section then expands the analytic lens to examine how the tension between refugee expectations and limited spaces is grappled with at the community level.

Hopes, Expectations, Waiting

Soon after arriving in Kampala, Uganda, I went to meet my research assistant, Fabrice. Fabrice had lived in Uganda for almost a decade and was part of a large family. Like many Congolese, Fabrice had heard stories about life in the West from friends and family members who had recently departed for resettlement. He would frequently ask me questions such as, “Which country is best to go to?” “I’ve heard it’s easy to get a good job in Texas. Is that true?” Or, “Apparently everybody needs a car. How do people learn to drive?” Moreover, Fabrice firmly believed his time for resettlement would soon come: “Our file’s been with the UNHCR for some time. We’re thinking that any day now, with the grace of God, we’ll be called for the interview. Until then, we’re just waiting here.”

The notion of life in waiting is a common trope in refugee scholarship (Agier 2008; Conlon 2011; Hyndman and Giles 2011; Sanyal 2018) often attached to the endemic experiences of liminality that refugees are forced to endure given their exclusion from nation-states and management by humanitarian agencies under logics of exception (Agamben 1998; Pallister-Wilkins 2015). Indeed, many of the refugees I interacted with in Uganda, such as Fabrice, had been “waiting” for a resolution to their refugeehood for over a decade. For Fabrice, the experience of liminality was, however, accompanied by a broader sense of hope, as resettlement loomed large in his everyday life, and oriented him to a more promising temporal horizon.

Over the following months, Fabrice and I spent many hours together walking through the Kampala neighborhoods of Katwe and Nsambya interviewing other

Congolese refugees, attending church services, having lunch, or finding the offices of local government officials or community-based NGOs. During these conversations, I became familiar with the ways in which the hope of resettlement permeated all aspects of his life. Indeed, emerging from Fabrice's narratives – as well as the narratives of other refugees – was an active orientation to waiting infused with a sense of urgency and imminence. This active sense of waiting, and the hopes and expectations that animated it, shaped peoples' lives in intimate ways.

One particularly notable example of the ways in which waiting for resettlement shaped Fabrice's life was his engagement. Fabrice had been engaged for several years but his fiancé's family would not approve the marriage. The issue boiled down to the family's resettlement file. They'd had a resettlement interview the year prior, and were therefore concerned that the change of circumstances accompanying the marriage would delay proceedings. "Everybody is saying to wait," Fabrice said, "because if you marry before, you'll have to change your file. So we wait." As a result, Fabrice and his fiancé were unable to live together or begin the family that they both wanted to build. Reflecting on his feelings about having to wait, Fabrice informed me that it was challenging but ultimately manageable because they knew that their children would have a better chance and set of opportunities following resettlement.

At the same time, Fabrice expressed concern that he could be broken up from his fiancé if she were to be resettled and for whatever reason was unable to sponsor him.

Reflecting on this situation, Fabrice lamented that it is “hard to keep a relationship here since this [resettlement] program started.” He went on to explain that,

...sometimes, you invest yourself in someone, maybe go through the process of getting engaged, even married, and then your fiancé gets resettled. She says that she’ll sponsor you, but then she gets to the US, to Canada and she forgets about you. You hear from someone else, ‘oh, your wife has a baby now’ and your heart hurts. Many people have experienced this. But, at the same time, you have to be good to her because she can be your ticket out of here.

I met several men during my stay in Kampala who had experienced this set of circumstances and were estranged from their fiancés, wives, and children due to their decision to delay filing paper work or getting married to maintain the consistency of their file.

Like Fabrice, resettlement had woven its way into the fabric of everyday life for many of the Congolese refugees I interacted with in Kampala. Research contacts would regularly show me pictures of friends and family outside of glass-fronted malls or famous monuments such as the Eiffel Tower, and numerous families I met received remittances from people abroad. As migration literature anticipates (Carling 2002; Faist 1997), the circulation of images, emotions, and resources across transnational social space elicited hopes and expectations among Congolese refugees about their future lives in Europe or North America. Prior to resettlement, Congolese refugees had few direct social connections to these places.

Hopes and expectations of resettlement were vivified by the frequent promises of those resettled to advocate for or “sponsor” the cases of those they left behind. For example, Gerard, a Congolese man in his thirties who became a friend during my stay,

regularly expressed to me that his sister, now in France, was sponsoring his case and that he was therefore soon to depart. Gerard expressed an imminent sense of waiting for resettlement, in which his time to go was always just around the corner. Each time I saw him, he would give me an update about his sister's progress, telling me that she was going to the embassy next week, or that she was speaking with a UNHCR representative. By the end of my time in Uganda, however, Gerard reported that his sister was no longer returning his calls or text messages. Such stories of broken and strained family ties were common among the refugees I spoke with both in Uganda and the United States.

Expectations and hopes of resettlement also came up frequently during interviews, in which I explored refugees' orientation to and plans for the future. Interviews included questions about refugees' vision for themselves and their families, and – at the suggestion of Fabrice – what they would need to achieve these visions. Despite the scarcity of resettlement spaces, interviewees often struggled to articulate a vision of the future beyond or independent of resettlement. Indeed, thirty-eight out of forty interviewees articulated resettlement as their primary vision and objective for the future. For example, Dianne, a middle-aged tailor from Goma, articulated a common position, “The first thing is to get out of here. There's no room for visions here in Uganda. After resettlement, then I can think about a future and how to make a good life for my child.” Olivier echoed Dianne's sentiment,

I have nothing to say about a vision. Here, life is just stuck. You are not going forward, you are not going back. You are only living here. Maybe one day God will help us and give us resettlement. But here, there's no future for us.

Unlike Dianne and Olivier, who could see no vision for themselves beyond resettlement, Mamadou had the ambition of being a professional musician or event coordinator, but believed he required resettlement to achieve this goal. “I have many visions for myself,” Mamadou said, “but the first thing is to get out of this country. Here in Africa, who can respect what skills God has given me? God has left this place.” He went on to say that his family “have been here for ten years and nothing has changed. After resettlement, then it will be time to think about a future.”

In sum, the increase of resettlement among Congolese refugees has generated a set of hopes and expectations about resettlement and migration to the West, reorienting refugees’ sense of the future around attaining resettlement. In other words, resettlement had become not simply *a* solution to exile, but instead *the* solution. As we’ve seen, this sense of hope and expectation inculcated an active sense of waiting for resettlement.

During fieldwork, I heard many stories (and complaints) about refugees not sending their children to school, turning down jobs or potential business opportunities, or delaying medical treatments due to the view that they would soon be resettled. For example, I interviewed a married couple outside their home in Nsambya. The husband was a tailor and worked from home, and their three children were playing outside. After discussing her hopes for resettlement, the wife told me that “There’s no good schools here to go to. In fact, there’s no bad schools to go to either!” Given this, she was waiting to send her children to school in the United States: “Once we get resettled, then my kids will have a good education.” I asked where their case was in the process, and the husband

told me that they didn't know. "We had an interview in 2016," he said, "but we've not heard from them since." "What, then, are your plans until you do hear from them," I asked. After a pause, the husband said simply that they'd just wait until they did hear.

The hopes and expectations around resettlement were also marked in refugees' orientation to local integration and the possibility of naturalization in Uganda. As was discussed in the background section above, Ugandan policies offer a certain amount of local integration, with refugees able to work and use public institutions such as schools and hospitals. The result is that Congolese refugees are in many ways indistinguishable in their livelihoods and living circumstances to Ugandan citizens, sixty-percent of whom live in Kampala's fast growing semi-urbanized "informal settlements." Moreover, Ugandan national law provides refugees a conditional pathway to naturalization.

Despite the policy context, the refugees I spoke with roundly opposed integration and naturalization in Uganda. As January put it, "I am a refugee now and my life is so hard. You see how it is for [Ugandans]. It's just the same. So, if I become a citizen, nothing will change for me. My status will change, but I will remain the same." Similarly, Joyeux expressed a view that "The national ID is just a card. It's just an administrative thing. It doesn't change your nationality. We will still be Congolese and they will still be Ugandan. We are better here as refugees." Striking a similar tone, Disanka said that "No, it can't help us here at all. [Ugandans] are also struggling, so I can't achieve anything here more than them. Anyway, I think you can live here as another nationality until you leave. It's no problem."

These discourses on integration and naturalization reflect a view that the refugee status is more valuable than Ugandan nationality because it indicates a formal relationship of responsibility and even membership between refugees and Western countries (see Moulin and Nyers 2007) – an observation revealing the extent to which citizenship and other political statuses should be viewed in global and relational terms (Cook-Martin 2013). For the refugees I spoke with who expressed this view, the central benefit of the refugee status was the promise and expectation of resettlement.

Bukasa, a father in his thirties, put it succinctly. “I did not come here to be a Ugandan,” he said, “I am here as a refugee and to get resettled. This is my future. If I get [citizenship], the only thing that will change for me is that I will have no hope [of getting resettlement].” Lomba, a woman in her late-20s who owned a small shop selling staple Congolese foods such as *pondu* (cassava leaves) and palm oil, made a similar claim. She said that there was little real difference between the situation of Congolese refugees and Ugandans, except for the fact that,

...refugees belong to the UNHCR, not Uganda. The US, UK, these big countries, are always sending money to help *refugees* not Ugandans. Because of this, I know that one day I will get resettlement and get out of this place. This is the hope that we [refugees] have.

Emerging from these discourses around integration and naturalization is therefore a deeper sense that resettlement is a right and entitlement connected to the refugee status. This view of resettlement contrasts sharply to the reality of resettlement as a discretionary humanitarian provision provided by states with little formal basis in international refugee law (Sandvik 2010; UNHCR 2011).

So far, we've seen that the increase of resettlement among Uganda's Congolese refugee population has generated a set of hopes and expectations around resettlement that impact refugees' everyday lives and orientations to the present and future. Such expectations, however, conflict sharply with the reality of resource scarcity, long, uncertain processing times, and opaque, unaccountable bureaucracy. Indeed, less than one percent of Congolese refugees received resettlement the year I conducted the research for this project, with the majority selected from Kyaka Refugee Camp in the west of Uganda. Moreover, refugees were waiting for up to two years from the time of their first formal resettlement interview to departure, with the election of Donald Trump and reduction of resettlement numbers leading to indefinite delays for many of those "in the pipeline." Despite these realities, many of the refugees I spoke with share an orientation to life in Kampala characterized by "waiting for resettlement" and articulate a deep ambivalence about prospects for local integration or naturalization.

In the next section, I examine how humanitarian agencies and resettlement practitioners interpret and navigate their mediating role between refugee expectations and scarce resettlement spaces. As we will see, practitioners respond to these expectations by establishing procedural and physical barriers between themselves and refugees, forcing refugees to wait and accept the temporal rhythms of resettlement processes. Refugees in turn come to see the African, and largely Ugandan, frontline practitioners – rather than resettlement countries – as the primary barriers restricting their access to resettlement. This leads to an entrenched animosity and distrust between refugees and service

providers, compounding experiences of traumatic waiting and liminality, and exacerbating refugees' feelings of exclusion within the Ugandan state.

Managing Refugee Expectations

Despite refugees' expectations of attaining resettlement, there is in fact no right to resettlement under international law and refugees are generally unable to claim or apply for it (Sandvik 2010; UNHCR 2011). Instead, a small number of refugees are selected on the basis of selection and eligibility criteria that are often opaque to refugees themselves (Jansen 2008; Thomson 2012). The availability of spaces are also at the complete discretion of states, with shifts in domestic and international politics leading to abrupt changes in resettlement priorities or reductions in annual quotas for particular populations. Resettlement can also take years, compounding rather than alleviating experiences of waiting and provoking anxiety about case files and paper work.

Frontline humanitarian staff report increased anxieties and feelings of hopelessness among those waiting for resettlement or those whose case is rejected, including tragic stories of suicide and self-harm (Jansen 2008:573; see also Loyd et al. 2018). Resettlement can also become a site of contestation between refugees and humanitarian agencies, resulting in violence and protests (Moulin and Nyers 2007:361). Such anxieties and dynamics find little remediation in the administration of resettlement as refugees have no formal right to representation, due process, review, or appeal (Sandvik 2011). Cases can be rejected at any time, with little to no justification; and

despite the emphasis on detailed case files in the resettlement sector, refugees do not have a right to view their file or know where their file is in the process.

A critical facet in the administration of resettlement programs is therefore managing and mitigating refugee expectations. Reflecting the importance of this dimension of resettlement work, the UNHCR's Resettlement Handbook (UNHCR 2011), which provides the basis for training and best practices across UNHCR operations, contains frequent and specific discussion about the potential problems of refugee expectations and how to mitigate and manage them. The Handbook cautions national and local agencies that (UNHCR 2011:232),

[Any] increase in identification activities [in your spheres of operation] will likely result in heightened resettlement expectations within the refugee population. As such, a common strategy must be developed for the management of resettlement expectations.

Similarly, the Handbook warns that resettlement programs can “be a source of anxiety and tension that may lead refugees to extreme measures, such as organized protests or violence,” and increase risks of “fraud, corruption, [and] violence among refugees and concerns for staff security” (UNHCR 2011:142). The Handbook therefore provides extensive discussion of strategies and best practices under the section “Managing Resettlement Effectively” (UNHCR 2011:109–70) and, specifically, “Managing Refugee Expectations” (UNHCR 2011:141–47). Best practices include integrated and comprehensive communication strategies, staff oversight, individual case management, and individual counselling services.

In Kampala, the work of managing expectations is primarily done by staff at the UNHCR's Uganda office; the UNHCR's primary urban implementing partner, InterAid; and a number of other organizations mandated to refer cases, such as HIAS. At the time of my research, InterAid was the lead organization in these efforts, running regular information sessions with refugees and community leaders about the resettlement process and eligibility criteria. These sessions also reiterated to refugees that resettlement is not a right and that there are very limited spaces provided to those "most in need."

Alongside information sessions, individual case management work was a critical component of mitigating and managing refugee expectations in Kampala, with InterAid and HIAS playing leading roles. A US State Department official who oversees the Congolese program emphasized the central role that case management has in resettlement work, especially in urban contexts such as Kampala where humanitarian agencies lack the centralized communication infrastructures available in camp settings. After outlining the various stages of the resettlement process and the length of time it can take, he noted that "[resettlement] is not just drop a referral on our doorstep and we'll take it from there." Instead, he said, the US "needs people on the ground interacting with refugees on a regular basis to manage expectations, and the UNHCR is really the only agency that has the infrastructure and expertise to do that kind of individual, intensive case work." Referencing a number of protests around resettlement in Uganda and Rwanda, he went on to say that,

We don't want riots in the camps when the numbers decrease like they have recently [under Donald Trump]. We don't want refugees camping outside the US embassy or

outside UNHCR offices demanding resettlement. We need refugees to know that this is a very selective program that is only for those who really need it. This is not a solution for everyone. It's only through careful case management and constant communication that we can transmit this message.

Reference to riots, protests, and staff security frequently accompanied concerns around refugees' resettlement expectations (e.g. UNHCR 2011:142).

Despite communication strategies and case management work, my interviews and observations revealed that frontline practitioners were overwhelmed by the sheer volume and sense of urgency surrounding refugees' resettlement hopes and expectations. Put simply, frontline staff were under-resourced and overstretched to do the forms of individual case management required; and even if they could, it was not clear how effective such strategies would be given the mismatch between refugees' desires for resettlement and the limited spaces provided by states.

During an interview with Deidre, an African woman who'd worked in resettlement across Africa for over a decade, we extensively discussed the emotional and psychological strain she experienced responding to refugee expectations around resettlement: "Dealing with refugee expectations [is] a constant struggle and challenge. Refugees see me as someone who can decide who goes and who stays, as if I have the power over life and death." In response, Deidre emphasized official procedures:

I explain to [refugees] that resettlement is a privilege not a right, and that the places are very, *very* small. I make sure to be very clear with people about whether they've been selected for resettlement or not and whether they're in the pipeline.

Ultimately, however, such explanations fell short: "It doesn't matter what I say. Almost as soon as numbers increase, I have people coming to me every day: 'where's my case?'"

What is happening? You are corrupt! Why did you send this person? You made a mistake on my file.' It becomes very acrimonious and very hostile.”

Joan, a Ugandan national who managed a referral program for an international NGO, articulated a similar view to Deidre. She said that managing refugee expectations was “the most challenging aspect of our work.” “Refugees,” she said,

...look at me as if I am the US President, deciding if they live or die. But I say to them, ‘resettlement spaces are very small, and countries have strict criteria. We can only submit those who really need resettlement urgently.’

Even as she found such dynamics difficult to contend with, Joan expressed sympathy for the situation of refugees: “There’s just so much need in the population. People are so desperate. This is their one chance to get out of this situation. And I try to understand this.” Despite such sympathies, however, Joan lamented that “it’s very difficult when you’re dealing with people coming to the office all the time, ‘where is my case? Why did this person go and not me? You’ve lost my file!’ It’s very difficult.”

The challenge for frontline staff like Deirdre and Joan was compounded by the fact that they themselves were unsure about the status or situation of particular cases given the multiple levels of review and checks involved, as well as the many confounding factors that could lead specific cases to move along quickly or slowly. Indeed, after referral, any one case has to be reviewed by multiple senior staff in Kampala, Nairobi, and at times Geneva. That’s before the file is even seen by a resettlement country official. These checks are in place to ward against corruption and fraud, and also to ensure the quality of case files being sent to resettlement countries. Similarly, Audit Reports used to

track changes to case files (such as changes in family composition) have to be reviewed by multiple staff members, which can often take weeks if not months. Progress through these steps are regularly held up due to paperwork issues. The sheer volume of referrals demanded by resettlement countries intersects with the difficulty of writing individual referrals to result in administrative mistakes. Given the broader culture of suspicion and fraud prevention, such mistakes can lead to long delays.

One practitioner outlined a typical cause of procedural delays through reference to the family composition requirements on referral forms. Michael frequently had difficulties finding out the legal names of refugees' parents. He'd eventually come to a name, and then a month or so later that family would go to another interview and provide a different name. At this stage, the whole case had to be reviewed. Reflecting on this situation, he said,

This is my biggest fear. If you get something wrong like this and a case is rejected as a result, it's very unlikely that [the individual] will be considered by another country. But there's just so many referrals that it's somewhat inevitable.

Such problems were endemic. Another senior staff member described to me the process of sending documents across offices, which involved informally-managed excel spreadsheets and a patchwork of databases and printed paper work. One office, for example, made hard copies of all of its files to work from, and then re-digitalized everything after making handwritten notes. Such complexity frequently led to problems.

Staff uncertainty was further compounded by the structural uncertainty built into the way resettlement countries establish quotas. Countries generally establish quotas on a

yearly basis and a variety of domestic and international factors can lead to abrupt changes in the number of spaces available for specific populations and regions. Changes in the ratio of referrals to places can lead to bottlenecks in departures, therefore resulting in certain cases being delayed or even pushed out of the pipeline entirely. As resettlement already takes at least six months from initial referral, the lack of certainty about next year's quota meant that staff had little insight into when a particular case would move forward. In response, the staff I interviewed reported a need to be strategically ambiguous with refugees in order to manage expectations effectively. One practitioner laid out the rationale succinctly, "Would you rather be told that you're being resettled next month and it actually takes a year? Or, would you rather be told that it will take a year and get it next month?"

To manage the above challenges and tensions, I found that practitioners used their ability to regulate refugees' access to them as a form of control (Auyero 2012; Gupta 2012; Lipsky 1980). In other words, staff established procedural and physical barriers to insulate themselves from refugees, which essentially forces refugees to wait and accept the temporal rhythm of resettlement processing. For example, practitioners had switched certain aspects of their work from home and site visits to appointments. This shift meant that access to staff was mediated by appointments, time slots, and security personnel. Staff had also set mandatory wait times between appointments, such that refugees had to wait twelve months (increased from six after the election of Donald Trump) between appointments unless they were called. Those coming to the office before this period would simply be turned away. Alongside appointments, staff also strictly enforced

limited office hour times, which meant that those arriving too late would not be allowed past security. Similarly, refugees would often wait for long periods of time only to be turned away at the end of the day.

With surprising frequency, staff used the language of “being mobbed” to frame the shift to appointments, mandatory wait times, and strictly enforced office hours. This language reflects both a subjective experience of being overwhelmed, but also an objectifying viewpoint that collapsed individuals into an undifferentiated mass needing to be managed and controlled. For example, Deidre, discussed above, talked about the benefits of a new system in which staff were able to set appointment times and mandatory wait windows out of their gated office complex:

Before, I would have to go to refugees, and as soon as I get out of the car I'd be mobbed. Now, they have to come to me. If they don't have an appointment, they're not getting through. I can now really focus on the cases that need my attention.

Joan, also introduced above, made a similar statement. Discussing mandatory wait times, she explained how “things are better now as we no longer have people coming in all of the time and mobbing us. I've got more time now to focus on referrals.” Innocent, a Ugandan practitioner, explicitly rationalized policies of refugee deterrence by casting suspicion on those who regularly came to the office: “It's not the refugees coming to the office every day that really need resettlement. It never is.” According to Innocent, controlling refugees' access therefore provided “more time to actually look into our files. We can start to identify those who really need resettlement.”

Navigating the Resettlement Bureaucracy

During interviews and interactions, refugees expressed deep frustration with the strategies of expectation management outlined above, and especially the resultant difficulty refugees had in accessing case workers and getting information about their file. After making the long and potentially expensive trip to the InterAid office, refugees would have to wait hours at times simply to be turned away. For example, I regularly made the walk from Katwe to the InterAid office with friends and interlocutors. At times, our walks would reflect the fragmentary journeys discussed by Collyer (2007) in microcosm, as clusters of social and economic relations emerged along the journey's route as refugees stopped to talk with others or waited before turning back. In such spaces, refugees would share stories about how long they had waited, or about staff who were particularly rude, dismissive, or corrupt. At times we would meet people who had been turned away and we would therefore turn back ourselves. In sum, efforts to reach case workers generated feelings of frustration, animosity, and even hopelessness.

A particular frustration among refugees was the lack of transparency about where exactly their case was in the process. Relatedly, refugees expressed a sense of powerlessness regarding their inability to review case files and ensure that information was accurate. Frequent stories and experiences of files being lost, paperwork going missing, or administrative mistakes led to a deep sense of anxiety concerning paperwork. When trying to review or find out about the state of their file, however, refugees would simply be told to come back in six or twelve months. As one refugee put it, "Whenever I go, they say to wait, we will call you. Month after month goes by and I hear nothing. I go

back and they say go away, we will call you. This is how it goes for years: around and around.” Another interviewee expressed a similar frustration,

We are always going to the offices and they just tell us, ‘we will call you, we will call you.’ Then one month, two months goes by, and nothing. It’s like we just go there to disturb them and they just say come back in six months. So, all we can do is wait.

For many, the conflict between the promise of resettlement and the experience of enforced waiting and procedural and physical barriers generated animosity toward practitioners. This animosity was particularly pronounced for those who had a sense of urgency with regard to their case. For example, I met Ibrahim while I was waiting to interview a protection officer at the InterAid office. It was office hours at InterAid, and Ibrahim had come to talk with his caseworker about his file. We talked for over an hour while we both waited for our respective meetings, during which time Ibrahim informed me that he had been accepted for resettlement by a European country because of his child’s serious health condition. Despite the urgency of this situation it had been months since he’d heard about the state of his case. He was eventually called into the back office, but soon returned as his case manager would not see him without a scheduled appointment.

After my interview, we walked back together to his neighborhood. Ibrahim showed me pictures of his child and documents from the UNHCR, InterAid, and the country who had offered him resettlement. He explained to me that he had gone to the office on multiple occasions over the past several months but was either turned away or told to wait. He’d also given up his job in construction because he was expecting to be

resettled soon, and he was now several months in arrears with rent. He was perplexed as to why the office couldn't tell him when he would leave or provide more details about his case. He was particularly concerned that potential mistakes in his file might be delaying proceeding, and that the office didn't have the most recent medical report concerning his child. Expressing deep frustration with the process, he recommended that I title my dissertation "We Killed Refugees" or "We Let Refugees Die." Although a somewhat extreme case, the clash between refugees' sense of urgency and the seeming indifference of staff and agencies came up frequently in interviews and interactions.

The lived experience of resettlement further compounded the frustration with and animosity toward practitioners. While waiting for their cases, refugees saw friends, family members, and neighbors depart. At times, these departures were quite sudden, such as one family that I was familiar with who were told on a Friday that they would leave the next week. The lived experience of resettlement within the community led refugees to compare themselves and their files to the situations of those who had left, questioning the factors that distinguished them. For example, I asked an elderly woman who lived in a multi-generational home about how refugees are selected. Outlining the formal criteria, she expressed exacerbation with the fact that her family had not yet received resettlement:

I've been here for almost twenty years. My grandchildren were born here as refugees, and my son passed away recently from illness. We had an interview in 2015, but I've heard nothing since. I used to go to the office to bug, bug, bug them, but they just say to go away, we will call you when you are ready.

Pointing down the road, she then went on to discuss a family who had arrived a few years ago but had already been resettled: “It just makes no sense.”

These lived experiences lead refugees to characterize resettlement as “*la tombola*,” which literally means, “the raffle,” suggesting a purely random process of selection akin to pulling a number out of a box. Discussing a family from her church who were recently resettled, one lady commented upon the fact that there were families in that very church who needed resettlement more: “This is why we call resettlement *la tombola*. Nobody can know if they are next.” These experiences contrasted sharply with official discourses about formalized selection criteria and processing times, therefore creating the sense that one’s time could come at any moment.

Furthermore, in undermining official discourses of formality and systemization, characterizations of resettlement as *la tombola* led refugees to see frontline bureaucrats as in fact having significant discretion over who is resettled and who is not. To understand why, then, practitioners prioritize some cases over others, the refugees I interviewed and interacted with offered two primary explanations.

The first explanation referenced the indifferent if not explicitly anti-refugee sentiments of African and Uganda staff. Put simply, these staff didn’t care about refugees and therefore didn’t do the proper paperwork, and/or didn’t take the time to hear and respond to refugees’ needs. The result was that many people eligible for resettlement or in need didn’t receive it. Worst of all, when individuals sought to follow up on their files or make their case for resettlement, they encountered indifference, suspicion, and

hostility from practitioners. Such experiences solidified refugees' view that Ugandans were deeply opposed to refugees and their presence in Uganda.

The second explanation referenced corruption. During a focus group, for example, I asked attendants about what they thought led some cases to be prioritized over others. Laughing, the group roundly said that it was the "corruption criteria." Notions of the corruption criteria came up frequently during fieldwork, paralleling findings in other settings (Jansen 2008; Thomson 2012). For example, I interviewed a group of men in a cafe on the main commercial street in Katwe. Discussing how spaces are distributed, an older man who had lived in Kampala for almost thirty years responded that "Resettlement is only for people with money. If you have money you go. If you don't you stay." The particular intersection of mandatory wait times and strictly enforced office hours added weight to corruption narratives given their resonance with prominent forms of administrative corruption in East African bureaucracies, epitomized in the Swahili saying "toa kitu kidago," which translates into "give a little something" (Gyimah-Brempong 2002). This saying reflects a view that to move bureaucratic procedures along you should pay a small amount of money.

Stories of corruption were rife during fieldwork. For example, a church that I frequently attended during fieldwork collected money for a recently widowed community member. The money went missing, and sometime later a prominent elder from the church left for resettlement. It was widely suggested that he had stolen the money to pay a bribe. Similarly, a group of translators who had worked for the UNHCR during a re-verification

program reported that several families came to verify their file only to be told that they had left for resettlement. The prominence of such narratives led some of the refugees that I interacted with to begin collecting money to pay bribes. The usual price quoted was \$1,000 per individual – a large sum for Congolese in Kampala.

Regardless of their real extent, corruption narratives reflect a view that the African, and largely Ugandan, staff employed to conduct case management and referrals had significant discretion over resettlement and were using this discretion to their own benefit. This view accompanied frequent calls for the UNHCR and resettlement countries to replace African staff with “mzungus”¹⁴ (see also Thomson 2012). As one refugee put it to me, “you mzungus already have your money, so you don’t need anything from us.” These views are a direct effect of resettlement bureaucracies using local and national staff as intermediaries, thus reducing administrative costs and insulating North American and European staff from directly confronting the challenges of administering scarce resettlement spaces in practice.

In this section, we’ve seen that the frontline practitioners responsible for identifying, referring, and processing resettlement cases develop a set of strategies to mitigate and manage refugee expectations. These strategies work by creating and enforcing procedural and physical barriers between refugees and case workers, therefore forcing refugees to wait and accept the temporal rhythms of resettlement processing.

¹⁴ Mzungu is a common word in large parts of east and central Africa to refer to “white people,” or, occasionally, people from the West more broadly.

These strategies are in direct conflict with the important role that frequent case management has in official UNHCR and US policy. Regardless, the result is substantial animosity between refugees and service providers, such that refugees come to see the agency of mediating actors rather than the policies of resettlement countries as the primary barriers to resettlement. Much of this frustration focuses on the issue of African, and especially Ugandan staff who refugees come to see as corrupt, indifferent, and even anti-refugee. These experiences also lead refugees to engage in practices to expedite their cases, such as collecting money for bribes.

Interestingly, the tension between refugee hopes for resettlement and limited spaces spilled out to other humanitarian agencies not directly involved in resettlement. For example, the director of a Kampala-based urban programming initiative complained to me about the start of a resettlement program: “It’s great for those who actually leave, but for the rest of us left here doing this work, it’s been terrible.” He went on to say that,

We always used to talk about working alongside refugees and this center as a safe space where community members could come. But now, everything has just become so acrimonious. Even though I’ve intentionally stayed well clear of resettlement, we’re seen as gatekeepers of this precious resource [...]. When resettlement countries lose interest and turn their focus elsewhere, it will take a long time for us to heal and rebuild trust.

In particular, the director discussed issues with Ugandan staff, who had taken money from refugees for resettlement despite not being mandated to refer cases. Refugees continued to come to the office to ask about their case. To prevent such issues and to better manage contact between refugees and staff, the director had ended the urban center’s walk-in policy and moved to appointments, restricting access outside of programming. Similar to the policies of resettlement practitioners outlined above, the

effect of such responses by humanitarian agencies is to consolidate and expand the administrative and physical barriers refugees confront in accessing services, and to compound the acrimonious relationship between refugees and providers.

Exit, Loyalty, or Voice?

Shifting from the above focus on humanitarian agencies, this section examines how refugees' hopes and expectations of resettlement impact dynamics at the community level. In particular, I draw attention to a highly ambivalent discourse that posits resettlement as good for the individuals selected but deleterious to the refugee community at large. This discourse suggests that resettlement leads refugees to be oriented to highly individualistic goals and temporal horizons that damage and undermine the organizational completeness, cohesion, and political power of Congolese community. Reflecting the salience of this discourse, I found two social projects that aimed to promote community over resettlement by (1) casting resettlement as pollutive and corruptive; and (2) promoting a pan-refugee political identity oriented toward claiming rights in Uganda. These projects can be broadly conceptualized through Hirschman's (1978) classic "exit, loyalty, voice" framework, which has been developed over the years to think about the social dynamics of emigration within "sending" contexts (e.g. Dako-Gyeke 2016; Hoffmann 2010).

Ambivalent Discourses

As we've seen, the majority of Congolese refugees that I interacted with articulated a strong desire for attaining resettlement and migrating to the West. At the

same time, however, refugees also articulated a deeply ambivalent discourse that posited resettlement as good for those individuals selected but as having negative consequences for the community at large. This discourse came up, for example, during a focus group with refugees following a church service. The format of the discussion encouraged participants to think about the broader impacts of resettlement. Bijou, a young Congolese woman who had spent most of her life in Kampala, articulated the terms of this ambivalent discourse succinctly, “Resettlement has given us hope for ourselves and our future. We didn’t have this before. We see that those who have gone are now living a better life.” She went on, however, to say that “to be honest, though, ever since resettlement started, it has made everything harder for those of us left living here.” Bijou elaborated by drawing attention to the deep frustration that many refugees lived with given their hopes for resettlement – a hope, Bijou was quick to note, which was unlikely to be fulfilled. Reflecting on these feelings, Bijou went on to say that, “You see your friends go, your brother, your sister, and you ask why not me? In this way, you can start to feel very low here and very isolated.”

Other focus group participants affirmed and extended Bijou’s comments, remarking on how resettlement made people suspicious of each other, inculcating tensions and animosity in the community. Conversation quickly turned to questions of corruption and theft, and also to the effects of resettlement on community infrastructure. Attendees noted that elders and leaders were often resettled leaving holes in the social organizational fabric of the community. Reflecting on this issue, Patrice noted that: “I’m very happy for those who have left. They get to have a new life. But for us who remain,

it's a big problem." Referencing a prominent church in the neighborhood, Patrice said that,

...this church used to have English classes, an urban agriculture program, and it even raised funds for small cash supports. Over the past two years, seven of the eight elders have been resettled, and now the programs have stopped. You can look across the community here and find this happening a lot. This is why I ask my fellow refugees: it's good for [those resettled], but how does it leave us?

Affirming Patrice, Robert talked about another educational scholarship initiative that had fallen apart because families had been resettled and had left with little or no notice.

Reflecting on such situations, Robert lamented that "We don't care about our lives here anymore. Nobody cares about what we've built. Everybody is just waiting to go to the US or UK."

Beyond the effects of resettlement on relationships and community infrastructure, another prominent dimension of the ambivalence surrounding resettlement was the view that refugees in Kampala were intentionally creating the impression of vulnerability and insecurity in order to be more appealing to resettlement countries. Rene, the director of a refugee-serving organization, was particularly concerned about this dynamic and raised it with me and others regularly. For example, during our first interview, Rene said that,

Nobody can say that it is bad for those who get resettled. But, how many go each year? Maybe 100, 200 from Kampala. But everybody now thinks that resettlement is their only solution. People are taking their kids from school, saying that America or Norway doesn't want people who are educated. They say they will wait to be in the US. We have people quitting their jobs or turning down opportunities. We even have people harming themselves and doing crazy things to get resettlement [...]. We have an opportunity right now in Uganda, but instead everybody is focused on getting resettlement. This is our challenge.

I heard Rene raise these issues in different settings, including at a conference of urban humanitarian practitioners and stakeholders convened by a Scandinavian country. In his speech, Rene drew a direct line of tension between the ways in which resettlement encourages refugees to perform notions of vulnerability with the demands for resiliency and entrepreneurialism that he saw as required of refugees to incorporate into Kampala and show Ugandans that refugees can contribute.

An attached concern centered on the question of dignity. Issues of dignity arose across a number of settings, centering on the negative outcomes of refugees' efforts to appear attractive to resettlement countries. Often, these narratives centered on Congolese clothes and lifestyle. During a conversation with a group of men at a cafe, Bosombo made the following statement to much laughter, "Congolese will go to bed hungry but be wearing Versace. This is how we are and it's why we can never be like [Ugandans]." I heard a similar version of this comment frequently among the refugees I interviewed, reflecting academic scholarship on Congolese fashion, identity, and dignity – epitomized by the transnational Congolese subculture of *La Sape* (Gondola 1999). Bosombo went on to say, however, that Congolese were now wearing torn and unwashed clothes because "they think that if you look too good you won't be resettled." Bosombo's comments reflect a broader view that resettlement was undermining community strength and dignity by encouraging performances of vulnerability and insecurity.

These ambivalent discourses essentially contend that resettlement fosters individualism within the refugee community, as refugees are encouraged to pursue

individual projects of attaining resettlement. In this regard, the ambivalence around resettlement parallels academic scholarship regarding the individualizing logics of the formal refugee status, which constantly calls upon refugees to tell individual stories of persecution, vulnerability, and insecurity to claim rights and attain resources (Blommaert 2001). From the perspective of those “left behind” in Kampala, however, these strategies undermine community cohesion, collective dignity, and the social organizational fabric of the Congolese community, which has been developing and consolidating in the neighborhoods of Katwe and Nsambya for over twenty years.

In response, I found a set of projects aimed at encouraging refugees to reorient their temporal horizons and expectations to the local Congolese community and to their lives in Uganda, therefore encouraging community over resettlement – or, otherwise put, loyalty and voice over exit. I address two particular projects below: the first frames resettlement as corruptive and pollutive; and the second frames resettlement as disempowering and as undermining refugees’ political power.

Loyalty: Resettlement as Corruptive

During my fieldwork, I found that a prominent way of grappling with the ambiguity of resettlement was to cast it as having a corruptive and pollutive effect on individuals. This moral discourse in many ways reflects literature on the moral economies that develop in contexts where external benefits promote individual behaviors that conflict with or undermine established foundations of community life, cohesion, and meaning (Taussig 2010). A prominent version of this cultural discourse was applied to

family and community members who had left for resettlement. As we saw in an earlier section, those leaving for resettlement often promise to send money home and “sponsor” the cases of those left behind. Such promises often do not materialize however, and the refugees I spoke with reported friends and family not returning calls or changing their phone numbers.

Congolese refugees frequently framed such behaviors in terms of the corruptive influence of resettlement. Gerard, who we met earlier, used this framework to discuss his sister who had stopped returning his calls: “This is what happens when people go. They become very selfish. I’ve heard this is how it is in the West.” Similar discourses about resettlement (or, perhaps more accurately, migration to the West) polluting or corrupting family members came up frequently. A young woman whose sister had left to Canada put it like this,

How will you just forget about your sister and your family so fast? She used to be very good, always thinking of us, but now she’s over there and she just thinks about herself. We’ve seen so many people go like this.

Refugees also pointed to examples such as church elders stealing money to remark upon the increased levels of theft and dishonesty generated by resettlement. As one individual put it, “Ever since resettlement started, you can’t even trust your own brother or sister. Sometimes, it seems like everybody is corrupt.”

Discourses of resettlement as corruptive and pollutive found particularly strong expression in Congolese churches. Over ninety percent of Congolese living in Uganda are Christian, the great many “Born Again” and especially Pentecostal. As such, churches

are central institutions in Congolese community and many of the refugees I interacted with attended church at least once a week and very often three or four times. The role of the church takes on a particular salience for Congolese in Kampala in that it is one of the few institutions where refugees can actively engage in place-making and community, and churches become key sites in the social organizational life of the community that allow the collection and distribution of symbolic and material resources.

Given the central role of the church, I spent significant amounts of time attending services and events such as choir practices, elder meetings, men's groups, or social programming. At services, preaching was often translated between Swahili, French, and Lingala, with some services also translated into English and Luganda. When services were not translated into English, elders would usually appoint a church member to sit next to me and translate. Services frequently went on for three to six hours, and would involve multiple leaders and pastors preaching on a great range of topics.

Discussions of the Devil, demons, and evil were constant features of the services I attended (Pype 2006). Pentecostals in particular see themselves as engaged in a spiritual warfare with evil, and the Devil and demons are seen to be ever present in everyday life (Luhmann 2013). Pastors would often preach about the role of the Devil in a great many phenomena, such as the ongoing problems in Congo, epidemics of cassava brown streak disease, or the spread of "immorality" and "homosexuality" across the globe.

To my surprise, resettlement often emerged as a specific topic during services, with pastors tying resettlement to the work of the Devil and demons. During one service,

for example, Pastor Dan discussed the Devil's role in promoting homosexuality and in breaking up families at length. He then went on to discuss "the new evil of resettlement." He told congregants that the Devil was working through resettlement to corrupt community leaders, break apart families, and to create idleness within the Congolese population. He tied these outcomes to a range of social problems such as drug and alcohol addiction, depression, and suicide. He finished his discussion imploring members to reject the Devil's temptation and to forget about resettlement. In making this claim, he drew particular reference to those who had left and had not been heard from since, asking congregants whether this is what they want for their brothers, sisters, and children.

During another church service, an elder discussed an ongoing conflict between a number of the church's members and Ugandan government officials over unpaid translation work. Again, he talked about demons working through Ugandan officials and through the refugee regime, saying how they were trying to steal money and break refugees' spirits. He said, however, that resettlement was not a solution. There are many faces of the Devil, the elder said, and sometimes he will come offering false hope. He implored congregants to reject this false hope and help build the church and minister to fellow Congolese and Ugandans.

Voice: Resettlement as Disempowering

Paralleling the views of resettlement as corruptive, my research unveiled a prevalent view that resettlement was being strategically used by the UNHCR and Ugandan state to undermine the political voice, power, and organizational capacity of the

Congolese community. In one version of this view, resettlement was used to remove “troublemakers” who questioned the way things were done and stood up for the rights of refugees.

During my research stay, for example, a large corruption scandal was exposed in which several high ranking government and UNHCR officials conspired to embezzle funds by over-counting refugees (referred to by Ugandan press as “ghost refugees”). A number of Congolese community leaders were credited with helping to expose this corruption and were said to have been subsequently offered resettlement. One individual was said to have taken it and had since departed. Another individual called Francois, however, rejected resettlement, deciding instead to stay and fight for Congolese rights in Uganda. Indeed, there was a prevalent idea that he had rejected multiple offers of resettlement – a story he would neither confirm nor deny when I spoke with him. In his own words, Francois sought to implore and organize refugees to reject “the language of humanitarian grievance and vulnerability,” and instead claim their civil and political rights as refugees in Uganda. In many ways, then, Francois’s political project represents the antithesis of the predominant humanitarian logic underpinning resettlement that casts refugees as needy and vulnerable.

Francois had an almost folk hero status among many of the Congolese I met, who often became quite animated when talking about him. I became interested in this folk hero status given that it conflicted so sharply with the widespread aspirations and desire

for resettlement among Congolese refugees.¹⁵ In my reading, Francois' position as folk hero reflects the deep ambivalence refugees feel toward resettlement, which offers a way out of protracted exile, but comes at the cost of community and dignity.

A similar narrative about the role of resettlement in breaking apart community integrity and power came up during a meeting of refugee leaders from across the national-origin country groups living in Uganda. The meeting was held under a fruit tree in the courtyard of a refugee-serving organization in the Katwe/Nsambya area. The leaders in attendance discussed the ways in which the UNHCR and Ugandan state sought to break up refugees by administering them on the basis of national-origin groups. Instead, attendees emphasized the importance of coming together under a common refugee identity irrespective of national origin. A Rwandese refugee leader put it like this:

We know what the UNHCR and Ugandan government want: they want us separate and divided. But we are not Rwandan, Burundi, Sudanese, Congoman, we are refugees first. This is how we must proceed in this country if we are to live here.

The assembled leaders made similar claims to a pan-refugee identity over their respective national or ethnic differences.

Midway through the discussion, attention turned specifically to the growing number of Congolese refugees being resettled. A Burundian leader took the floor, and described resettlement as an example of how the UNHCR breaks refugees apart and turns groups against one another. Following a round of discussion, a senior figure in the

¹⁵ Indeed, my research assistant continues to send me updates about Francois, which he often prefaces with "News about your favorite refugee."

Congolese Association of Uganda called Alain affirmed the views of attendees, casting resettlement as undermining unity and therefore acting as a barrier to the political power of refugees. I discussed these comments with Alain during an interview several weeks later. Reflecting the ambivalence around resettlement, he noted the value of resettlement to individual refugees, but lamented the ways in which it reoriented people to its attainment and to life in the West despite the very limited places.

To demonstrate his point, Alain discussed a recent incident in southwest Uganda in which a transit vehicle operated by a regional humanitarian logistics agency had crashed, resulting in the death of five Congolese. The vehicle was bringing refugees to Kampala for interviews. Alain said that the operators of the vehicle had just left the passengers – including those injured – on the roadside. “This is the reality we refugees face,” Alain exclaimed, continuing that “Our reality is here in Uganda, not in Europe or America. Uganda is where we will live and many of us will probably die here too.” Given this sentiment, Alain had begun planning workshops “to say to our brothers and sisters that we must turn our attention from resettlement. Maybe you will get it one day, but you cannot live your life waiting for it. Uganda is where our life is.”

Discussion & Conclusion

In foregrounding a central tension between heightened refugee expectations and the reality of limited spaces and long, uncertain processing times, this chapter shows that resettlement fundamentally impacts the lives of refugees in countries of asylum. In expanding the analytic lens from those resettled to those “left behind” and still living in

countries of asylum, this chapter reveals a significantly larger universe of social dynamics surrounding resettlement than previously accounted for in existing scholarship. These social dynamics are elided by the metrocentricism of existing approaches, which foreground dynamics in resettlement countries in the Global North.

A more analytically complete understanding of the social dynamics of resettlement also troubles the straightforward narrative of resettlement as “rescue” or a “solution.” Indeed, the central tension between refugee expectations and resettlement policies creates a set of social and organizational challenges that are worked out by individuals, organizations, and communities to varying effects. For example, as we’ve seen, the hope of resettlement in many ways compounds rather than alleviates refugees’ experience of traumatic waiting and liminality; expands rather than decreases the barriers separating refugees from services; and becomes a site of social antagonism between refugees and African, largely Ugandan, practitioners that exacerbate feelings of exclusion and marginality from the Ugandan state.

In troubling the straightforward notion of resettlement as solution, this chapter extends critical scholarship on the limits of resettlement. To date, this latter work has focused on the experiences of refugees in the United States, examining how underfunded resettlement programs, neoliberal workfarism, and experiences of racialization lead to unmet expectations for refugees placing significant strain on refugee families and communities (Espiritu 2014; Gowayed 2019b; Kibria 1995; Tang 2015). In particular, Critical Refugee Studies (CRS) shows that refugee experiences are structured around

their mobilization within efforts to buttress American claims to liberal exceptionalism in the face of imperialist expansionism and war. This chapter extends this scholarship by incorporating the experiences of refugees living in countries of asylum and “waiting” for resettlement. Indeed, this chapter points to the wider cost borne by refugees in the service of the US’s highly selective and opaque resettlement program.

Moreover, this chapter has drawn attention to the critical role of meso-level actors in managing the inherent tension in resettlement policy between refugee expectations and resource scarcity. As we’ve seen, it is the on-the-ground actors mediating refugees and resettlement countries that face the reality of refugee expectations and are therefore led to develop strategies of mitigation and management. These strategies involve leveraging administrative discretion to force refugees to wait and accept the temporal rhythms of resettlement processing. In response to these strategies, refugees often come to see meso-level, mediating actors – the great many of whom are African or more specifically Ugandan – as the primary barriers to resettlement. In other words, rather than confronting resettlement county policies, refugees encounter a set of procedural and physical barriers established by mediating staff and agencies. This finding reveals the critical role that “local” staff play in buffering the largely white desk officers, UNHCR senior managers, and US government officials from the emotional strain and procedural problems that emerge due to the scarcity and selectivity of resettlement. For the senior, largely white officials who often reside in gated compounds and inaccessible offices, resettlement exists as a largely humanitarian program and solution to refugee plight. For “local”

actors, however, resettlement becomes a site of coercive, punitive, and antagonistic relationships with refugees.

Although beyond the scope of this chapter, my research in the United States revealed that the challenge of managing refugee expectations is in fact endemic to the resettlement system at large. As in Uganda, frontline practitioners frequently reported that managing refugee expectations was one of the hardest dimensions of their work. According to the staff responsible for implementing the US government's Reception and Placement policy, refugees frequently had unrealistic expectations about their life in the US stemming from their prior class position or from consumption of American popular culture. Instead, resettlement workers are charged with transitioning refugees (often through coercive means tied to benefit and service conditions) to rapid economic self-sufficiency, which generally means long hours and low wages in physically intensive jobs at the bottom of the economic ladder. To meet self-sufficiency goals on limited and dwindling budgets, resettlement agencies have established employment pipelines with sectors of the economy desperate for cheap, exploitable labor such as meat processing and packaging (Darrow 2015a; Koyama 2017). In sum, refugees quickly find their expectations of life in the United States in conflict with the reality of racialized poverty, and local resettlement agencies find themselves managing these expectations.

Future Directions

In closing, this chapter points to two areas of future research. The first area involves overcoming the existing bifurcation (see Go 2013 for a broader discussion of

this tendency in sociology) of existing scholarship on resettlement policy by connecting the experiences of refugees in countries of asylum with refugees' experiences in countries of resettlement. Indeed, incorporating the experiences of those abroad raises serious questions about the notion of resettlement as a "solution" and troubles dominant humanitarian framings of resettlement. Connecting dynamics of processing and reception also raises the question of how the administration of resettlement impacts refugee experiences once they resettle; or, how refugee processing abroad impacts the structure and dynamics of the transnational social space linking refugee communities spread across countries of asylum and countries of resettlement.

Extending the above line of thought, future work might fruitfully compare how the administration of different resettlement programs shape different outcomes across transnational space. My preliminary observations suggest the potentials of such an endeavor. Indeed, during my fieldwork in Pittsburgh (which I turn to in the next chapter) I found that Bhutanese refugees seemed far better equipped to form community organizations and articulate a collective, ethnicized identity compared to Congolese refugees – something extant literature holds as an important determinant of refugee adaptation. Standard accounts in sociology posit this difference as a result of the intrinsic ethnic characteristics of refugees, which shape their levels of social capital and cohesion (Hein 2006; Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou and Bankston 1994). Instead, my hypothesis would be that this outcome is at least in part due to the structure and administration of resettlement that refugees were processed through.

As we've seen, Congolese refugees are administered as individual refugees, in a highly selective, arbitrary, and opaque manner. This leads to high levels of distrust, issues of corruption, and strained relationships within families and communities stretched across countries of asylum and resettlement. The Bhutanese case, on the other hand, is quite different. Unlike Congolese, Bhutanese refugees were resettled as a whole group. All 108,000 refugees were essentially offered resettlement and simply had to sign up and wait their turn. Moreover, endemic conflicts in the Bhutanese camps over resettlement (which culminated in a spate of arson that destroyed half of the largest camp in Nepal) led the UNHCR and the US government to establish a leadership structure within the camps explicitly focused on convincing refugees to accept resettlement. This structure consisted primarily of younger refugees raised in Nepal, many of whom had attended universities in Nepal and India. Once sufficient buy-in was attained, practitioners resettled the Bhutanese leadership structure first in order to establish a groundwork for resettlement in the United States, build connections between Bhutanese and local community partners and agencies, and transmit positive stories of resettlement back home. These leaders also established community organizations and NGOs in the US, which provided the foundation for later arrivals. Such a process was simply absent with the Congolese. Again, this points to the potential value of transnational comparative research across refugee groups.

The second area of future research concerns the role of racial logics in structuring resettlement policy and resolving tensions between refugee expectations and policy realities. The following quote from a desk officer of the US State Department illustrates

the possibilities of work in this area. During an interview, the desk officer discussed with me why detractors of the US resettlement policy were misguided in their calls for more skill selectivity in processing. Comparing Congolese refugees to Syrians he said,

People in the US have the impression, and a lot of people in Europe have asked for and demanded this, but we want refugees being resettled who are doctors and lawyers and are educated people. That's what Syrian refugees were by and large. But they don't often integrate as well, because... and this was a big article in the New Yorker or New York Times, but there was a Syrian family who were high level professionals in Syria, but now they are living in a roach infested place, cleaning toilets, and you would be upset too if that was your lifestyle. But for the Congolese, this is a big step-up, and so they roll with the punches so to speak. Because of this, they do well over the long run. This is the big debate we're having right now.

I heard such racialized discourses of African suitability for poverty conditions among resettlement staff in the United States. For example, one staff member compared the experience of resettling Afghan refugees to Congolese:

Afghans come in with very high expectations and this can take a while to overcome to be honest. Many have been professionals at home, but we're now asking them to work in entry-level jobs. Although in many ways you see greater barriers for our Congolese clients, there aren't these expectations and so the initial [Reception and Placement] process is a little more straightforward.

Future work might explore the extent to which such racial logics shape or help mediate tensions in resettlement policy. Indeed, to borrow Paul Gilroy, existing work on resettlement remains “substantially unaffected by the histories of barbarity which appear to be such a prominent feature of the widening gap between modern experience and modern expectation” (Gilroy 1993:49). Future work may therefore benefit from focusing more attention on the tension between realities and expectations in resettlement as a means of apprehending and grappling with resettlement’s “counter discourses.”

CHAPTER 4 - RECEPTION**PLACE, LEGAL STATUS, AND REFUGEES: HOW URBAN INCORPORATION
REGIMES SHAPE REFUGEE IDENTITY***Abstract*

This chapter explores a puzzle revealed through fifteen months of fieldwork examining refugee settlement in Metro Pittsburgh and Metro Atlanta. I found that resettled refugees living in each region emphasize different dimensions of their identity in articulating understandings of and claims for belonging. Those living in Pittsburgh emphasize their ethnic identity and membership to ethnic groups, while refugees in Atlanta see membership to ethnic groups as a delegitimized platform for belonging and instead emphasize their legal status. These findings are puzzling given that all refugees are resettled through the same federal resettlement bureaucracy, which scholars anticipate will lead to relatively standardized modes of identification with pertinent variations organized around axes of social and economic differentiation.

To explain these place-based differences, this chapter argues that refugee resettlement policy has been rescaled to local levels. Critically, however, I show that refugees confront different local policies in Pittsburgh and Atlanta due to the broader social and institutional histories of each place. These histories lead different actors to respond to refugees, and shape how these actors view refugees and the ideal outcomes of their resettlement. I advance the concept of *urban incorporation regimes* to conceptualize

this process, showing how each regime constitutes particular aspects of refugees' identity as socially valuable. Refugees learn about these valuations as they interact with, negotiate, and contest these regimes. Tracing the regimes' formation and outcomes, this chapter identifies a diversity regime in Pittsburgh that amplifies refugees' cultural identity, and a humanitarian regime in Atlanta that amplifies refugees' legal status.

The theoretical contribution of this chapter is in identifying urban context as a critical mediating scale in the implementation of resettlement policy and experiences of refugee status. The existing emphasis on the federal resettlement bureaucracy and distinctive refugee/state relationship therefore needs to be rethought through deeper engagement with urban context. In turn, this chapter troubles the predominant distinction between immigrants and refugees in extant scholarship, instead suggesting that the variable salience of legal status is produced through urban incorporation regimes that differ across subnational space.

Introduction

While waiting for a civics class at a public library in the South Hills of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a group of resettled refugees were heckled by white locals shouting racist and xenophobic remarks. Reflecting on this incident, Dharma, who was resettled from Bhutan *via* Nepal in the early-2010s, noted "problems like this when we first arrived." Referencing the Bhutanese community's contribution to the region by buying homes, opening businesses, and adding to Pittsburgh's cultural diversity, Dharma believed that

such incidents would decline as the Bhutanese continued “to work together and show our neighbors that we contribute, that we are one of the most vibrant communities here.”

Around the same time that Dharma arrived in Pittsburgh, Jemal, an Eritrean refugee resettled from Ethiopia, arrived in Atlanta, Georgia. Like Dharma, Jemal was frequently reminded of his position as “other,” and wanted to make sure his children didn’t experience the same. “We came here as refugees,” Jemal said, “We were given this chance. So, I don’t tell my kids to be Eritrean. That’s ridiculous! I tell them to be American first. You’ve got to know your rights, represent yourself, and succeed. This is the way to be here.”

These quotes come from fifteen months of fieldwork exploring the experiences of resettled refugees living in Metro Pittsburgh and Metro Atlanta. They reveal different ways of articulating claims for belonging and social membership that were remarkably consistent across refugee groups living in each region. Like Dharma, refugees in Pittsburgh make claims for membership by emphasizing their ethnic identity, membership to ethnic communities, and contributions to the region’s cultural diversity. As Jemal’s reflections indicate, refugees in Atlanta cast ethnic identity as a delegitimized platform for such claims. Instead, they draw on their legal status as refugees and emphasize individualistic notions of rights, entitlements, and hard work. The difference between Pittsburgh and Atlanta is surprising as extant literature expects resettled refugees to have relatively standardized experiences on account of their legal status and managed incorporation through a federal resettlement bureaucracy. This distinctive refugee/state relationship is seen to constitute an “adaptational advantage” for resettled refugees over

other immigrant groups (Bloemraad 2006; Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Portes and Zhou 1993) and undergird a secure sense of belonging to the state (Bloemraad 2006; Brown 2011).

To explain these place-based articulations of refugee belonging, this chapter argues that refugees encounter different institutional and cultural logics of incorporation in each context. These differences stem from the social histories of Pittsburgh and Atlanta, which impact the actors that primarily respond to refugees, and how these actors view refugees and the ideal outcomes of their resettlement. I offer the concept of “urban incorporation regimes” to conceptualize these institutional and cultural logics, and show how each regime mediates refugees’ access to material and symbolic resources in ways that valorize different aspects of their identity. This chapter identifies two incorporation regimes: a diversity regime that amplifies cultural identity; and a humanitarian regime that amplifies legal status. As we will see, refugees learn about and negotiate their social valuation as they interact with these regimes to attain resources and recognition, thus shaping place-specific articulations of identity and belonging.

The theoretical contribution of this chapter is in identifying urban context as a critical mediating scale shaping the implementation of resettlement policy and experiences of refugee status. In this regard, this paper contributes to a nascent body of scholarship that examines how place-based factors modulate national immigration policies and experiences of legal entry (Andrews 2018; García 2019; Marrow 2011). To date, this literature has focused on undocumented immigrants, suggesting that it is

immigrants' *lack* of legal status that makes local context important. In extending this scholarship to resettled refugees, this chapter suggests the need for a more substantial revision of predominant accounts of immigration policies and legal status through theoretical engagement with subnational context – an argument supported by other areas of sociological scholarship (e.g. Brown-Saracino 2015; Somers 1994a; Steinmetz 1993). I offer the concept of urban incorporation regimes to organize this rethinking. Moreover, this chapter troubles the predominant distinction between refugees and immigrants that undergirds scholarship on legal status (FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Menjívar 2000:77–114, 2006), instead suggesting that the variable salience of legal status is produced through incorporation regimes that differ across subnational space.

The following section situates the puzzle of this chapter in scholarship on refugees and legal status and then moves on to outline methods. I then trace out the formation of a diversity regime in Pittsburgh and a humanitarian regime in Atlanta, paying close attention to how and why they valorize different aspects of refugee identity. At the end of each section, I show how refugees' understandings of belonging stem from interactions with these regimes. A final section outlines avenues for future research and clarifies the contributions of this chapter to refugee studies and, more broadly, the relationship between place, policies, and legal status.

Place, Legal Status, and Refugee Incorporation

Migration scholars in the United States generally distinguish resettled refugees from other immigrant groups on the basis of their distinctive legal status and managed

incorporation through a federal resettlement bureaucracy (Bloemraad 2006; Brown 2011; FitzGerald and Arar 2018; Menjívar 2000:77–114). Unlike other immigrants entering the US, refugees are selected and processed abroad before being invited to travel. Upon arrival, refugees are then granted permanent residency and a pathway to citizenship and family reunification reflecting an expectation that they will become citizens. In recognition of their admission on the basis of humanitarian need rather than a capacity to economically contribute, refugees are also granted access to public welfare, and the federal government financially supports initial relocation for at least three months. Federal supports are administered by local non-governmental agencies who meet refugees at airports; find them their first homes and jobs; enroll them in English classes, schools, and public welfare programs; and have a mandate to serve refugees for up to five years.

Scholars working within the segmented assimilation paradigm dominant in the sociology of immigration at large, generally argue that refugees' distinctive legal status and managed incorporation constitutes an "adaptational advantage" over other immigrants who arrive with similar social and economic characteristics (Bloemraad 2006; Brown 2011; National Academies of Sciences 2015; Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Portes and Zhou 1993). Bloemraad's (2006) classic book, *Becoming a Citizen*, offers the clearest articulation of the "adaptational advantage" thesis. She shows that Vietnamese refugees naturalize at higher rates than Portuguese labor migrants because the former's legal status and system of admission leads them to greater value state membership. Moreover, federal supports and access to public welfare provides additional resources

that can be used to build supportive community infrastructure (see also Hein 1997). Brown (2011) deepens our understanding of the link between refugee status and incorporation, showing how Liberian refugees see their legal status and coordinated incorporation as indicating a strong and personal relationship to the state. Liberians used familial metaphors to cast the state as having paternalistic responsibilities to them on account of their invitation to travel to the United States and their status as refugees. They used this status to make claims on public institutions, and to enact a form of racial distancing, differentiating themselves from Black Americans who they deemed “failed citizens” (Brown 2011:155).

The adaptational advantage thesis is further buttressed by scholarship comparing the experiences of resettled refugees to those of asylum-seekers (see Menjívar 2000:77–114 for an example). Unlike the former, asylum-seekers claim refugee status at or within the borders of the United States and face extended periods of uncertainty, antagonistic relationships with state agencies, restricted access to public goods, periods of detention, and the denial of refugee status leading to deportation orders and/or legal exclusion. Legal liminality and exclusion has long-term impacts, as these migrants are dissuaded from using or making claims on public institutions and often express fear of and exclusion from the state (Abrego 2011; Gonzales 2016; Horton 2004; Menjívar 2006). Scholars therefore find that differences in legal status lead to divergent health outcomes (Horton 2004), naturalization rates (Bloemraad 2006), and labor market experiences (Portes and Rumbaut 2014:215–21), with residual differences explained by variations in ethnic and/or economic profiles (Hein 2006; Portes and Zhou 1993).

Another set of scholars, however, question the adaptational advantage thesis by pointing to institutional and social factors that undermine the security of the refugee status and advantages of the federal resettlement program. Kibria (1995), for example, found that Vietnamese refugees formed large family structures and elevated norms of collectivism in the US in order to draw together resources from the labor market and government programs that were “scarce and unstable in quality” (Kibria 1995:79). Developing this perspective, Tang (2015) draws on over a decade of community activism and research to show how fractious and disciplinary relationships with state agencies lead Cambodian refugees to feel deeply “unsettled” decades after their initial arrival. Similarly, Gowayed (2019b) shows that national political discourses and local experiences racialize Syrian refugees, therefore attenuating the apparent stability and security of their legal status.

Others have turned their gaze inward to question the benefits of the federal reception program. Contextualizing the US resettlement program within the broader context of racialized welfare retrenchment and punitive, disciplinary approaches to poverty (Benson 2016), scholars show that the local agencies charged with receiving and incorporating refugees enact strategies that have at best ambiguous outcomes for refugees. To stretch insufficient budgets and hit unrealistic self-sufficiency targets, for example, resettlement agencies channel refugees into sectors of the labor market such as meat processing that are desperate for legal, docile and disciplined labor due to the undesirability of such work (Darrow 2015a; Koyama 2017). Fee (2019:477) similarly finds that in response to financial insecurity, resettlement agencies “creatively utilize

paperwork to separate policy from practice in order to protect themselves [from high-stakes government oversight] and appease their refugee clients” (see also Darrow 2015b).

Existing scholarship therefore offers a contradictory account of the outcomes of resettlement policy. One argues that refugees’ legal status and managed incorporation through the federal resettlement program constitutes an adaptational advantage over other immigrants marked by successful integration and strong, secure feelings of belonging. The second, however, challenges this account and instead suggests that refugees’ legal status is inadequate to insulate them from the experiences of other racialized and working class immigrants. Rather than adjudicate between these two accounts, this chapter argues that both miss the critical role of subnational context in shaping the relationship among federal resettlement policy, legal status, and refugee incorporation. In other words, I argue that refugees’ experience of their legal status is shaped by subnational context.

To make this argument, I draw on findings stemming from fifteen months of fieldwork on refugee settlement in Metro Pittsburgh and Metro Atlanta. Specifically, I found that place-based articulations of refugee belonging were remarkably consistent across different groups. In Pittsburgh, refugees drew on their ethnic identity, membership to ethnic communities, and contributions to the diversity of the region. In Atlanta, on the other hand, refugees did not see membership to ethnic groups as a legitimate platform for membership. Instead, they drew on their legal status as refugees. These findings challenge the primacy of the state/refugee relationship in existing scholarship and points to the role of meso-level factors in shaping the outcomes of resettlement policy and legal

status. Indeed, local actors have created policies over the past two decades that strongly condition refugee experiences. These policies, vary, however, between Pittsburgh and Atlanta due to their different social and institutional histories.

In Pittsburgh, powerful foundations and city and municipal government officials have embedded immigrant “welcoming” across regional institutions as part of a broader postindustrial transition agenda. This agenda seeks to restructure the sociocultural and institutional fabric of Pittsburgh, and amplify markers of cultural diversity in urban rebranding efforts. Refugees are cast as stakeholders, participants, and symbolic resources in these initiatives, encouraging the formation of ethnicized communities and valorizing displays of cultural difference. In Atlanta, on the other hand, the response to refugees has been primarily crafted by a charity sector predominated by White Evangelical Christians. This sector demarcates refugees as deserving objects of care and distributes resources through individual relationships. Moreover, this sector presents refugees as ideal workers within a regional economy hungry for flexible, cheap, and, importantly, *legal* immigrant labor. These policies therefore amplify and valorize refugees’ legal identity. Ultimately, I found that refugees learn about and negotiate their social valuation as they strategically interact with these policies, leading to place-based differences in articulations of belonging.

To conceptualize the impact of these policies on refugee incorporation, I advance the concept of “urban incorporation regimes.” These regimes are underpinned by institutional and cultural logics that shape how local actors “see” refugees and the ideal

outcomes of their resettlement. In turn, these *ways of seeing* condition how refugees access material and symbolic resources in ways that amplify certain aspects of their identity as socially valuable. I identify two regimes: a diversity regime that valorizes ethnic identity; and a humanitarian regime that valorizes legal status. As such, this chapter suggests that the salient dimension of refugees' identity (whether, in this case, their legal status or ethnic identity) is socially produced through urban incorporation regimes.

I position the above argument within a nascent body of scholarship examining the role of place-based factors in shaping experiences and outcomes of legal status (Andrews 2018; García 2019; Marrow 2011). To date, this body of work has been developed through attention to undocumented immigrants, showing how local policies and political dynamics generated by counties, municipalities, libraries, police forces, and so on mediate migrants' experiences of state violence. The experience of being undocumented therefore varies across subnational scale, shaping different modes of incorporation (Marrow 2011), identification (García 2019), and political engagement (Burciaga and Martinez 2017) and subjectivity (Andrews 2018). This scholarship also draws attention to how local policies rescale binaries of the deserving/undeserving migrant, structuring migrants' access to resources and recognition in ways that promote certain forms of identification (Andrews 2018; García 2019; Nicholls 2019).

The focus on undocumented immigrants, however, suggests that the importance of local factors stem from migrants' *lack* of legal status and undocumented immigrants'

fear of detection, detention, and deportation. My findings of place-based differences in refugee identifications therefore expands this scholarship, and in so doing suggests that our broader understanding of legal status and immigration policies needs to be revised through close attention to scale. More than this, however, incorporating refugees into analysis draws attention to a different set of underlying dynamics shaping the link between place and legal status. While support for undocumented immigrants is often theorized as stemming from liberal values (Walker and Leitner 2011), professional norms (Marrow 2009), economic interests (Nicholson-Crotty and Nicholson-Crotty 2011), or social movements (Voss and Bloemraad 2011), “welcoming refugees” is also accompanied by discourses of hospitality (Nayeri 2019) that mobilize refugees within the moral and cultural projects of “hosts.” Thus far, such dynamics have been studied in terms of nationalist projects (Espiritu 2014; Lippert 1998, 1999; Tang 2015) or single urban case studies (Watson 2019). This chapter extends this scholarship, and shows urban incorporation regimes interpolate refugees through idealized constructions that are different across subnational space.

Studying Refugee Belonging in Two Resettlement Gateways

The data for this chapter comes from fifteen months of fieldwork in Metro Pittsburgh and Metro Atlanta. Fieldwork was conducted in two phases. The first phase occurred over three months in each location between September 2016 and March 2017. This period spanned the election of Donald Trump in November 2016 and subsequent Executive Orders suspending resettlement and banning immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries in January 2017. Beginning in November 2017, the second phase

involved five and four months in Pittsburgh and Atlanta respectively. Over the course of these fifteen months, new admissions declined and the politics of resettlement became contentious at national and local levels.

Pittsburgh and Atlanta were selected as case studies given that key similarities in their engagement with the federal resettlement program allow me to identify contextual factors impacting refugee experiences. First, Pittsburgh and Atlanta became resettlement sites during the late-1980s and early-1990s, meaning they began receiving refugees at roughly the same time. Second, both received sizable numbers from the main refugee groups resettled to the United States over the past thirty years. This allowed a measure of control over the profile of refugees across each site. Third, both have postindustrial economies that channel refugees into low-skilled, segmented sections of the labor market. Finally, the story of resettlement is remarkably similar in each place. Refugees were relocated into suburban municipalities that had under-capacity apartment complexes due to white suburbanization patterns. These places had little experience with international immigration, and, as anticipated (de Graauw et al. 2013), refugees initially encountered a largely indifferent if not hostile response. Beginning in the early-2000s, however, local actors in each context began enacting policies to “welcome refugees.”

At the same time, each region differs in important contextual ways. First, Pittsburgh is a “legacy city” (Singer et al. 2008:3) that was a hub of immigration in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but has seen nominal new immigrant settlement since the 1950s. The region has also lost half of its population and has only recently

begun to emerge from a half century of deindustrialization. Atlanta, on the other hand, is a “new immigrant destination” (Singer and Wilson 2006:13) that had few immigrants for much of the nineteenth and twentieth-century but has seen its immigrant population boom since the 1990s (McDaniel et al. 2017). This boom has been driven by a vibrant and diverse mixed-economy and has correlated with a sizable increase in the region’s population and subsequent metropolitan development.

Data collection can be broadly split into two dimensions. First, I collected data on refugee experiences. To gain research access, I volunteered with refugee support agencies and community organizations in each city and shadowed community leaders during their day-to-day activities. Through these contexts, I was introduced to others with varying levels of engagement with the formal refugee support structure. I also developed regular contact with a Bhutanese and Congolese family in Pittsburgh and two families from the same countries in Atlanta. These relationships provided a context for more sustained interaction across a range of settings. Third, I drew on refugees’ activities and experiences to trace out the ecology of policies and services. From this, I identified key institutional spaces for observations, and attended training sessions, closed-door meetings, initiative launches, council meetings, library events, art exhibitions, and so on. I also conducted thirty-seven semi-structured interviews with key informants (nineteen in Pittsburgh and eighteen in Atlanta) who were identified on the basis of their institutional position. Interviews were supplemented by interactions at events, as well as at three national conferences on local immigrant incorporation held in Philadelphia (2016), Syracuse (2017), and Louisville (2018).

Beyond ethnographic observations, I conducted forty semi-structured interviews with resettled refugees from five countries of origin: Bhutan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Sudan, and Somalia. Refugees from these countries constitute forty-seven percent of all refugees resettled to the United States since 2000 and are present in large numbers in both cities. My Atlanta case also draws on data collected from Eritrean refugees who are not present in significant numbers in Pittsburgh. I had frequent and rich interactions with Eritreans in Atlanta, and their expressions of belonging followed that of the other five groups. The only eligibility condition was that interviewees had lived in each region for at least one year. Refugees in my sample had arrived in the United States between 2002 and 2017, with the modal year being 2013. Out of the forty interviews, eighteen were done entirely through a translator. I interviewed twenty-four men and sixteen women, an unevenness that reflects my own position as a male researcher. This also impacted ethnographic observations, which, outside formal service contexts, primarily occurred with families or in male-dominated spaces.

Measuring Belonging

Guided by a broader tradition of examining the outcomes of immigration policies through attention to immigrants' political subjectivity (Abrego 2011; Brown 2011; Galli 2020; Jensen 2018; Menjívar and Lakhani 2016), the dependent variable in this study is refugee belonging and understanding of social membership. I was particularly interested in how patterned and nested interactions in specific institutional and organizational spaces led refugees to see themselves as particular types of political subjects and to make certain claims of institutions, organizations, and other refugee and non-refugee

individuals and groups. My interview guidelines therefore examined who refugees made claims to, their moral landscapes of responsibility, how they viewed themselves in relationship to other immigrant and non-immigrant groups, and their perceptions on citizenship, membership, and concepts of integration. I did not ask questions about refugees' experiences of displacement, as such information was not directly pertinent to this study, and I did not want interviewees to relive potentially traumatic experiences.

Pittsburgh: The Origins & Outcomes of a Diversity Regime

The contemporary period of refugee resettlement into Pittsburgh began in the early-1990s when agencies identified under-capacity apartment complexes in suburban municipalities as good locations for resettlement. These complexes were built in response to white suburbanization, but residents began to move out in the 1980s into single-family units. As occupancy rates declined, landlords looked to make their units Section-8 eligible, provoking contestation from local councils and resident associations. Instead, a relationship between landlords and resettlement agencies was brokered to rent empty units to refugees. Thousands of refugees from Bhutan, Congo, Myanmar, Sudan, and Somalia have come through these and other complexes over the past twenty years and have dispersed across the metro area. At first, refugees encountered a largely indifferent response. Over the past twenty years, however, local actors have developed policies to “welcome refugees.” Before delving into these policies and their outcomes, we need to first situate their emergence within a broader postindustrial transition agenda.

Refugee Resettlement in a Legacy City

An archetypal Rustbelt city, Pittsburgh entered the 1980s in economic crisis following three decades of deindustrialization and population loss. After a period of political infighting, Pittsburgh's development stakeholders came together to restructure the region's economy around its research universities and innovations in STEM fields. Despite successes, the region's transition was stunted by its difficulty attracting and retaining high-skilled labor. Largely bypassed by mid to late-twentieth century immigration, Pittsburgh has the lowest proportional immigrant population of the nation's forty largest metropolitan areas, with just 3.8% of the population foreign-born compared to a national average of 14.7%. It therefore lacks the immigrant networks that sustain migration as well as the symbolic resources and diverse consumerscapes that have come to typify notions of urban dynamism and cosmopolitanism – or what Watson (2019) has termed the “cultural wealth of cities.” Stakeholders concluded that an apparent “diversity deficit” was at the root of the region's problems.

A coalition of regional development stakeholders, led by foundations and city and county government, diagnosed these problems in the 1990s and initiated an agenda to attract and retain immigrants. Central to this agenda was encouraging area institutions and organizations to develop and adopt “welcoming initiatives.” In the early-2000s, for example, local foundations worked with charities to increase refugee intake numbers and funded refugee services to prevent their secondary migration out of the region. In 2005, Jewish Family and Children's Services received funding to create a Welcoming Center. This became Vibrant Pittsburgh in 2010, an organization tasked to work with “employers

and community organizations [to] ensure the growth and economic competitiveness of the Pittsburgh region [...] by attracting, retaining, and elevating a diversity of talent” (Vibrant Pittsburgh, n.d.). Similarly, in 2008 the Department of Human Services responded to budgetary restructuring and stakeholder advocacy by creating the Internationals and Immigrants Advisory Board, aimed at making public services more accessible.

Attracting and retaining immigrants has taken on an exigent quality across area institutions. Introducing the City of Pittsburgh’s Welcoming Pittsburgh Plan in 2015, for example, the Mayor of Pittsburgh stated,

To be competitive, we need to fill the gaps in our labor force and cultivate the next generation of innovators and entrepreneurs that will create jobs for new and native Pittsburghers alike. We’re going to need a diverse population to do it.

A similar coupling of welcoming and development accompanied the launch of the Community Blueprint Plan, a “comprehensive, county-wide, and community-led strategic plan to address the needs of immigrants and Latinos in our region” (World Affairs Council of Pittsburgh, 2016). At the launch event, the Executive of Allegheny County stated, “If all school-aged children in the county stayed, we would still be 8,000 workers short per year [...]. We need to be more welcoming.”

As we’ll see below, this agenda mobilizes refugees as stakeholders, participants, and symbolic resources in the region’s postindustrial transition, encouraging the formation of community infrastructure and creating a self-understanding among refugees that their social value hinges on their cultural identity.

Refugees as Stakeholders and Participants

A central feature of Pittsburgh's welcoming agenda has been to embed immigrant inclusion across area institutions and organizations. Forums and advisory councils have been created to coordinate and legitimize this work, as well as to bridge information and implementation gaps between government and NGO decision-makers in downtown offices and immigrant and refugee communities often in suburban municipalities. These forums have become important control points in allocating funds, coordinating regional programming, and developing consensus around the objectives of "welcoming" work. Refugees are considered important stakeholders in these forums and their participation is encouraged. In turn, participation increases the "visibility" (de Graauw et al. 2013) of refugee communities to resource-holders and decisions-makers, shaping the design and implementation of policies.

An example came up during an interview with the manager of the City of Pittsburgh's Welcoming Pittsburgh program. Discussing how they evaluate the program, the official emphasized community participation: "For me, it's all about participation. Am I reflecting the interests of our communities?" Looking at empty chairs around the room, she went on to list the different stakeholders present at bi-monthly meetings, noting the "foundation community," "business community," and "Somali community." After listing a dozen or so stakeholders, she lamented the fact that "We've tried so hard to get someone from the Congolese community, but each time I've reached out I never get feedback. It's a shame because we don't have their view here as a result." This

passage reflects the importance of community infrastructure for refugees' visibility and access to key institutional sites of resource allocation.

Another example comes from the Immigrant and International's Advisory Council (IIAC) at the county level. IIAC similarly brings together community "stakeholders" and "representatives" for monthly meetings held in its downtown office. Among other programs, IIAC distributes a million dollar budget to support immigrant incorporation. Refugees are constantly celebrated for their participation and role as community representatives. Announcing the appointment of a Bhutanese refugee to a co-chair position, for example, a county government official noted their "tireless work bringing the issues of the Bhutanese community to local government."

The emphasis on community participation leads government and powerful NGO officials to see refugee success as connected to their capacity to organize and represent their interests in institutional spaces. The director of an important county-wide agency reflected a common view that,

...what helps [refugees] do well here is their ability to organize and connect into [professional/institutional] networks. That's really the key: setting up infrastructure and connecting to all the resources on offer here.

To support refugees' participation, foundations and NGOs provide leadership training, support community institutionalization, offer office space for community leaders, and generally amplify these leaders, inviting them to speak at events locally and across the country as representatives of Pittsburgh's "welcoming" agenda.

Refugees as Symbols of Diversity

Beyond incorporating them as “community stakeholders,” local policies also amplify refugees’ cultural difference by presenting them as symbols of diversity. Given the broader context of anxiety around Pittsburgh’s “diversity deficit,” the growth of a refugee population in the region’s suburban municipalities is seen by key resource-holders through the lens of cultural diversity. As a senior figure at a regional foundation recalls,

We were having these conversations about how to change the fortunes of the city, how to bring in internationals. And bam! Suddenly we have refugees coming to our city from all over the world and building homes here. They were just a breath of fresh air and completely revitalized our communities.

Similarly, a prominent county employee reflected on the “very homogenous, very white, and very Catholic” neighborhood she grew up in and recalls that “when resettlement started here, and I was working for the county, I remember being genuinely excited about my community having this unique pocket of diversity. Refugees really just breathed vitality into our communities and institutions.”

Concepts of “diversity,” “vibrancy,” and “vitality” are frequently used to describe refugees and their relationship to what is seen as a homogenous, parochial, and problematic socio-cultural backdrop. Given this framing, refugees have become important symbolic resources in the region’s ongoing rebranding efforts, as well as within programming designed to engage local Pittsburghers around cultural diversity. These efforts are coordinated by organizations such as the Allegheny Regional Asset District, Welcoming Pittsburgh, Vibrant Pittsburgh, Global Pittsburgh, and Diverse

Pittsburgh. Interactions with such organizations and programs amplify refugees' cultural difference and encourage ethnicized expressions of identity.

The "Hello Neighbor!" program, for example, matches non-immigrant Pittsburgh families with refugee families in an effort to bolster cross-cultural understanding through experiences around food and eating together. Another example comes from a book project organized by a public school and library in a refugee-hosting municipality. Titled *Saving Stories*, the project worked with high school children from refugee backgrounds to collect folk stories and cultural practices from their parents and grandparents. Each book is bilingual, with narratives presented in heritage languages as well as English.¹⁶ According to a regional newspaper, refugees at a launch event "read their stories aloud and danced on stage, with smiles on their faces, as their native tales were shared with the world." Similarly, the *Building Bridges* project collected stories from refugees and immigrants over the course of two years and put on a number of exhibits across Allegheny County, framed as an "exploration of a quintessentially American story, highlighting how Pittsburgh is a city of immigrants – past, present, and future."

Running parallel to the above initiatives, senior officials across city and county government frequently support refugee community programming and incorporate them into the broader "welcoming" agenda. A good example comes from the Annual Civics Quiz

¹⁶This project differed markedly from a similar book project organized by a local high school and library in Atlanta. Titled *Green Card Voices*, this book recounts individual stories of immigration and adaptation following a common arc of struggle, resilience, and perseverance. Unlike the *Saving Stories* series, *Green Card Voices* is published in entirely in English.

put on by the Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh as part of the national “Welcoming Week” celebrations. Originally held in the high school of the main suburban municipality where refugees are resettled, the organizers were invited to run the event at City Hall as part of the City of Pittsburgh's annual Citizenship Day in 2018. I attended the second iteration of the quiz while it was still held in the suburban high school. Despite being a Saturday morning, the executive of Allegheny County, two other prominent county officials, and a number of journalists were present. The executive delivered a speech to the 300-odd Bhutanese refugees who attended, emphasizing the importance of immigrants to Allegheny County’s development prospects, highlighting refugees as important drivers of rejuvenation. Towards the end of the speech, he thanked the Bhutanese community “for all the work you have done,” heralding the event as a “wonderful example of your exceptional contribution to the vibrancy, diversity, and spirit of our county.”

Belonging and Membership in Pittsburgh

The confluence of refugee community building and celebrations of refugee contributions to cultural diversity in the examples above were common during my time in Pittsburgh. I found that they powerfully shape how refugees understand and articulate their social membership and belonging. One particularly telling example is the frequency with which refugees invoked cultural “vibrancy.” We saw this at the beginning of this chapter with a quote from Dharma, a Bhutanese refugee who responded to a racist incident with explicit use of the concept of “vibrancy.” I discussed this same incident with another Bhutanese refugee while driving around her neighborhood. During the

conversation, Puja pointed to the Nepali and Bhutanese storefronts dotted along the main thoroughfare, remarking that,

This [place] has changed a lot since refugees started coming. A lot of Bhutanese have bought houses, businesses have grown, so even that library when we first came to [this area] was very quiet. If you go to the library now there's lots of kids, a lot of noise, lots of color, it's not quiet anymore! [...] It was an older community, but now you can see that it's younger, more vibrant.

Josue, a Congolese refugee who arrived in Pittsburgh in the early-2010s, also invoked the concept of cultural vibrancy when discussing his involvement in an initiative to counter bullying in schools:

A lot of our kids were having problems in school with bullying because they didn't speak English well or they speak it with an accent [...] We started this cultural group, so we can do presentations at the school and then we can make them know our vibrant culture, even by singing, dancing, you know, we are just people like you, it's just that we came from a different country.

This response reflects the extent to which refugees in Pittsburgh see their social membership as tied to organized displays of cultural diversity.

Attached to prominent notions of cultural vibrancy and contribution, another common trope used to frame refugee incorporation was the notion of “finding a place for oneself.” This notion reflects a multicultural view of membership and citizenship, in which discrete communities construct their own infrastructure and make few claims on surrounding populations. Over lunch at a housewarming party, I asked a group of Myanmarese refugees what it was like when they first arrived in Pittsburgh and how their experiences had changed. Then, a middle-aged man who arrived in the city in the late-2000s, reflected the opinion of the group,

When we first came it was a little difficult. But, we've found a place here and people now say, 'This is the Chin people. They are from Burma. They are hardworking, very polite, good people. They belong here.' This is how it is right now. You find a place for yourself [...] It is our dream to make Pittsburgh the home for many of our people. We will not be like these people who always ask for things. Our ambition is that we would support the government of the United States abroad and here also in Pittsburgh.

This quote also indicates the persistent ways in which refugees in Pittsburgh cast their struggles and difficulties as problems of community organization.

This tendency is particularly notable for African refugees whose experiences are conditioned by the racial structure of the city – commonly dubbed the “Mississippi of the North” by Black American residents. Indeed, many African refugees are integrated into peri-urban spaces of Black American poverty and segregation. Residents and visitors at one public housing complex where African refugees live are required to show their ID to enter and exit. Reflecting on this, a young Somali refugee noted “It was like the camps! I thought we left that behind us.” Given their location within these spaces, African refugees are subject to enhanced surveillance and social control leading to arrests, entanglements with child welfare services, and exclusion from school. These issues were a constant theme of discussion with African refugees during my fieldwork.

Brown's work (2011) revealed that Liberian refugees responded to similar contexts by leveraging their refugee status to make claims on public agencies and differentiate themselves from Black Americans. In discussing their situation in Pittsburgh, however, African refugees instead drew on concepts of culture and community. During an interview with a Congolese couple, for example, conversation turned to their recent move to a public housing complex and their concern for their

children. Paul noted that the “Congolese do not feel quite at home here.” He went on to explain that “The main problem we face is a group for us [...]. We don’t have that yet. Maybe it is in the mind, but we haven’t practiced it yet.” Winny concurred with her husband’s assessment, emphasizing the importance of community infrastructure for accessing employment and resources, adding, “But you see the others, the Bhutanese, the Somalis, they have organizations. I don’t know why Congolese have this difficulty, but like [Paul] says it is in our minds.” Refugees frequently drew such comparisons to make sense of their situation.

Somali refugees drew similar connections between community infrastructure, belonging, and security. One common point of discussion concerned a former leader whom many saw as failing to represent and protect the community. Though he had built a community organization and set up an annual Somali cultural event, the leader lost his standing in the community following a series of arrests of young Somali men. Reflecting common sentiments, Malik noted, “Nobody trusts him anymore. He doesn’t protect the community.” Suleyman, a young leader in a newly-formed community group provided further insight into the role of community organization [emphasis added]: “Before, many of us have been struggling. There’s been lots of problems with the police and with child services. But now *people are beginning to see us here*. After we started this new organization, everything that used be [negative] is changing.” The coupling of “being seen” with strong ethnic community infrastructure powerfully reflects the extent to which refugees in Pittsburgh come to see their security, membership, and belonging as attached to ethnic identification and community building.

Atlanta: The Origins and Outcomes of a Humanitarian Regime

The recent history of refugee resettlement in Metro Atlanta reflects that of Pittsburgh. Refugees began arriving in the late-1980s and early-1990s into suburban municipalities that had large, under-capacity apartment complexes. These municipalities had received few immigrants prior to the arrival of refugees, such that they quickly became visible in public spaces and institutions. Above, we saw that refugees arriving in Pittsburgh at roughly the same time, under similar conditions, and through the same resettlement system came to articulate their sense of belonging through ethnic identity and membership in ethnic groups. In sharp contrast, refugees in Atlanta do not see the ethnic group as a legitimate platform for claims to belonging, instead drawing on their legal status as refugees. To explain this outcome, the following sections draw attention to the different actors that mediate refugees' access to symbolic and material resources in Atlanta. As we will see, refugees arriving in Metro Atlanta encounter a large private charity sector dominated by White Evangelical Christians. This sector demarcates resettled refugees as deserving recipients of care and channels them into the labor market as flexible but legal workers. Refugees are therefore incorporated on the basis of their distinct humanitarian and legal status.

Refugees as Objects of Humanitarian Care

During the 1990s, members of local churches began to notice the growing presence of refugees and organized English classes, food and clothing donations, and volunteer support for families. Over the following two decades, these informal initiatives scaled up into a large Christian charity sector serving thousands of refugees a year. To

indicate the scale of this sector, Send Relief, the service wing of the North American Missions Board, recently invested fifteen million dollars in a refugee service center that includes a business incubator, community meeting space, and health clinic. Although Christian charities play the predominant role, a number of the region's public health institutions and medical schools are also involved in refugee incorporation. Medical students from Emory University, for example, frequently offer free screenings and checkups at refugee events. Similarly, a collaboration of area medical schools, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (headquartered locally), and health advocates founded a Community Health Clinic in 2013 that serves under- and uninsured refugees.

A distinctive feature of the Atlanta-based charity sector is that it demarcates resettled refugees as particularly deserving objects of care. Workers and volunteers frequently reference refugees' formal legal and humanitarian status to frame their deservedness. This status is seen to indicate an ideal-typical refugee experience characterized by suffering, hardship, and vulnerability. A prominent refugee-focused organization, for example, sends out regular emails to supporters with multi-part stories from their refugee employees, covering their displacement, exile, and resettlement. The walls of organizations are often lined with pictures of refugees accompanied by quotations reflecting their perseverance through personal hardship, and refugees are frequently invited to narrate their stories of exile and resettlement at events like poetry slams and art exhibitions. In an overall environment characterized by conservative and racialized views on poverty and welfare, these humanitarian representations remove

understandings of poverty as personal failure and instead frame refugees as deserving of assistance.

This point is made clear through comparisons charity workers make between refugees and the low-income Black Americans with whom refugees live, work, and go to school. Charity workers often contend that Black Americans have developed a “poverty identity” that traps them in marginal positions and prevents them from capitalizing on opportunities and aid. For example, the directors of three separate refugee-serving NGOs differentiated between refugees and Black Americans by connecting the notion of “poverty identity” to Seligman’s Learned Helplessness Theory. They posited that multigenerational experiences of oppression and marginalization have led Black Americans to develop a sense of learned helplessness and a notion of themselves as victims. Refugees are also seen to have had this mindset due to assumption that they have come from backgrounds of exclusion and marginalization in their home countries. Displacement, exile, and resettlement, however, interrupt this poverty identity because refugees have to be entrepreneurial and resilient to survive. A prominent individual involved in the Christian charity sector put it like this,

It’s easier to help refugees and internationals than it is to help African Americans who have been through generations of cyclical problems that are so much more complex than ‘here is your first job.’ It’s just as much need, but just ... we find that African Americans have a low socioeconomic narrative, this kind of poverty identity. It’s just a whole different ballgame, and it’s harder.

Such modes of differentiating deserving and desirable recipients of care impact how and to whom scarce charitable resources are distributed.

The salience of refugee status is further buttressed by how the charity sector shapes access to resources. Unlike in Pittsburgh, where community organizations play an important role, refugees in Atlanta access resources through individual relationships with charities and workers/volunteers. This stems from the fact that charities see American volunteers as co-beneficiaries of their work, and many volunteers expressly desire the opportunity to build personal relationships with refugees. Christian charities in particular facilitate these relationships due to their funding structure, but also as part of a collective orientation toward Christian service and evangelism. Thus, figureheads emphasize the number of volunteers served by the agency or reference volunteer experiences when outlining measures of organizational success.

This dimension of the charity sector is important because it means that refugees access resources by leveraging their individual legal and humanitarian status. It also means that refugees often have long-term interactions with generally middle-class White Americans. For example, after discussing his sense of calling to work with refugees, a program manager at a large Christian charity and resettlement agency went on to discuss how this impacts his work: “We form far longer connections than your average resettlement officer or secular worker. This is how I spend my evenings. This is how I spend my weekends.” Christians frame this interest in relationship forming through the language of “walking alongside” refugees. I asked a prominent missionary what this term means,

Personal journeys are central because our faith sees personal transformations as connected to our relationship with God who lives in us. So, with refugees, we want to

walk with them, to follow them, we want to hold their hand for much longer than say your regular resettlement agency.

Whereas in Pittsburgh locals and refugees are brought together for cultural exchange and communication, Atlanta's charity sector brings refugees and native-born Americans¹⁷ together in relationships of service. Americans are meant to "help" refugees. Because of this, agencies provide regular trainings for volunteers to increase their ability to "be of service."

Refugees as Ideal Workers

The second main way in which Atlanta's charity sector amplifies refugees' legal status is through their managed incorporation into the labor market. Economic self-sufficiency is a central outcome of concern for refugee-serving agencies across the country. Employment is particularly important in Georgia for access to health insurance, as the state has some of the highest uninsured rates in the country and declined to expand Medicare under the Affordable Care Act. Much like in Pittsburgh, refugees were originally channeled into sectors such as hospitality, retail, and commercial cleaning. Over the past fifteen years, however, local organizations have come to frame refugees as a replacement workforce for undocumented immigrants. This strategy began in the early-2010s as the region's poultry industry was reeling from Bush-era workplace raids, with some factories losing over seventy percent of their workforce. Refugee-serving agencies established employment pipelines with the poultry industry and have since channeled thousands of refugees into this sector.

¹⁷ Many in fact move to Atlanta in order to train as missionaries and work with refugees.

Today, refugees are forwarded as a replacement workforce for undocumented immigrants across the region's labor market. As the director of one agency put it, "I know it's messed up, but we can basically go to any entry-level employer in the area and say, 'you have a problem with Latinos? Take refugees. They have status, they work hard, and they'll stick around.'" Similarly, the promotional material of a Christian refugee-serving payroll agency addresses the question "Why Hire Refugees?" and provides four reasons: their legal status; their high levels of motivation to provide for their family; their dependability and low turnover rates; and their "growth mindset," characterized by an eagerness to learn new skills. The value of refugees as ideal workers has only increased over the past decade given the close collaboration of Georgia's state government and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). In 2009, the state was one of the first in the country to pass a ban against so-called sanctuary cities, which threatens to deny such cities state funds.

This form of labor market incorporation means that refugees often share workplaces and come to see their position in the labor market as tied to their legal status. In the meatpacking industry, for example, refugees are picked up together at apartment complexes and driven by bus to work. They spend upward of three hours, six days a week commuting, making these buses an important space where refugees learn about their status and forge relationships. As a volunteer, I spent numerous days accompanying refugees on agency buses for *en masse* interviews. Beyond the primary labor market, a number of largely Christian-run companies and social enterprises in the area hire refugees specifically, for everything from solar panel installation to commercial cleaning.

Belonging and Membership in Atlanta

In Pittsburgh resettled refugees draw on concepts of culture and community to articulate and make claims for belonging. In sharp contrast, refugees in Atlanta cast the ethnic group as a delegitimized platform for belonging. A revealing example comes from a conversation with Bhutanese refugees whose extended family lives in Pittsburgh. I asked what had changed most since coming to the US. The family agreed that it was holding worship ceremonies (*puja*) indoors: “In Nepal, we were all together and there would be a huge festival. Now, we always do *puja* in our homes and maybe we’ll drive around from family to family, but we’re not together. In the apartments [where they were resettled when they first arrived in Atlanta], it was more like the camps.” Fuli, the mother of the family, said that “Pittsburgh and Ohio are more like the apartments” because Bhutanese refugees are able to come together for festivals. I asked if they missed that sense of community in Atlanta: “It’s okay to visit [places like Pittsburgh] sometimes,” Fuli said, “but you can’t be always in the community and just doing *puja* all the time. This isn’t the way to be here.”

Hasifa, a Sudanese woman in her thirties, similarly described local apartment complexes as a space of community akin to the refugee camp where she was raised. She went on to say, however, that “you can’t always live with a camp mindset of being together all the time, of being in the community.” Referencing home ownership, education, and work, she concluded that “if you want to make it here, you have to work hard and take advantage of this opportunity we’ve received as refugees.” Hasifa’s comments stand in sharp contrast to refugees in Pittsburgh, who repeatedly emphasize

membership to the ethnic community as a platform for belonging and reference markers such as homeownership as evidence of their community's contribution to the region.

Rather than concepts of community and culture, refugees emphasize their legal status in articulating their membership and belonging. This tendency is linked to interactions in the charity sector. Senait, for example, an Eritrean refugee who came in the mid-2000s, remarked that,

It's good here in many ways because people know we're refugees and so they help us. It used to be very dangerous just outside when I first [arrived], but since more refugees have come the government have come and have made it much safer for our kids.

In this quote, Senait posits that the growth of a refugee population has made the area safer because the government has a responsibility to refugees and has therefore provided additional resources. Not uncommonly, Senait did not distinguish the charity sector from the government. Discussing the municipality where most refugees and charities are concentrated, Senait went on to discuss how the refugee status differentiated her from Black Americans: "When they see us, a lot of people outside think that we're Black Americans. But here, they know that we're refugees." In drawing this distinction, Senait bounds her recognition as a refugee to a particular place, reflecting the way in which the institutional and cultural logics of particular contexts informs refugees' understanding of belonging. Moreover, Senait draws on her legal status to practice racial distancing (Brown 2011).

Like Senait, Obed, a male Congolese refugee, understood his formal refugee status as indicating certain entitlements, even if they were not always met:

It was hard when I first came. We were working in the chicken factory. My head and back were hurting every day. This is not how it should be for refugees. We did not ask to be in this situation and come to America. I would prefer to be home [in Congo]. I tell my sister [who is still in exile], do not come here, stay there. Go home, make Congo a better place. But I am here, and so I tell them that you should take care of us. It's somewhat okay now because there are people from the church who help refugees. They paid for my kid's school, they helped me find work. They do this because we are refugees.

Obed's emphasis on his refugee status to frame his position locally differs sharply from refugees in Pittsburgh, who emphasize concepts of culture and community. Interestingly, the charity sector's use of humanitarian imagery to demarcate resettled refugees also brightens legal distinctions for other immigrant groups. Over lunch with a group of undocumented Haitians, for example, discussion turned to their difficulty finding work. I told them that I volunteered at an employment agency and they should come and see whether there's any information available for them. They laughed, and one person said, "Man, that place is a white people place for refugees. That's not for us. We're not refugees. We don't get that kind of thing."

The managed incorporation of refugees into the labor market as legal and flexible immigrant labor further amplifies these complex positionings. Upon seeing the card of an ICE officer in the car of Hartaj, a Bhutanese refugee who arrived in the early-2010s, I asked him why he had it. He said that an officer had given it to him in the parking lot outside his place of work and that he'd used it to resolve a workplace conflict with his manager. He was annoyed that his Latino colleagues spoke Spanish at work and would not interact with English-speaking customers. The responsibility therefore fell on him, and he grew frustrated because he enjoyed back-of-house work. Angry, he went to his manager and brandished the card, threatening to call the ICE officer, "We are not Spanish.

We have rights because we are refugees. You cannot treat us like this. So, I told [my boss] that I will call this person if he keeps giving me problems.” While the prevalence of this practice is unclear, I heard six separate stories of refugees using their legal status in a similar way.

Lastly, refugees interact with, negotiate, and at times contest the humanitarian representations of them emanating from the charity sector. Through this, they learn how to mobilize and make claims on the basis of their legal and humanitarian status. Thiha, a Burmese man resettled in the early-2010s, discussed his time in the apartment complexes where Christians would go door-to-door asking if refugees’ needed help or services. Putting on a mock pleading tone and broken English, Thiha repeated his usual reply, “Oh, I am refugee, help please with rent. I need food.” To the laughter of his family, Thiha recalls that “They would always help you. Then, ‘Oh, okay, you want me to come to your church? I will come for five years if you pay my rent for five months.’ This is how we got used to being here.” Thiha’s comments reveal the extent to which he recognizes the terms of his access to resources and also his understanding of how certain presentations of refugee vulnerability can elicit resources.

At the same time, a younger generation of refugees raised in the area were beginning to contest the humanitarian framing of refugees. For example, I discussed a series of shootings in the Somali community with a young woman. She noted that young men were increasingly getting into these problems and that something had to be done. She expressed frustration with “white folks” whose activity in the area she saw as self-

serving and who didn't understand the problems faced by community members, instead viewing them as "victims and vulnerable refugees." She contended, "I'm always thinking now that we refugees need to work together. We can't always be these needy refugees. We need to come together and organize ourselves. Take care of ourselves." A young Sudanese woman, Atifa, echoed these sentiments when discussing her concern about the growth of the Christian charity sector,

These Christians are coming here and trying to convert us. We know this. You see their materials, 'come and help poor needy refugees.' Okay, they're helping, but this isn't honest help. So for me, I'm trying to organize refugees and to say to the local government and to others, we have rights, we need to be protected from these guys. Refugees are not always strong enough. A lot of us didn't ask to come here. But we're here now and we need to be protected [...]. This place is not safe for us anymore.

Interestingly, even as Atifa opposes the humanitarian framing of refugees, she draws on refugees' legal status to assert demands on local government and other actors to protect refugees. In other words, she mobilizes a notion of the refugee as a rights-bearing subject to elicit a sense of responsibility from state actors in the region. This differs from refugees in Pittsburgh, who rarely use a language of rights and entitlements, and instead rely on community infrastructure and leaders.

Discussion and Conclusion

The previous two sections have shown that meso-level factors play a critical role in shaping refugee incorporation experiences in Pittsburgh and Atlanta. This finding revises the dominant account in sociology that sees resettled refugees as having a relatively standardized incorporation experience due to their legal status and managed incorporation through a federal resettlement bureaucracy (Bloemraad 2006; Brown 2011;

Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Portes and Zhou 1993). Instead, we've seen that the urban context shapes the implementation and experience of resettlement policy, therefore leading to divergent articulations of refugee belonging. To theorize these policies and their impact on refugees, this chapter advances the concept of "urban incorporation regimes" to understand how refugees are socially produced at local scales through nested institutional and cultural logics.

Drawing on the empirical arguments outlined in the previous two sections, this chapter identifies two incorporation regimes: a diversity regime and a humanitarian regime. The diversity regime in Pittsburgh encourages refugees to be stakeholders, participants, and symbolic resources in a postindustrial redevelopment agenda driven by powerful foundations and city and county government. This regime amplifies refugees' cultural difference and encourages the formation of ethnicized refugee communities. In Atlanta, on the other hand, we find a humanitarian regime that demarcates refugees as deserving objects of humanitarian care and as ideal workers in an economy hungry for flexible but legal immigrant labor. This regime amplifies refugees' legal status, and diminishes the structural importance of community infrastructure in refugees' lives. As the previous sections showed, refugees learn about their social valuation as they interact with these regimes, shaping how they come to articulate and make claims for belonging and membership.

While this chapter has drawn on data from Pittsburgh and Atlanta, preliminary evidence suggest that diversity- and humanitarian-based incorporation regimes exist in

other regions of the United States and beyond. If this concept proves helpful, future work could specify the conditions that give rise to particular incorporation regimes, as well as their relationship to national regimes. Relatedly, this chapter has left open the question of whether the outcomes of resettlement policy have always been shaped by urban context or whether the findings of this chapter reflect a change. This question requires further research. It is notable, however, that touchstone texts on resettlement stem from analyses of Cold War-era programs (Bloemraad 2006; Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Portes and Zhou 1993) when refugees had geopolitical significance and received greater financial support from the federal government.

In closing, this chapter reframes the contemporary debate in refugee scholarship about whether the refugee status leads to positive incorporation outcomes or not. Instead, the saliency of refugees' legal status is produced through the institutional and cultural logics of incorporation regimes. The symbolic terms of these regimes are always up for contestation, requiring empirical attention to their articulation and transformation. In forwarding this argument, this chapter also advances a nascent body of scholarship examining how place shapes outcomes of legal entry and status (Andrews 2018; García 2019; Marrow 2011). Thus far, this literature has focused exclusively on the experiences of undocumented immigrants, suggesting that it is a lack of legal status that makes urban context important. Indeed, the capacity of local contexts to impact subjectivity is seen to emerge from migrants' fear of apprehension and detection by the state. In finding that place-based factors impact the outcomes of resettlement, this chapter advances this nascent literature while also calling into question the implicit comparison between the

experiences of resettled refugees and the undocumented. When, how, and why immigrants' legal identity becomes socially meaningful and significant is an empirical question worthy of further investigation.

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

Summary

Resettlement is one of the UNHCR’s three “durable solutions” to refugee displacement and involves relocating refugees from countries of asylum to a “safe-third country” which offers permanent residency. Given the growing refugee population, the increasingly protracted character of exile, and dwindling access to effective asylum across the globe, resettlement offers one of the only legal, safe, and viable routes out of long-term exile for many of today’s refugees. This dissertation has set out to explain how resettlement policy works in practice and what outcomes it has for refugees and their access to scarce humanitarian resources. Specifically, I have asked: how are refugees selected for resettlement? How are refugees processed abroad? And how are refugees received and incorporated once they arrive in their new homes? More broadly, this dissertation has sought to understand refugees’ experiences of and responses to resettlement policy at sites of selection, processing, and reception.

To answer these questions and examine processes and outcomes of resettlement policy, I conducted a multi-sited, mixed-methods study of the United States’ resettlement program. The US has admitted over two-thirds of all refugees resettled globally since it formalized its federal resettlement system in the 1980 Refugee Act. During this time, the US has also been the largest funder of the UNHCR and the agency’s resettlement activities. In general, the US has been a global leader in establishing priorities, building global capacity, and providing best practices for other resettlement countries (Martin and

Ferris 2017). As a result, the US offers a particularly strong case to examine the processes and outcomes of resettlement policy. From the perspective of refugees, studying the US program is consequential, as it accounts for the sizable majority of spaces, making questions of selection, processing, and reception particularly important.

Methods used in this study include statistical analysis of previously unreleased State Department data; content analysis of government and I/NGO documents and reports; 150 interviews with policymakers, practitioners, and refugees; and a total of nineteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Kampala, Uganda, a global hub for the processing of Congolese refugees; and, Pittsburgh and Atlanta, two US cities that have received significant numbers of refugees over the past several decades but have differed in their response. Data was collected between September 2016 and July 2019, a period of instability in the US resettlement program given the nativist, anti-refugee policies of the Trump Administration. I began qualitative fieldwork in September 2016 with three months of preliminary research in Pittsburgh and Atlanta, followed by four months in Uganda, and then a further five and four months in Pittsburgh and Atlanta respectively. Expert interviews were conducted across this period, with a significant number done over Skype. Following the abductive approach, I analyzed data simultaneously with fieldwork and also during research breaks, using initial analyses to guide subsequent investigations.

The empirical chapters in this dissertation have shown that practices of selection, processing, and reception produce and are subsequently guided by constructions of refugees as “ideal beneficiaries.” These constructions shape the distribution of and access

to scarce humanitarian resources, therefore impacting refugee experiences across the transnational chain of resettlement. Critically, however, I have argued that these constructions emerge from social processes embedded at meso-level scales. This finding challenges the existing emphasis in refugee scholarship on national-level policies and discourses, which frames resettlement as a relatively straightforward transformation of “refugees” into “national citizens.” This framing leads to analyses of how well resettlement policies achieve their stated goals. Instead, the constructions of refugees produced at meso-level scales do not fit neatly into the refugee/national citizen binary that animates existing scholarship on refugees, therefore drawing our attention to the diverse experiences and subject positions associated with the resettlement system. Each chapter has developed this argument through an analysis of a puzzle or problematic that emerged through research on selection, processing, and reception.

Chapter 2 argued that refugees are selected for resettlement through constructions of “clean cases.” These are cases that can be identified, referred, and processed abroad to meet demands for predictable and stable admissions to the United States on limited budgets and under complex institutional constraints. Constructing clean cases involves multilateral and nested negotiations between key state and nonstate processing stakeholders, and investments in infrastructures to ensure predictable and stable admissions from selected populations. This system of selection has three important implications. First, groups that pose complex political and operational barriers are less likely to be resettled regardless of “need.” Second, the emphasis on infrastructures implants a path-dependency in resettlement, meaning that refugees from certain

populations or living in certain countries of asylum receive a disproportionate number of scarce resettlement spaces. And third, constructing clean cases takes time, meaning that resettlement is poorly responsive to imminent protection needs. Crucially, however, Chapter 2 showed that these departures from humanitarian ideals of “distributional equality” and “rescue” stem from the transnational social process of constructing clean cases rather than the pre-existent interests of the US state or values of humanitarian actors. Demonstrating the value of this argument, the final part of this chapter explained the imbalance in resettlement spaces between Congolese and Sudanese refugees.

Drawing on fieldwork in Kampala, Uganda, Chapter 3 turned to refugee processing. The chapter identified a central tension in refugee processing between the high value attached to resettlement by refugees and the reality of scarce spaces and long processing times. In response, local practitioners have crafted policies that effectively force refugees to wait and accept the temporal rhythms of processing. In expanding the analytic scope from those refugees resettled to those waiting or left behind, this chapter troubles official framings of resettlement as “solution.” Instead, Chapter 3 showed that the administration of resettlement processing involves coercion and compounds refugee experiences of traumatic waiting and liminality. Moreover, this chapter showed that refugees come to see the African, and largely Ugandan, frontline staff employed to do processing work – rather than resettlement countries – as their primary barriers to resettlement. This generates animosity between refugees and “local” staff, exacerbating refugees’ feelings of exclusion and marginality within Uganda. The final part of this chapter examined a highly ambivalent discourse around resettlement at the refugee

community level and traced two emergent projects that seek to turn refugees away from resettlement and toward locally-oriented goals and objectives.

Finally, Chapter 4 argued that the outcomes of federal resettlement policies are mediated and refracted through urban context. Drawing on fieldwork in Pittsburgh and Atlanta, I showed that local actors have essentially rescaled federal resettlement policy. Critically, however, I found that the specific actors that respond to refugees differ in each context, as does how these actors “see” refugees and the ideal outcomes of their resettlement. Chapter 4 forwarded the framework of “urban incorporation regimes” to conceptualize the institutional and cultural logics of incorporation that refugees confront in each city, showing how each regime amplifies different aspects of refugees’ identity as socially valuable. I proceeded to show that refugees internalize these social valuations as they interact with and negotiate incorporation regimes, leading to place-based differences in refugee identification and articulations of belonging. In conclusion, this chapter demonstrated that the social salience of refugee status is variable across subnational context, undermining the strong coupling of refugees and the nation-state in existing literature. Furthermore, this chapter suggested that urban incorporation regimes mediate national projects of extracting symbolic and economic value from refugees and calls for greater attention to social processes of refugee construction at this level of analysis.

Contributions

Taken together, these chapters offer three specific contributions to extant scholarship. First and foremost, the arguments made in this dissertation advance our

understanding of refugee resettlement. As we've seen, the system of selecting refugees for resettlement leads to distributional imbalances and is poorly responsive to imminent protection needs. The social dynamics of processing involve coercion and compound refugees' experiences of traumatic waiting and liminality, troubling notions of resettlement as a "solution." Finally, outcomes of refugee reception are mediated through urban incorporation regimes, leading to subnational variation in the social salience of the refugee status and place-based modes of refugee identification. Critically, however, I've shown that these outcomes are produced through social dynamics embedded at meso-level scales: whether the transnational system of refugee selection; local refugee offices; or the urban context of reception. The emphasis on meso-level dynamics challenges the expectations of existing research that tend to see divergences from official state and humanitarian immigration policies as resulting from the constraining impact of national interests and immigration politics or from the individual characteristics of refugees.

Secondly, the importance of meso-level social dynamics to the arguments made above complicate dominant framings of refugees in extant literature. Indeed, whether in its realist or constructivist register, the Refugee Studies paradigm generally casts refugees as a homogenous political category defined by their exclusion from nation-states.

Proceeding from this conceptualization of the refugee, researchers examine whether and how humanitarian actors and states reintegrate refugees into national citizenship regimes or further compound their exclusion. This dissertation instead shows that refugees are produced through social processes embedded at meso-level scales, and that these constructions shape the distribution of resources and outcomes of refugee policies. This

finding adds weight to a broader call to revise the dominant view of refugees and family migrants in extant immigration politics literature (Bonjour 2011; Watson 2018), which suggests that families and refugees are constructed, confronted, and regulated as relatively homogenous categories within national immigration regimes (e.g., Hollifield et al. 2014; Joppke 1998).

Similarly, each chapter suggests that constructions of refugees vary not just across stages of resettlement (selection, processing, reception), but also within each stage at particular sites of implementation. For example, Chapter 2 suggests that the profile of “clean cases” will be different across contexts, given the specific constellation of interests and values guiding any one program. Similarly, Chapter 3 suggested that forms of processing will be different across contexts, therefore leading to place-specific refugee experiences. And finally, Chapter 4 showed that urban incorporation regimes valorize different aspects of refugees’ identity, a finding that reframes dichotomized debates about whether the refugee status leads to positive or negative integration outcomes.

Third and finally, the above set of arguments have broader relevance for studies of immigration policies. Much of this work has remained stubbornly state-centric, focusing on national-level dynamics and discourses (FitzGerald and Cook-Martin 2014; Ngai 2014). When those charged with implementing policies are in the picture, they are often reduced to local instantiations of national policies and are therefore rendered peripheral to accounts of policies and their outcomes. In the few studies that do look more closely into the inner-workings of immigration bureaucracies, scholars often deploy

frameworks such as street-level bureaucratic theory (Darrow 2015b, 2015a; Fee 2019; Lipsky 1980; Marrow 2009), which emphasize how specific offices or practitioners resolve tensions between institutional constraints and professional norms. This dissertation instead suggests that scholarship on immigration bureaucracies would benefit from taking a more deeply sociological and relational approach, shifting focus from institutional and normative tensions to the social spaces within which policies are implemented, experienced, and negotiated. Indeed, as we've seen, spaces such as the transnational field of refugee selection, local contexts of processing offices, or urban contexts of reception generate and pattern certain relationships, forms of action, norms, and values that shape outcomes of resettlement.

Limitations & Future Research

The primary limitation of this study is its focus on the United States' program. While justified on the basis of the US's outsized role in global resettlement, focusing on a single case raises questions about generalizability. For example, to what extent does the search for "clean cases" shape how Australia or Canada selects refugees? Or similarly, does urban context affect the implementation of national resettlement policies in countries that don't have federalized systems (like the UK) or that provide stronger financial supports from the national level (such as Canada)? Such questions need to be examined in greater depth through comparative research. At the same time, the focus on a single national program has revealed significant intra-national differences shaping outcomes of resettlement policy. Such differences can be missed in studies that compare across countries. The findings of Chapter 4, for example, reveal the risk of inferring

national differences from qualitative research in single sites (e.g. de Graauw and Vermeulen 2016). As we saw, refugees confront substantively different institutional and cultural logics of reception in Atlanta and Pittsburgh, which would be missed and potentially misattributed to “national” logics if just Atlanta or Pittsburgh were included in a cross-national comparative study.

A connected problem of the focus on the US program is that this study necessarily misses relational and transnational dynamics that might shape comparative differences in the processes and outcomes of refugee resettlement. Indeed, such processes have been gestured to at numerous points in this dissertation. For example, in Chapter 2 we heard from a US State Department official who favorably compared the US program to Canada’s and those of European countries, given that the US doesn’t have integration criteria on selection. Such modes of position-taking within a global field of resettlement may impact outcomes and help explain cross-national differences. Similarly, during my time in Atlanta, I met a delegation from the City of Dresden, Germany, which was engaged in a transatlantic municipal exchange program created by two NGOs to foster best practices with regard to incorporating refugees. This observation raises questions about how municipal transnationalism and the role of transnationally organized NGOs might be shaping urban responses to refugees. Future work should therefore examine such relational and transnational processes, both in order to extend the findings of this dissertation but also to specify mechanisms driving policy outcomes.

Second, this study has raised but not been able to answer the question of how moving through each stage of resettlement impacts refugees' experiences and subjectivity. Indeed, as we've seen, refugees encounter different social processes of construction at each stage of resettlement. Refugees therefore have to learn to navigate these different representational systems, not least in order to gain access to otherwise scarce material, humanitarian, and symbolic resources. Given the design of this study, however, I was not able to examine such multi-sited and potentially conflictual processes of subject formation or their outcomes for refugees. Instead, this study has intentionally focused on how resettlement policy is implemented at specific sites, rather than on tracing the experiences of specific groups – as is the norm in immigration and refugee research. Future work might explore how refugees' movement across different institutional and social spaces shapes their experiences, subjectivities, resources, and strategies (c.f. Erel 2010; Kim 2018). Preliminary inference suggests that some refugees develop a specific habitus through movement within the transnational field of resettlement that allows them to effectively adjudicate expectations within specific institutional and social settings and subsequently modify subjective performances.

A final limitation of this study is that I have focused on forms of resettlement organized through the UNHCR system. The managed relocation of displaced people has a far longer and more diverse history, however. Future work might therefore examine dynamics of refugee resettlement managed and organized under different institutional and normative systems. Such research would answer the emergent call to look beyond UNHCR-defined refugee contexts in order to gain deeper understanding of the social

dynamics and outcomes of displacement, but also of the specificities of the international refugee regime and its positioning of refugees (Cole 2021).

With the election of Joe Biden as US President, refugee resettlement looks set to reemerge as a core feature of the global refugee regime. Biden's commitment to increase annual US admissions to 125,000 over the course of his presidency promises to increase global resettlement capacity and provide renewed legitimacy to this beleaguered program. The sum result is that more refugees will gain access to this vital lifeline, thus ending years of indefinite legal exclusion and liminality. Justifiably, then, refugee advocates across the globe have applauded and praised Biden's commitments, hoping that they will provide the political legitimacy and financial resources to achieve the ambitious goals laid out in the Global Compact on Refugees. Notwithstanding the welcome shift in support for the resettlement program, the findings of this dissertation also call for critical reflection. Shifting attention from official discourse and the emphasis on simply how many refugees are resettled, we've seen that the implementation of resettlement policy patterns social and resource inequalities, therefore pointing to a far more ambivalent and hesitant endorsement of refugee resettlement.

First and foremost, we've seen that resettlement is marked by substantial distributional imbalances and is poorly responsive to imminent protection across the global refugee population. These departures from humanitarian ideals stem from the transnational system of selecting refugees that concentrates spaces and access around

“clean cases.” Second, attention to resettlement processing aboard shows that resettlement programs generate coercive and antagonistic relationships between and among refugees and service providers, compounding experiences of traumatic waiting and liminality, and exacerbating feelings of exclusion for the vast majority of refugees left behind in countries of asylum. Finally, we’ve seen that refugees encounter cultural and institutional logics of incorporation at sites of reception that interpolate them into idealized representations of refugees. In other words, this dissertation has shown that refugees encounter a variety of representational regimes that structure their subjective experiences and pattern their access to scarce resources. This dissertation therefore advocates for greater critical engagement with the resettlement program and its claims to provide refuge for those in exile across the globe.

APPENDIX 1

List of Interviewees			
Number	Level / Sector	Date of Interview	Platform
1	Non-Governmental	May 2019	Phone
2	US Government (retired)	May 2019	Phone
3	UN – Country Office	August 2017	Phone
4	US Government (retired)	June 2019	Skype
5	UN – Field Worker	August 2017	In-person
6	US VolAg (retired)	June 2019	Skype
7	US Government	April 2019	Phone
8	US Government (retired)	June 2019	Phone
9	US Government, VolAg, UN (current)	May 2019	Phone
10	Non-Governmental	January 2018	Skype
11	Non-Governmental	September 2018	In-person
12	US Government	October 2018	In-Person
13	VolAg (retired)	May 2019	Phone
14	US Government, UN (current)	May 2019	Phone
15	US Government, Non- Governmental (current)	April 2018	In-person
16	US Government	April 2019	Phone
17	UN – Country Office	August 2017	Phone
18	US Government (retired)	April 2019	Skype
19	UN Field (retired)	August 2016	Phone
20	VolAg	March 2018	In-person
21	UNHCR Field Staff	April 2018	Skype

APPENDIX 2

Variable	Description	Source
Refugees	UNHCR recognized refugees by country of asylum/residence	UNHCR Population Statistics.
Resettled	US resettlement figures from countries of asylum.	Special Request from US State Department
Protracted	Indicates whether a given refugee situation is considered 'protracted.' According to the UNHCR: "The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a protracted refugee situation as one in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for five or more years in a given asylum country."	Author Created
Free	Level of political and civil freedom.	Freedom House
SFI	Level of state fragility	State Fragility Index
War	Aggregate count for the magnitude of all sorts of wars on a given territory.	Major Episodes of Political Violence
ConRat	Indicates whether the state has ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol.	Refworld
Trade	Total import and export values (\$) with US	US Census: https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/index.html
Polity2	Levels of autocracy and democracy.	
Terror	Total number of terrorist attack in that country each year.	Global Terrorism Database

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CURRICULUM VITAE

