



PENN: CURRENT RESEARCH ON SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

A Case for Strengthening Evidence-Based Understanding of Refugee Integration

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 2015 surge in refugees and migrants entering Europe focused attention on the plight of refugees, many destination countries have, by choice or necessity, turned their attention to urgent global policy questions presented by forced displacement.¹ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has estimated that as of June 2017, 65.6 million people are living in a state of displacement, of whom 22.5 million are refugees. The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, agreed on at the UN Summit on September 19, 2016, committed member states to enhance the protection of refugees and migrants, as well as to improve their integration (paragraph 39). The global refugee population, diverse in composition and needs, is increasingly being absorbed by cities: today, over 60 percent of refugees worldwide reside in urban areas. If governments are to advance the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and in particular SDG #11—making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable—and SDG #17—strengthening the means of implementation and revitalizing the global partnership for sustainable development—then understanding how best to support the integration of refugees in urban areas will be critical. UN-Habitat’s New Urban Agenda also explicitly recognizes the importance of strengthening a knowledge base of “globally comparable as well as locally generated data” that is disaggregated by a range of characteristics (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender) in order to monitor the implementation of its goals as they apply to different groups of people, inform decision-making, and promote evidence-based governance.² Nevertheless, the capacity to institute, effectively use, and share evidence-based learning about certain groups of people is far from assured, as this paper will demonstrate.

At the “Global Shifts: Urbanization, Migration, and Demography” conference hosted by Perry World House on April 20, 2017, policymakers, scholars, and practitioners convened to discuss policy questions at the intersection of forced migration and urbanization. Across every session, there was a call for more data, especially disaggregated data, which can reveal dissimilar outcomes between sub-groups of data (e.g., women/men, individuals living in different locations, recipients of different programs) (Leader 2017). This type of information is important, because a glance at aggregate data can show overall progress toward a given goal, while masking stark differences in progress across groups. This need was particularly apparent for data collection on refugees. In her conference paper, Kathleen Newland, Senior Fellow and Co-Founder of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), explained:

Relatively few studies track the economic and social outcomes for refugee populations, owing to a lack of data. Data collected by governmental authorities does not normally differentiate between refugees and other migrants, making it difficult to formulate evidence-based policies. More systematic collection of data on how refugees fare once they are accepted for permanent residency would be extremely useful. (Newland 2017)

Newland’s point is echoed by a number of institutions and academics, both domestically and internationally. In a recent report by Newland’s own institution, MPI, Michael Fix et al. (2017) note the importance of additional research on refugee outcomes at the state and local levels in order to better understand the effects of a range of variables on specific groups. A 2016 report published by the European Parliament on the labor market integration of refugees also highlights the importance of evaluating outcomes, stating, “In cases where no robust evidence on integration outcomes or practical impact is available, assessment teams composed by experts from different countries could step in” (Konle-Seidl and Bolits 2016: 10). This same study also finds a lack of comparative information on refugee integration policies and practices across EU Member States, a

¹ This paper will use the UNHCR definition of a refugee: “A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.” UNHCR, Refugee Facts. What is a Refugee? 2017. <http://www.unrefugees.org/what-is-a-refugee/>

² United Nations, New Urban Agenda, A/RES/71/256. October 20, 2016. <http://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/NUA-English.pdf>. The full text of Section 159 reads: We will support the role and enhanced capacity of national, subnational and local governments in data collection, mapping, analysis and dissemination and in promoting evidence-based governance, building on a shared knowledge base using both globally comparable as well as locally generated data, including through censuses, household surveys, population registers, community based monitoring processes and other relevant sources, disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national, subnational and local contexts.

dearth of adequate data sources, including longitudinal surveys, for empirical research, and the need for more methodical analysis of the transferability of certain schemes across countries. The New York Declaration of September 19, 2016 recognized the importance of improved data collection and called for data to be disaggregated by sex and age, among other categories (paragraph 40).

Data can play a crucial role at multiple levels. From assisting international entities in identifying and replicating promising techniques for refugee integration to providing national governments with the means to justify or challenge domestic policy positions, evidence can inform smarter practice and policy. Moreover, disaggregated information, in particular, can help organizations understand how best to serve diverse constituents within the refugee community. Good data can thus be a tool for helping to improve the lives of refugees, while also providing resettlement agencies, other community-based groups, and government agencies with information to be more strategic, cost-effective, and accountable to their stakeholders. An adage from USAID states, “evaluation is not a silver bullet,” but it does help equip organizations and individuals with the tools they need to perform better (“USAID” 2017: 2). A key question, however, is the extent to which different entities are willing and able to collect and use data to inform practice and policy.

This paper explores the challenges of evidence-based learning on refugee integration in the United States, highlighting two areas of particular weakness. The first is the failure to systematically collect disaggregated and longitudinal data on refugee integration. The second is the dearth of monitoring and evaluation for programs that support refugee integration. It then explores the reasons for these weaknesses and presents several approaches to these challenges that merit further exploration.

CHALLENGES TO EVIDENCE-BASED EVALUATION OF REFUGEE INTEGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Many factors constrain data collection on refugee integration in the United States. This begins with the very issue that integration does not happen in any standardized way; the process is influenced by the characteristics of the individual and of the host society and its institutions.³ In 2005, the UNHCR Executive Committee defined local integration in the refugee context as:

... a dynamic and multifaceted two-way process which requires efforts by all parties concerned, including a preparedness on the part of refugees to adapt to the host society without having to forego their own cultural identity, and a corresponding readiness on the part of host communities and public institutions to welcome refugees and to meet the needs of a diverse population.

The intangible and unique nature of this process is one explanation as to why some researchers and entities do not attempt (or rarely attempt) to measure it. For instance, a 2012 report published by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) referred to the lack of definitional clarity as one of the reasons that officials from the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) did not measure integration as a program outcome (“U.S. Government Accountability Office 2012).

Some efforts have been made to create a common understanding of integration that can be used for planning, monitoring, and evaluation at the national or international level, such as the “Indicators of Integration” developed by Alastair Ager and Alison Strang (2004) for the United Kingdom Home Office, or the Migration Policy Group’s Integration Evaluation Tool developed for UNHCR and piloted in Central Europe in 2012. However, no single set of integration indicators has been adopted by the United States or at an international level.

Nevertheless, several dimensions of integration are widely considered to be critical to a successful transition—even if they assume different forms and features. The White House Task Force on New Americans, an

³ For more background on refugee integration, see: UNHCR, A New Beginning. Refugee Integration in Europe. 2013. <http://www.unhcr.org/52403d389.pdf>.

interagency effort established in 2014 under President Barack Obama, emerged from an understanding that more could be done to coordinate, strengthen, and evaluate the integration of immigrants and refugees. It described the core components of integration as three pillars: civic, economic, and linguistic. Given the United States' focus on helping refugees become self-sufficient as quickly as possible, employment status and English proficiency are often seen as two of the most important indicators of integration. Yet even with a shared appreciation for some of the categories that might be valuable to measure, significant limitations to collecting data on refugee integration in the United States remain.

SHORTCOMINGS IN DATA COLLECTION ON REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES

More than 3 million refugees have been resettled in the United States since the Refugee Act of 1980, which formalized the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) “to provide a permanent and systematic procedure for the admission to this country of refugees...and to provide comprehensive and uniform provisions for the effective resettlement and absorption of those refugees who are admitted” (“Refugee Act” 1980). The stages of resettlement have been well documented by a number of authorities, including the Department of State (State) and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). USRAP requires that refugees become economically self-sufficient as quickly as possible, which is reflected in a focus on early employment. This approach has been studied both in the United States and abroad, and according to some experts, participation in the labor market is the most significant factor for long-term integration (Konle-Seidl and Bolits 2016).

Refugees arrive in the United States only after a rigorous vetting process that can take two years or longer. After arrival, the State Department and HHS/ORR work with nine networks of nongovernmental refugee resettlement agencies (hereinafter, “voluntary agencies”) to resettle refugees across the country.⁴ In 2016, PRM reported that these networks had about 315 affiliates in 180 communities across the United States. The agencies are responsible for helping refugees to find safe and affordable housing and to provide them with services. They can also help enroll them in public assistance programs that are also available to the broader U.S. population, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (commonly known as “welfare”), Supplemental Security Income, Medicaid, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (commonly known as SNAP or “food stamps”), which most refugee families initially use (Fix et al. 2017). At 90 days, State Department funding ends, and many voluntary agencies can no longer afford to assist refugees, let alone track their outcomes over time.

The assistance programs available to refugees after 90 days vary by voluntary agency and location, given that each agency has its own set of limited resources, each state has a hand in shaping rules and regulations governing its public assistance programs, and each community has a different capacity and inclination to assist (Fix et al. 2017). This means that refugees' experiences can vary significantly depending on the resettlement locations—a compelling reason to better understand how the characteristics of a given location and its available programs shape outcomes. However, once voluntary agencies report employment statistics at 90 days, many cease to collect data on refugees, unless there are continued interactions through ORR-funded programs, legal services, or special circumstances.⁵ Not all refugees qualify for or choose to partake in ORR-funded programs (some of which are available to refugees for five years), and budget constraints have limited most ORR-funded programs to the refugees' first few months (Capps, Newland et al. 2015).

⁴ The voluntary agencies in FY 2016 were: Church World Service; Ethiopian Community Development Council; Domestic & Foreign Missionary Society; Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society; International Rescue Committee; U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants; Lutheran Immigration & Refugee Services; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops; and World Relief. The Refugee Processing Center. R&P Agency Contacts. 2016. <http://www.wrapsnet.org/rp-agency-contacts/>

⁵ The Department of State requires voluntary agencies to report employment statistics at 90 days: <https://www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/factsheets/2017/266447.htm>. ORR provides time-limited cash and medical assistance to new arrivals, as well as support for case management services, English as a Foreign Language classes, and job readiness and employment services – all designed to facilitate refugees' successful transition to life in the U.S. and help them to attain self-sufficiency. ORR supports additional programs to serve all eligible populations beyond the first eight months post-arrival, including micro-enterprise development, ethnic community self-help and agricultural partnerships. In addition, ORR provides services for survivors of torture. See: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/refugees>. Populations eligible for ORR services include: refugees, asylees, Cuban and Haitian entrants, special immigrant visa holders, and victims of human trafficking. ORR also funds foster care programs for unaccompanied refugee minors, certain minors granted special immigrant juvenile status, and unaccompanied minor victims of a severe form of trafficking.

According to several interviews with staff at a voluntary agency, the provision of immigration legal services can be one of the best ways to maintain contact with refugees. Refugees often return after one year to adjust their status, as required by law to initiate the process of becoming a lawful permanent resident or, after five years following arrival, to start the process of becoming a citizen; however, this is a self-selecting population, and no systems are in place to ensure continued contact. Moreover, law-abiding refugees are not monitored and are free to relocate within the United States—a phenomenon called secondary migration—just as any citizen or legal immigrant can. This is important since it is widely believed that their ability to connect to social networks and opportunities wherever they are located is key to self-sufficiency. However, the U.S. resettlement program is not adequately prepared to track refugees who move, making it difficult to collect accurate resettlement data and to provide relocated refugees and their new host communities with the appropriate services and funding (Myers 2015; Brown and Scribner 2014). The decentralized nature of refugee resettlement in the United States combined with an emphasis on rapidly becoming economically self-sufficient seems to have contributed to a system that is not equipped, or even incentivized, to collect longitudinal data at the sub-national level—data that should be used to evaluate and improve the resettlement process.

Mechanisms for long-term follow-up at the national level are also deficient. As Evans and Fitzgerald (2017: 2) write, “Despite the size of the U.S. refugee resettlement program, there is surprisingly little research about how well refugees do economically and socially in the U.S. after they are resettled.” Evans and Fitzgerald provide several explanations for this situation, also noted in studies by the Center for American Progress (CAP) and MPI. First, major federal data sets, such as the surveys conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, do not distinguish refugees from immigrants, making it difficult to analyze refugee-specific outcomes at the national level. However, researchers are beginning to address this obstacle by using data on refugee arrivals to estimate the refugee population as a percentage of all immigrants, evident in reports such as “The Economic and Social Outcomes of Refugees in the United States,” by Evans and Fitzgerald (2017); “How Are Refugees Faring? Integration at U.S. and State Levels,” by Fix et al. (2017); “Refugee Integration in the United States,” by David Dyssegaard Kallick and Silva Mathema (2016), and “The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees: Successes and Challenges,” by Capps, Newland, et al. (2015). For example, Kallick and Mathema used the data in the American Community Survey (ACS) to examine four groups of people in the United States—Bosnians, Burmese, Hmong, and Somalis—whose presence in the country corresponds highly with arriving as refugees. Evans and Fitzgerald were able to analyze the largest sample to date at 19,298 refugees. While this approach has resulted in new and valuable insights, it merely hints at the possibilities that such studies can make. Large-scale, longitudinal studies are commonplace in other fields, such as with medical studies, raising questions as to why they have not been readily used for refugees.

Evans and Fitzgerald explain that most data on refugees, such as that collected in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Database, does not include long-term follow-up or is unavailable to researchers. Moreover, data sources that are longitudinal and available often include only small numbers of refugees. As a result, refugee literature is highly specific, often based on small samples and short periods of time. These studies are still useful and should not be discounted, but with such small samples it can prove difficult to develop evidence-based recommendations.

As Claus Preissler, Commissioner for Integration and Migration in Mannheim, Germany, stated, “Integration takes place at the local level—this is where we will achieve success or not” (Fenstermacher 2016). For local policymakers, resettlement agencies, and civil society groups supporting integration “on the ground,” disaggregated data on how different variables (e.g., place of origin, gender, and family size; the demand for labor; housing affordability; social networks, etc.) affect outcomes is central to identifying and strengthening promising practices and policies. The report by Capps, Newland, et al. (2015: 8), for example, describes the value in recognizing variation within categories like national origin:

...refugees have increasingly diverse ethnic and socioeconomic characteristics that distinguish even those from the same national origin. For example, Iraqi refugees who came to the United States before 2000 were from

Kurdish regions, while many arriving in the last ten years are from Baghdad. Such intranational differences may not be reflected in the aggregate data...but can greatly affect the needs of refugee groups.

A dearth of data that can explain the differential outcomes of the diverse groups that constitute the refugee community poses a significant challenge to policymaking generally and to answering the essential question: What factors lead to differential outcomes and why? Ensuring that policymakers and practitioners have the data that they need to identify and support the best policies and programs is important both in the United States and abroad. This means finding more methodical ways to collect and communicate data collection and analysis in a variety of forms, including short-term and longitudinal, as well as aggregated and disaggregated. However, evidence-based learning on refugee integration is not only impaired by the lack of mechanisms for systematic data collection; it is also hindered by weaknesses in monitoring and evaluation across programs that are assisting refugees.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION AS A RECOGNIZED BUT NOT PRIORITIZED COMPONENT OF U.S. RESETTLEMENT PROGRAMS

More tools for monitoring and evaluating programs at all levels of the refugee resettlement process are needed. A Continuous Evaluation Report prepared by the Lewin Group for ORR (2008) makes a strong case for better integrating evaluation into ORR's programs, as well as among the grantees administering programs:

There have been very few internal or independent evaluations of ORR programs, and those that have been conducted have not been adequate in rigor, regularity, or scope. True program accountability requires this type of regular evaluation, in addition to solid monitoring and reporting practices.... (Nightingale 2008: 2)

Preparing such reports yearly or every two or three years would serve several purposes, including providing additional tables that could be included in Annual Reports to Congress and OMB, serving as an information resource tool for policy officials and the general public, and raising the awareness of all grantees about the similarities and differences between their program and others... If properly designed, grantees and service providers might find the information about all programs quite useful. (Nightingale 2008: 12)

Efforts to address these findings continue. On October 26, 2017, Scott Lloyd, Director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, explained before the House Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security that ORR was "redoubling its efforts to obtain dependable data on program outcomes and to incorporate evidence-based decision-making" Other initiatives have also been formed to strengthen monitoring and evaluation. For example, The White House Task Force on New Americans released a Federal Strategic Action Plan on Immigrant and Refugee Integration in April 2015, which was developed with the goal of fostering best practices for integrating immigrants and refugees across the United States and was a critical step in promoting coordination. Yet the report underscores that "Still, there are limited mechanisms to identify and share successful evidence-based models of economic, linguistic, and civic integration that are already working in other communities" ("The White House Task Force" 2015: 11).

In September 2015, the International Rescue Committee was awarded a technical assistance grant from ORR to implement the Monitoring and Evaluation Technical Assistance (META) program, which as described on its website, is intended "to improve ORR-funded organizations' capacity to collect meaningful data, manage it well, analyze it effectively, and use the resulting analyses to improve programs for refugees in the U.S." META could be a valuable resource for voluntary agencies, but a core question is whether voluntary agencies, already faced with funding constraints, have the institutional capacity to take advantage of its services and resources in a significant or sustained way without additional means for implementation.

In a number of countries, the ministries responsible for refugees are attempting to track this data and improve programs based on evidence. In Germany, which is still managing the impact of a historic influx of refugees and migrants from 2015, the issue of accountability and monitoring and evaluation came to the fore in March 2017. The German National Audit Office accused the Federal Labor Agency of failing to properly execute, monitor, and manage the finances of entry-level German language courses beginning in late 2015 (“Refugee Language Programs” 2017). The Federal Labor Agency responded by arguing that in order to meet demand at that moment, it was forced to suspend normal program requirements, and furthermore, it was preemptive to judge the success of these programs so soon.

POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR A LACK OF EVIDENCE-BASED LEARNING ON REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES

Funding for integration programs has always been scarce. Voluntary agencies are expected to operate on tight budgets and raise money and in-kind donations to supplement the U.S. Government’s funding. Trump Administration policies, however, are reducing the number of refugees admitted per year and cutting funding for the resettlement program.

Total Federal funding for USRAP exceeds \$1 billion per year and is spread across three agencies: State, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and HHS. The table below includes estimates of the portion of the agencies’ budgets that are spent in support of the program.⁶

U.S. Government Funding for USRAP -- \$ in millions	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018
	(est.)	(est.)	(est.)
Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Service (DHS/USCIS)			
<i>Refugee Processing</i>	50.0	67.8	64.1
Department of State, Population, Refugees & Migration bureau (State/PRM)			
<i>Refugee Admissions</i>	656.6	583.9	472.0
Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS/ORR)			
<i>Refugee Resettlement</i>	720.9	697.2	479.3
Total Cost to Federal Government	1,427.5	1,348.9	1,015.4
Number of Refugees Admitted (FY 2018 reflects cap)	84,994	53,716	45,000

All of the agencies involved in the program already face difficult trade-offs when it comes to their resources; budget cuts and other policies proposed by the Trump Administration will undermine USRAP further. For DHS/USCIS (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services), pressure to devote staff to asylum cases in the United States can mean sending fewer interviewers to process refugee claims overseas.⁷ The State Department’s refugee bureau (PRM) is a leading donor of aid to refugees overseas in addition to funding the parts of USRAP that bring the refugees to the United States and get them set up in new homes, so the resettlement program competes

⁶ Numbers are from Report to Congress on Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2017 (<https://www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/docsforcongress/261956.htm>) and Report to Congress on Proposed Refugee Admissions for FY 2018 (<https://www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/docsforcongress/274613.htm>). Please see original documents for extensive notes about how the numbers were derived and what is included in these cost estimates.

⁷ For the detailed report, see Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2018: Report to the Congress. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/274857.pdf>.

with needs overseas. In fact, President Trump argued in his speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2017, echoing an argument originally advanced by the Center for Immigration Studies, that refugees should stay close to their countries of origin, noting that, “For the cost of resettling one refugee in the United States, we can assist more than 10 in their home region” (“The White House Office” 2017).⁸

State Department funding to cover the costs—including administrative costs—of the first three months of the refugees’ lives in the United States is provided on a *per capita* basis and increases or decreases based on the number of refugees resettled. These voluntary agencies will now see a sharp reduction in their operating budgets, as President Trump has drastically reduced the number of refugees admitted (from the Obama Administration proposal of 110,000 to 53,716 in FY 2017) and proposed a cap on refugee admissions of 45,000 for FY 2018, the lowest cap since 1980. Finally, HHS/ORR not only helps refugees and other eligible populations get better established in communities in the United States, but is also responsible for arranging care for unaccompanied minor children who show up at U.S. borders. As the number of unaccompanied children and youth from the Northern Triangle Countries of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) swelled over the past few years, HHS leaders discovered they did not have enough money to cover all of ORR’s responsibilities and have cut back on grants to states and non-profits for programs to help refugees integrate.

The large swings in the numbers arriving and changes in funding for them—from halting the program temporarily after the September 11th terrorist attacks, to severe under-funding of the program at the time of the 2008 economic downturn, to increases in funding and numbers of refugees admitted during the Obama administration, to a complete course reversal under President Trump—have been a factor in making monitoring and evaluation at the federal or sub-national level a very low priority. Managers at voluntary agencies have had to scramble to keep up with changes, hiring and then letting go staff, planning to open new locations and then canceling those openings and closing existing offices.⁹ The current political context leads one to question whether there will be enough money to carry out the programs, let alone implement updated practices for evidence-based evaluation.

Another challenge that has been raised by a number of scholars and studies is the issue of mistrust between refugees and researchers or other institutions. As Hynes (2003) explains, the refugee experience can create mistrust at a number of levels, affecting their willingness to participate in studies. Recently, multiple versions of the ban on refugees, funding cuts to USRAP, and divisive political rhetoric framing refugees as threats have most likely not helped build trust with the refugee community. Data collection on individuals also raises privacy concerns, but well-executed research can find ways to overcome this issue.

Finally, it should be noted that while data can be used to improve USRAP, it can also be used to criticize or dismantle it. It is therefore important to recognize potential unintended consequences. As a program that was created for humanitarian and not economic purposes, it is disconcerting to think that data could lead to an oversimplified debate about the program’s economic value. Unfortunately, it is almost inevitable that these studies will play a significant role in discussions moving forward, and the best evidence available will be needed to inform arguments. For instance, when the *New York Times* article by Julie Hirschfeld Davis and Somini Sengupta (2017) reported that a draft HHS study showed refugees contributed \$63 billion in economic benefits to the United States between 2005 and 2014, this finding helped contest the stance that refugees are a financial drain, even though the study was suppressed by the White House and never formally issued. Helping refugees to achieve the best possible outcomes—and identifying the most promising practices and policies that can facilitate the integration of displaced persons around the world—are still very compelling reasons to improve the United States’ capacity for evidence-based learning. The next section explores several options as to how this might be done.

⁸ For the report published by the Center for Immigration Studies, see Camarota, Steven. The High Cost of Resettling Middle Eastern Refugees. The Center for Immigration Studies. November 4, 2015. <https://cis.org/Report/High-Cost-Resettling-Middle-Eastern-Refugees#28>.

⁹ For more on funding constraints, see: Brown, Anastasia and Todd Scribner. “Unfulfilled Promises, Future Possibilities: The Refugee Resettlement System in the United States,” *Journal on Migration and Human Security*. <http://jmhs.cmsny.org/index.php/jmhs/article/view/27>

POLICY OPTIONS TO IMPROVE EVIDENCE-BASED LEARNING

Many institutions and scholars have discussed ways to strengthen data collection and analysis on refugee integration. This section draws on that range of work to highlight three recommendations that stand out as particularly promising in responding to the data collection and monitoring and evaluation gaps identified above.

HARMONIZING INTEGRATION POLICY TO FACILITATE SYSTEMATIC EVIDENCE-BASED LEARNING

The 2014 White House Task Force on New Americans was created as “an interagency effort to develop a coordinated federal strategy to better integrate new Americans into communities and support state and local efforts to do the same” (“The White House Task Force” December 2015: 1). Out of this taskforce emerged a historic federal strategic action plan on immigrant and refugee integration, which makes the following vital point:

The pillars of civic, economic, and linguistic integration cannot be supported without the collaboration of state and local governments, the nonprofit and private sectors, schools, philanthropic organizations, community-based organizations, immigrant- and refugee-serving organizations, religious institutions, and private citizens. Only with a sustained effort from all of us can we ensure that the integration of new Americans remains a national priority. (“The White House Task Force” April 2015: 5)

Understanding the multidimensional landscape of integration is important to being able to analyze and evaluate it. It is therefore advantageous to understand not only the horizontal context that shapes integration (i.e., across federal agencies) but also the synergies and frictions that occur vertically (i.e., between community, municipality, city, regional, and national actors, both governmental and nongovernmental). In a February 2015 letter to the Directors of the Task Force on New Americans, Margie McHugh, Director of MPI’s National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy makes several recommendations that affirm the importance of a holistic approach to integration. The first is the “whole of government” approach, encouraging the creation of a coordinating body that creates greater synergy on integration between levels of governance (i.e., municipal, city, state) and federal agencies, of which the Task Force is an exemplary first step. The second is an “Integration Goals and Indicators Framework,” which is closely connected to the first approach but also suggests that a set of goals and indicators be developed for each agency, helping “to close gaps in access, relevance, and quality of services for newcomers.” Such a process demands the review and strengthening of data collection and evaluation practices on which these approaches rely.

While the United States has not yet fully implemented either of these approaches, the United Kingdom provides an example as to what an attempt to create indicators specifically focused on refugee integration might look like. In 2004, the UK Home Office published the results of its commissioned study, “Indicators of Integration,” by Ager and Strang. The study was part of a wider effort to understand and evaluate integration efforts in the UK and presents refugee integration in ten domains, with a series of indicators under each domain. In addition to strengthening monitoring and evaluation and serving as a tool to define and measure integration progress, it aims to help structure the assessment of regional and national policies and facilitate structured action planning and consultation among local stakeholders. The framework is not meant to be used uniformly across all contexts, but rather can be adapted as appropriate, or simply used as a tool for long-term planning (Ager and Strang 2008). Platts-Fowler and Robinson (2015) commend this framework for accommodating the complexity of integration (i.e., progress or setbacks in one aspect of life, such as employment, can have various consequences for other aspects of life, such as health or housing.); the process of integration is not a linear trajectory. Phillimore and Goodson (2008) also find value in using the indicators to help understand how refugees are faring in relation to the general population, with the important reminder that measures alone cannot replace qualitative analysis, which is essential for contextualizing categorical data.

In 2007, Germany established its own National Integration Plan, with reportedly over 400 measures and voluntary commitments on integration. This plan was the outcome of an “Integration Summit” held by Chancellor Merkel in 2006, to which representatives from all social groups working on integration were invited.¹⁰ Little information about this document is publicly available, but it might serve as a tool for contemplating the integration of recently arrived refugees and migrants.¹¹ National frameworks create a shared set of goals for monitoring and evaluation, even if aspirational, and strengthen possibilities for comparative research.

Much can be learned about integration through comparative research, but such studies require a certain degree of comparable data. For example, in 2012, UNHCR piloted the Integration Evaluation Tool in Bulgaria, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania, with the goal of developing “effective, reliable, and sustainable data collection methods and internal review mechanisms, to identify gaps and good practices as well as to build the capacity of and partnerships among the various actors involved in refugee integration” (UNHCR 2013: 12). However, it was found that “the lack of reliable and accurate data about the beneficiaries of international protection in the four countries makes it very difficult to guarantee full access to integration services, monitor their progress, and assess the efficiency of ERF [European Refugee Fund]- or state-funded programmes” (UNHCR 2013: 88). These challenges were echoed in the other part of this UNHCR study, summarized in “A New Beginning: Refugee Integration in Europe” (2013), which examined various aspects of integration policy and measures in France, Sweden, Ireland, and Austria. It noted that the lack of refugee-specific data can result in policies that are not relevant for refugees or that have varying impacts on different groups without the ability to understand or monitor those outcomes.

Initiatives such as the Task Force on New Americans or the UK Home Office’s Integration Indicators, while never perfect, can play a key role in framing and facilitating a more coordinated and responsive approach to integration policy and programs, which can in turn allow for a more systematic, integrated approach to data collection and monitoring and evaluation. This “whole of government” or “whole of society” framework recognizes that integration, as well as the ability to learn about it, is a multi-dimensional process.

PLACE-BASED OPPORTUNITIES FOR EVIDENCE-BASED LEARNING: PUTTING CITIES AT THE FOREFRONT

While global and national policies articulate the goals that strongly influence the context for refugee resettlement, sub-national actors implement those policies; increasingly, these sub-national actors are cities, which, as previously mentioned, host 60 percent of refugees and 80 percent of internally displaced persons. According to a Brookings Report “Cities and Refugees: The German experience” by Bruce Katz, et al. (2016), “the reality is that refugees disproportionately settle in large cities, where they have better job prospects and existing social connections. Ultimately, it is those communities, rather than national governments, that will grapple with accommodating and integrating new arrivals.” This is an enormous task, especially at a time in the United States when federal assistance and funding cuts will require resettlement initiatives to depend on the resources of states, local communities, and voluntary agencies. It is thus increasingly important that cities are empowered to know how best to serve their constituents. As a Visiting Fellow at Perry World House, Aisa Kirabo Kacyira, Deputy Executive Director of UN-Habitat, reminded us that cities provide valuable checks and balances on the relevance and feasibility of national policies.

The city itself offers a practical unit of analysis, given that it controls, to some degree, for variables like labor market demand, housing affordability, and social welfare benefits. As noted in the 2008 Lewin Group report

¹⁰ For more on Germany’s National Integration Plan, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/EN/StatischeSeiten/Schwerpunkte/Integration/kasten-der-nationale-integrationsplan.html>

¹¹ As of August 2017, the total number of people with migrant backgrounds in Germany was estimated by the German Federal Statistics Office to be 18.6 million. See “Germany sees record number of people with immigrant background,” Deutsche Welle. August 1, 2017. <http://www.dw.com/en/germany-sees-record-number-of-people-with-immigrant-background/a-39917868>

“A Framework for Continuous Evaluation of Office of Refugee Resettlement Formula Programs Supporting Employability Services,” research design plays a vital part in effectively measuring program outcomes. Where possible, it is best to control for variation, and the opportunity to coordinate a study comparing programs within a city or between cities with similar profiles, for example, should allow for better comparison than across a state or region. The Lewin Group report recommends several ways that service provision could be varied in order to identify different levels of impact, which might serve as a useful methodological approach that voluntary agencies operating within the same city could implement.¹²

In the United States, voluntary agencies must meet a minimum set of standards for the work that they carry out but these agencies also have a great deal of discretion in how they carry out programs. Voluntary agencies have thus evolved in different ways, adapting to a range of environments and constraints reflected in their levels of support and types of programs. Philadelphia, for example, has three voluntary agencies that handle resettlement: HIAS Pennsylvania, Nationalities Service Center (part of the USCRI network), and Bethany Christian Services (an affiliate of Church World Service). Each offers its own selection of services, yet must achieve the same minimum standards, and all three operate in similar environments. It would be advantageous to use such scenarios to measure the relative rates of success in different programmatic areas across the agencies, using the insights to inform their work.

The United States has a long history of community-based groups organized by ethnicity that help facilitate immigrant and refugee integration. These are often referred to as mutual assistance associations. In particular, these organizations play a central role in assisting refugees with the post-resettlement process, and some of these groups receive support from ORR. In Philadelphia, the African Family Health Organization, the Bhutanese American Organization of Philadelphia, and the Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Association Coalition (SEAMAAC) together received \$475,000 in grants from ORR in FY 2014-2015.¹³ Nongovernmental organizations play a vital role in influencing the integration process, as explained by Rinus Penninx (2003):

First and foremost, they function as direct partners in the implementation of policies. But they are perhaps even more important as political actors. They may influence the political climate and political outcomes, and may be important agents in combating exclusion, discrimination, and xenophobia.

Better understanding the impact of their work, especially through a comparative analysis across cities, and incentivizing them to monitor and evaluate their programs could prove insightful not only for the USRAP but also for other countries where similar community-based organizations exist or might be evolving.

Finally, for purposes of evidence-based learning on refugee outcomes, the role of place—the local context and how individuals interact with it—should not be underestimated. In the study “A Place for Integration: Refugee Experiences in Two English Cities,” Platts-Fowler and Robinson (2015) compare the integration of the same cohort of Iraqi refugees in two different English cities, Hull and Sheffield. They find that the variation in the refugees’ integration experiences is very much related to differing levels of satisfaction with their respective resettlement locations. In addition to housing, public spaces, and other features of the location, the migration history of the city also had a notable impact. For example, the authors describe how the less diverse city, Hull, was perceived by refugees:

In contrast to the reported situation in more diverse places, such as Hackney in London where international immigration is not specifically noticed (Wessendorf, 2010), the arrival of the refugees into these particular neighbourhoods appeared to be experienced as a specific, noticeable change. Refugee experiences suggest these neighbourhoods represented spaces of social distance and limited contact between new arrivals and established residents and, in some instances, places of conflict. (Platts-Fowler and Robinson 2015: 488)

¹² For details, see ES 11-12 in Nightingale, Demetra Smith. A Framework for Continuous Evaluation of Office of Refugee Resettlement Formula Programs Supporting Employability Services. The Lewin Group. March 2008. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/continuousevaluationreport.pdf>.

¹³ Office of Refugee Resettlement. Ethnic Community Self-Help Grants, Fiscal Year 2014/2015. November 10, 2015. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/ethnic-community-self-help-grants>



A study conducted by the Lewin Group (2008), “The Evaluation of the Refugee Social Service (RSS) and Targeted Assistance Formula Grant (TAG) Programs: Synthesis of Findings from Three Sites” also highlights how the experiences of refugees vary between Houston, Texas, Miami, Florida, and Sacramento, California. For instance, Houston and Miami offer less public assistance than Sacramento, which contributes to Miami and Houston having a higher employment rate, especially after the first year. In Sacramento, refugees were encouraged to receive ESL instruction before finding work, whereas this was not a priority in Miami and Houston. While hourly wages increased in all three cities, the largest gains were in Sacramento. It should be noted that these cities were each receiving very different populations of refugees by nationality, so it would be fruitful to do both within- and between-city analyses of the programming.

City-to-city exchanges and collaborations can also serve as a platform for sharing promising practices around evidence-based learning. In the program “Welcoming Communities Transatlantic Exchange,” administered by Cultural Vistas, representatives from local governments, resettlement agencies, interfaith groups, local schools, and private companies participate in a reciprocal exchange program between Germany and the United States.¹⁴ The multi-stakeholder delegation from each country has the opportunity to visit several cities in the other, where they examine both established models and innovative approaches to local integration. This type of program offers a ripe opportunity not only to document the work being done but also to encourage collective learning and problem-solving.

Incentivizing studies of and between cities or local communities in a more systematic way could help foster evidence-based learning that more clearly disaggregates the effects of place-based variables such as housing, the presence of established ethnic communities, social welfare benefits, and more. While some cities such as Philadelphia have installed an Office for Immigrant Affairs, not many cities have the resources or capacity to conduct such studies on their own. Until greater leadership from federal or local government emerges, partnerships between city government, non-profits, and universities should be formed to better analyze and understand the experiences and needs of refugees.

INCENTIVIZING EVIDENCE-BASED LEARNING FOR REPLICABILITY AND SCALABILITY OF NEW INITIATIVES

Civil society and the private sector are producing innovative refugee integration initiatives at a rapid rate. Many of these projects are being implemented at the city level, presenting an ideal opportunity to learn from and across them. In her letter to the Task Force on New Americans on February 9, 2015, Marlene Myers, Acting President of the State Coordinators of Refugee Resettlement, encouraged the federal government to catalogue innovative programs and fund their replication or expansion. As resources for refugee resettlement decrease, finding ways to document and support these initiatives will be particularly important.

In 2017, a public-private partnership among the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Jewish Vocational Service in Boston (JVS), and Social Finance launched the Massachusetts Pathways to Economic Advancement project (MA Pathways), a Pay for Success (PFS) initiative in Greater Boston.¹⁵ PFS is a public-private partnership model of funding social services through performance-based contracts. For this project, Social Finance raised \$12.4 million from 40 investors, enabling JVS to strengthen and expand its services, namely vocational English classes integrated with job search assistance and coaching, for approximately 2,000 immigrants and refugees. The model hinges on its ability to define success and track progress, as the Commonwealth only pays back investors if the program meets “mutually predetermined and independently verified goals” related to participant earnings and transitions to higher education (Palandjian 2016). Tracy Palandjian, CEO of Social Finance, notes the importance of such a model for the public sector: “First, governments at all levels are cash-strapped. And even when there is available funding, [governments] struggle to defend investments in preventative programs,

¹⁴ For more information, see Cultural Vistas. “Welcoming Communities and Transatlantic Exchange.” <https://culturalvistas.org/programs/specialty/welcoming-communities-transatlantic-exchange/>

¹⁵ For details on this project, visit: <http://socialfinance.org/focus-areas/workforce/massachusetts-pathways-economic-advancement-project/>



which are not quick wins. Governments also often lack the capacity to measure outcomes and hold non-profits accountable for results” (Ibid.) This is the first PFS project in the United States to focus exclusively on workforce development for immigrants and refugees, and it will be implemented over three years.

This type of public-private partnership not only provides an opportunity to create shared definitions and expectations surrounding goals and monitoring and evaluation, but it also requires good data to execute. Rather than look solely at participant earnings, for example, this project might also actively track levels of underemployment, examine gendered differences, and monitor other key pieces of information. It incentivizes evidence-based learning and impact, which provides the necessary groundwork for exploring replicability and scalability. Documenting and sharing innovative models of program delivery would help ensure that opportunities to strengthen integration are not lost, and furthermore, encourage more effective collaborations.

CONCLUSION

At a time when UNHCR has reported the highest levels of displacement since World War II, any analytical tools that can be used to better understand and ameliorate the conditions of displaced persons should be applied. The SDGs and the New Urban Agenda both depend on an ability to assess which policies and programs achieve the best outcomes and why, and equally, which have not worked and why not. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence are essential to understanding the needs of those who are experiencing protracted displacement or resettlement in host communities and thus, intentionally or not, engaging in the process of integration.

This paper has not attempted to provide a comprehensive review of all the challenges and opportunities around data collection, monitoring and evaluation, and evidence-based learning more broadly. Rather, it sought to highlight some of the issues and possibilities in each of these areas, emphasizing the valuable role that data collection and analysis can play in strengthening our understanding of integration. From the diverse characteristics of refugees to the range of local contexts in which they are integrating, there is much to learn about how and why refugees experience distinct opportunities and challenges. Evidence-based learning must be seen as a tool that can enhance the USRAP and the work of its partner organizations and inform global efforts on integration. Circumstances driving forced migration will persist, and achieving the best possible outcomes for displaced persons and their host societies should remain a global priority.

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