



Refugee Resettlement Should Look Beyond First Job Placements

Anna Nicole Kreisberg, Harvard University

Els de Graauw, CUNY Bernard M Baruch College

Shannon Gleeson, Cornell University

As refugees from Afghanistan continue to resettle in the United States, there has been an upswell of public support to provide aid to these displaced individuals and families. However, ongoing concerns over refugee resettlement among policymakers on both sides of the immigration debate have raised questions about the efficacy of current resettlement approaches and their emphasis on quick employment above all else. Our research shows that even though nonprofit resettlement agencies help refugees find jobs and become self-sufficient quickly, as mandated by their government funders, this narrow focus may hinder refugees' long-term economic stability. To improve refugees' durable job prospects, policymakers should increase funding to resettlement services, prioritize quality job placement and develop long-term employment skills, and improve collaboration between refugee and non-refugee serving organizations.

Resettlement Services Fall Short in Helping Refugees Find Sustained Employment

Refugees are eligible for resettlement support, most notably from the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). ORR funds nonprofit resettlement agencies that offer short-term housing, cash support, medical assistance, English-language training, and job readiness and employment services. "Self-sufficiency" is a key goal of this support, with indicators of success prioritizing quick employment and ending refugees' reliance on government assistance. As the costs of these employment supports have increased while funding for them has dwindled, refugee resettlement agencies face a tall task: serving more refugees on tighter budgets, with the same expectations for success.

From our analysis of the [New Immigrant Survey](#), which tracks Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR) immigrants from a variety of entry categories over time, we found that when refugees first receive this status, they have a higher likelihood of employment compared to other categories of migrants who were never refugees. This is to be expected given that refugees, unlike other immigrants, have access to government-funded services upon arrival in the United States, and the bulk of these services is hyper focused on self-sufficiency and quick job placement.

Five years later, however, the survey data show that refugees actually experience a *decline* in employment, whereas other immigrants' employment increases. This decline cannot be explained by refugees' individual characteristics, such as country of origin, gender, prior work experience, or English language skills. Refugees' over-time declines in employment are thus puzzling given that the resettlement process is so centered on positive employment outcomes early on.

To make sense of this surprising decline in refugee employment, we draw on 61 interviews with resettlement experts in different refugee-serving organizations and identified three key drivers: 1) inadequate funding and declines in resettlement funding over time, 2) the outsized focus on finding quick, and often low-quality, employment, and 3) the disjuncture between ORR-funded services and the broader ecology of migrant services funded by other government and private entities.

Recommendations to Achieve Sustained Self-Sufficiency

To fully ensure that refugees are put in the best position to succeed long-term in the United States, federal officials and resettlement services should consider:

- **Increasing funding and timelines for services:** In the 1980s, resettlement services lasted as long as three years; today, refugees have at most six months to become self-sufficient. Particularly in light of language barriers, the challenge of matching foreign credentials to U.S. training programs and jobs, and the prevalence of indescribable trauma for refugees who escaped violence and experienced extreme loss, this is simply not enough time. Federal officials should lengthen the eligibility period for refugees to receive social services and increase funding to resettlement agencies to provide them. These services must address refugees' immediate housing and physical and mental health needs as well as English language acquisition and education *before* addressing employment.
- **Prioritizing job quality and skills development:** By measuring success through "self-sufficiency," resettlement agencies are compelled to find their refugee clients jobs as quickly as possible, often to their detriment. Many refugees end up in "survival jobs" in poultry plants, hotels, restaurants, and assembly factories that provide little financial stability, involve back-breaking and dangerous work, typically pay low wages, and are often located far from where refugees are housed. It is not surprising then that refugees lose or leave these jobs after several years. Government and philanthropic funding should instead focus on job quality and developing refugees' skills, considering what refugees need so they can gain better jobs with upwardly mobile employment. Recent initiatives to train individuals with free certificates in artificial intelligence or the technology industry, for example, bolster the economy while ensuring refugees find rewarding employment.
- **Incentivizing collaboration between organizations:** Once their ORR-funded support ends, refugees often do not know where to turn for long-term employment assistance, even though organizations addressing these long-term needs exist in a parallel infrastructure of nonprofit organizations. Refugee resettlement efforts must do more to connect the large network of ORR-funded organizations with other networks of smaller and alternatively funded community organizations that provide long-term services to immigrants and other vulnerable populations. Federal resettlement policies should not only incentivize those two networks of organizations to collaborate but also relax the resettlement deliverables that drive unhealthy and counterproductive competition among organizations. Through innovative seed grants and multi-agency funding streams, different refugee-serving organizations can build effective referral networks that will help refugees to reap greater long-term employment benefits.

Read more in A. Nicole Kreisberg, Els de Graauw, and Shannon Gleeson, "Explaining Refugee Employment Declines: Structural Shortcomings in Federal Resettlement Support." *Social Problems* (2022).