

Underemployment of Refugees in the Triangle Region:

Analysis and Avenues for Growth

Claire E. Bates

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Underemployment of Refugees in the Triangle Region: Analysis and Avenues for Growth

Facts and Figures: Refugee Underemployment and the Triangle Region

Upon first moving to the Triangle Region of North Carolina (Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill, and the surrounding counties), newly resettled refugees encounter significant obstacles to securing employment capable of meeting their needs and commensurate with their preexisting skills. Qualitative interview research with Triangle Area refugees, exploring factors increasing refugee emotional distress, found that financial distress and concern over lack of appropriate employment accounted for 40% of participant responses (Refugee Mental Health and Wellness Initiative, 2014). Moreover, while refugees are about as likely to be employed as their US-born counterparts (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Policy Development and Evaluation Service [UNHCR PDES], 2013), their average wages in the United States are \$9.79, less than half the average wage of the overall U.S. population (United States Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families Office of Refugee Resettlement [USDHHS ORR], 2015a). The failure of refugees to secure sustainable jobs building on their past abilities warrants attention from the standpoints of both normative and perceived need.

Refugee underemployment is a challenge particularly pertinent to the Triangle Region. North Carolina accepts more refugees than 38 other states in the United States (USDHHS ORR, 2015b), and the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area is one of the state's most populous regions. Four resettlement agencies make their home in this resettlement hotspot, including U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) Raleigh, the resettlement agency with the highest refugee enrollment in the state of North Carolina (USDHHS ORR, 2015a).

Currently, North Carolina most frequently admits resettled refugees from Burma, Bhutan, Iraq, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (USDHHS ORR, 2015b). Several of these groups sustain increased vulnerability to the mechanisms of underemployment. Somali refugees, for example, experience exceptional levels of cultural and religious discrimination leading to increased exclusion from the workplace (Ali, 2011, 2007 and Abdi, 2012, as cited in UNHCR PDES, 2013). Iraqi refugees, typically extremely well trained, often respond to underemployment with particularly pronounced distress (A. Ingrassia, personal communication, September 29, 2015; Georgetown University Law Center Human Rights Institute, 2009; UNHCR PDES, 2013). Refugees from Africa and the Middle East in general seem particularly vulnerable to long-term reliance on government financial support (USDHHS ORR, 2015a).

Mechanisms at Work in Refugee Underemployment

Refugee Underemployment: What is at Stake?

Underemployment detracts from the efficacy and health of refugees, economies, and overall communities.

Low-wage employment ignoring previous workplace skills places refugees at risk of developing symptoms of mental illness. Downward social mobility experienced as part of migration increases the probability that migrants will screen positive for common mental health disorders (Das-Munshi, Leavey, Stansfeld, & Prince, 2012). Since refugees experience elevated vulnerability to stress-related chronic physical diseases (Palinkas et al., 2003), stress due to underemployment may also subtly increase the likelihood of experiencing physical illness.

Moreover, failing to establish a fitting and financially sustainable employment arrangement prevents refugees from achieving financial security and contributing positively to their communities. Disadvantages experienced by refugees in employment have long-term

effects. Twenty years after resettlement, refugees earn 15% lower income than the U.S. average and remain more likely than their U.S.-born counterparts to depend on government financial support (Capps et al., 2015). They experience challenges in securing safe housing environments (anonymous refugees, personal communication, September 5, 2015), and struggle to contribute their best skills to strengthening the economy and social capital of the communities around them.

Why Do Things Work This Way?

Research has identified numerous features that correlate with refugees' success at achieving integration into the labor market, from age, marital status, and country of origin to history of trauma and previous work history (UNHCR PDES, 2013). Several factors involving interaction with employment opportunities or surrounding systems also feature prominently.

Resettlement policies and segmentation of the labor market.

Under refugee policies in North Carolina, upon resettlement, refugees have 90-180 days to secure a job before losing financial support. The need to find employment becomes a driving factor in resettlement services, and job markets accommodating refugees—cleaning services, hotels, and poultry processing—become primary resources for resettlement agencies assisting refugees in the employment hunt (A. Clark, personal communication, September 30, 2015; C. Cox, personal communication, October 1, 2015). Government-funded employment assistance requires refugees to accept and maintain the first positions they are offered (C. Cox, personal communication, October 1, 2015), and they begin to function in a secondary labor market, lacking connection to other labor market streams (Easton-Calabria, 2015; Jimenez, 2010).

Lack of English language skills and opportunities.

Job seekers lacking English skills experience serious disadvantages (Bergson-Shilcock & Witte, 2015; UNHCR PDES, 2013). Congolese refugees resettled in Raleigh wrote to their

elected officials and the public that “refugees are not given enough time to learn the language and get ready to take over when the agencies leave them responsibility of their bills” (Congoese Community Adjustment Support Group, 2015).¹ They suggested a full year’s financial support would allow refugees to gain the English needed to communicate successfully with employers.

Discrimination.

Moreover, refugees face discrimination (UNHCR PDES, 2013). Consistent and unexplained firing of certain refugee groups can prevent refugees from establishing an economic foothold (A. Clark, personal communication, September 30, 2015), and refusal to hire refugee job seekers into particular lines of work can block them from entering certain markets at all (C. Cox, personal communication, October 1, 2015).

Difficulty navigating and achieving recertification.

Among immigrants in general with prior education, achieving even partial recognition of previous certifications produces better outcomes in career advancement (Bergson-Shilcock & Witte, 2015). However, a former community college administrator recalled her extensive work on refugee recertification as extremely difficult and rarely successful. Obstacles included obliteration of credentialing institutions by warfare, difficulties with foreign mailing systems, and, for some refugees, dangers inherent in communicating with communities where they had previously faced persecution (A. Ingrassia, personal communication, September 29, 2015).

¹ Beyond this input from refugee individuals, the author would like to ask additional questions eliciting the perspectives of refugee informants. Please see Appendix D for a list of questions.

Lack of awareness about what to expect.

Finally, many refugees suffer when their early employment experiences in the United States significantly differ from what they expected. Refugees may lack knowledge regarding the workings of the refugee employment system and the challenges of translating previous work experience into opportunities in the United States (C. Cox, personal communication, October 1, 2015; A. Ingrassia, personal communication, September 29, 2015) or regarding norms of U.S. workplace culture, such as keeping shoes on and refraining from stepping away from active machinery for prescribed prayer (A. Clark, personal communication, September 30, 2015). Providing realistic information and “managing pre-settlement expectations” provides a protective influence increasing the chances of refugee economic integration (UNHCR PDES, 2013, p. 28).

Assessing Available Community Assets

Formal employment services support the Triangle Region’s refugee communities in pursuing employment positions. Each of the four resettlement agencies in the Triangle Region connects its resettled refugees with basic job placement support which they may use for five years following resettlement (C. Cox, personal communication, October 1; USCRI, 2015b). The agencies provide additional services to their resettled refugees as well: One provides classes acclimating jobseekers to the realities of the U.S. workplace (A. Clark, personal communication, September 30, 2015); a second, opportunities for refugees to volunteer in the community (USCRI, 2015a); a third, a “job upgrade” program connecting refugees with matching funds supporting technical training (C. Cox, personal communication, October 1, 2015).

Refugees benefit from informal supports not directly aimed toward improving employment. All Triangle Region resettlement agencies and one outside non-profit organization connect refugees with community volunteers willing to help meet refugees’ basic needs.

Volunteer-led, refugee-focused English classes take place at a local church, supplementing more formal methods of language learning; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Master of Social Work student interns assist refugees with emotional challenges impeding employment progress; and online guides provide important information about reestablishing prior career paths after resettlement in the U.S. (Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service Higher Program, n.d.).

Leverage Points

Resettled refugees in the Triangle Region, numerous in number and drawn from populations particularly vulnerable to underemployment, need help connecting to careers that support their mental, physical, and financial well-being and enable them to contribute positively to their surrounding communities. Segmentation of the labor market, lack of English skills, discrimination, difficulty with recertification, and lack of knowledge about what to expect keep refugees stuck in low-paying, ill-fitting roles. Fortunately, the Triangle Region includes a strong network of formal and informal supports committed to refugee well-being.

Research indicates that increases in the size and reach of refugees' social networks correlate positively with the ability to achieve employment and earnings success (Bergson-Shilcock & Witte, 2015; UNHCR PDES, 2013). Social connections outside a refugee's ethnic group play a particularly important role (Allen, 2009) and give refugees the opportunity to achieve outcomes beyond prescribed labor sectors and income levels.

Shaping the existing supports available in the Triangle Region into intentional social network circles surrounding refugee job seekers may do much to alleviate obstacles blocking integration of refugees into meaningful and financially sustainable careers. The United Nations recognizes engaging the broader community as a promising method for increasing refugee economic integration (UNHCR PDES, 2013). Combined with additional promising practices

such as providing realistic information about the U.S. job market experience, personalized employment-planning opportunities, and support in navigating the recertification process (UNHCR PDES, 2013), interventions focused on intentionally connecting refugees with an expansive and diversified social network could go far in enabling them to overcome the challenges of underemployment in the Triangle Region.

References

- Allen, R. (2009). Benefit or burden? Social capital, gender, and the economic adaptation of refugees. *International Migration Review*, 43 (2), 332 – 365. DOI: 10.1111/j.1747-7379.2009.00767.x
- Bergson-Shilcock, A., and Witte, J. (2015). *Steps to Success: Integrating Immigrant Professionals in the U.S.* [Report from research partnership with George Mason University.] Retrieved from World Education Services website: <http://knowledge.wes.org/Report-Steps-to-Success-Integrating-Immigrant-Professionals-in-the-US.html>
- Capps, R., Newland, K., Fratzke, S., Groves, S., Auclair, G., Fix, M., & McHugh, M. (2015). *The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees—Successes and Challenges*. Retrieved from Migration Policy Institute website: <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/integration-outcomes-us-refugees-successes-and-challenges>
- Congolese Community Adjustment Support Group. (2015). *Refugees and immigrants settlement issues in the US*. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC.
- Das-Munshi, J., Leavey, G., Stansfeld, S. A., & Prince, M. J. (2012). Migration, social mobility and common mental disorders: Critical review of the literature and meta-analysis. *Ethnicity and Health*, 17(1-2), 17-53. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1114286727?accountid=14244>
- Easton-Calabria, E. E. (2015). From bottom-up to top-down: The ‘pre-history’ of refugee livelihoods assistance from 1919 to 1979. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 28 (3), 412-436. doi: 10.1093/jrs/fev004

- Georgetown University Law Center Human Rights Institute. (2009). Refugee crisis in America—Iraqis and their resettlement experience: A fact-finding investigation by Human Rights Action in Partnership with the Human Rights Institute Georgetown Law. *HRI Papers & Reports*. Retrieved from http://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/hri_papers/4/
- Jimenez, J. (2010). *Social policy and social change: Toward the creation of social and economic justice*. Washington, DC: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service Higher Program (n.d.). *Downloadable tools*. Retrieved from <http://www.higheradvantage.org/downloadable-tools/#recertification>
- Palinkas, L. A., Pickwell, S. M., Brandstein, K., Clark, T. J., Hill, L. L., Moser, R. J., & Osman, A. (2003). The journey to wellness: Stages of refugee health promotion and disease prevention. *Journal of Immigrant Health, 5*(1), 19-28. doi:10.1023/A:1021048112073
- Refugee Mental Health and Wellness Initiative. (2014). *Qualitative themes* [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://www.dropbox.com/home/UNC%20Global%20Transmigration%20-%20Refugee%20Mental%20Health%20Initiative/Qualitative%20Findings%20Spring%202014?preview=Qualitative+Themes.docx>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Policy Development and Evaluation Service (PDES). (2013). *The labour market integration of resettled refugees*. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/5273a9e89.pdf>
- United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. (2015a). *Preferred Communities program*. Retrieved from <http://www.refugees.org/our-work/refugee-resettlement/preferred-communities-pc/preferred-communities.html>

United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants. (2015b). *Resettling refugees in America*.

Retrieved from <http://www.refugees.org/our-work/refugee-resettlement/>

United States Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and

Families Office of Refugee Resettlement. (2015a). *Office of Refugee Resettlement annual report to Congress FY 2013*. Retrieved from

https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/arc_2013_508.pdf

United States Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and

Families Office of Refugee Resettlement. (2015b). [Table.] *Refugee Arrivals for FY 2014 by State and Country of Origin*. Retrieved from

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/fiscal-year-2014-refugee-arrivals>

Appendix A

Key Informant Interview Information for Adam Clark

Mr. Clark has been employed in refugee resettlement in several settings, including working in a refugee resettlement nonprofit organization, working as a job developer and employment manager in Kentucky, working as refugee employment consultant for the state of Kentucky, and now, directing World Relief in Durham, a resettlement agency in the Triangle Region. Mr. Clark's breadth of experience related to refugee employment and his current role overseeing the entire resettlement process situated him to comment on how refugee employment searches unfold differently in different regions and under different systems and to contextualize the refugee employment search within overall the overall resettlement process.

The author asked the following questions of Mr. Clark:

- “Would you describe your experience with refugees (and perhaps refugee employment) thus far?”
- “What would you say are the most challenging dynamics encountered in the search for refugee employment?”
- “What works, here in the Triangle Region, or elsewhere?”
- “Would you speak about efforts to connect refugees to jobs utilizing previous work experience?”

Appendix B

Key Informant Interview Information for Courtney Cox

Ms. Cox works as a job developer for refugees through USCRI Raleigh. In this position, she connects refugees with willing local employers, builds relationships with employers, and helps refugees overcome challenges with their earliest job placements. Ms. Cox's perspective seemed particularly useful for understanding the governmental systems through which refugees receive employment support.

The author approached Ms. Cox with the following questions:

- “What are some of the systems and resources that you work with in connecting refugees to employment once they arrive? What are some of the stipulations and assets of those systems?”
- “What do you see as the most challenging barriers refugees face in finding employment that is satisfying and meets needs for them?”
- “What helps most, and what would you like to see change?”
- “What makes refugees different than other employment-seeking populations?”

Appendix C

Key Informant Interview Information for Amanda Ingrassia

Amanda Ingrassia, now director of Refugee Solutions through Charlotte Awake, previously worked as a recruitment, retention, and assessment specialist at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, North Carolina. Her position involved extensive engagement with refugees regarding the processes of recertification and recredentialing and poised her to develop resources and consider varying approaches to equipping refugees for the employment search. Connected to Ms. Ingrassia through a personal contact, the author selected her as an informant because of her ability to describe hurdles refugees face in attempting to utilize previous work and educational experience, as well as her knowledge about a variety of nongovernmental supports for refugee employment.

The author asked Ms. Ingrassia to comment on the following:

- “Could you speak about your time spent helping refugees gain the ability to work in fields relevant to them in the United States?”
- “Specifically, what are some of the biggest challenges to meaningful employment that your clients face?”
- “What sort of strengths do you see that refugee clients in particular bring to the table?”
- “What are the key factors impacting refugee employment?”
- “Would you be able to recommend any specific resources or programs supportive to refugees who are seeking meaningful work?”

Appendix D

Key Informant Questions for Potential Refugee Informants

In order to gain increased insight into the employment search experience, I would like to ask resettled refugee informants:

- “Would you tell me about your efforts at achieving employment in the United States?”
- “What programs have you interacted with to help you seek employment, and how helpful have they been?”
- “What are your biggest employment challenges?”
- “Have you been able to bring your previous employment experience into your work life here in the United States? How has this impacted your life?”