

The US Refugee Resettlement Program — A Return to First Principles: How Refugees Help to Define, Strengthen, and Revitalize the United States

Donald Kerwin

Center for Migration Studies

“The bosom of America is open to receive not only the Opulent and respectable Stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations and Religions, whom we shall welcome to a participation of all our rights and privileges, if by decency and propriety of conduct they appear to merit the enjoyment.”

George Washington, December 2, 1783

“In this world of globalization we have fallen into a globalization of indifference. We are accustomed to the suffering of others, it doesn’t concern us, it’s none of our business.”

Pope Francis, Homily at Lampedusa, July 8, 2013

Executive Summary

The US refugee resettlement program should be a source of immense national pride. The program has saved countless lives; put millions of impoverished persons on a path to work, self-sufficiency, and integration; and advanced US standing in the world. Its beneficiaries have included US leaders in science, medicine, business, the law, government, education, and the arts, as well as countless others who have strengthened the nation’s social fabric through their work, family, faith, and community commitments. Refugees embody the ideals of freedom, endurance, and self-sacrifice, and their presence closes the gap between US ideals and its practices. For these reasons, the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) has enjoyed strong, bipartisan support for nearly 40 years.

Yet the current administration has taken aim at this program as part of a broader attack on legal immigration programs. It has treated refugees as a burden and a potential threat to our nation, rather than as a source of strength, renewal, and inspiration. In September 2017, it set an extremely low refugee admissions ceiling (45,000) for 2018, which it had no intention of meeting: the United States is on pace to resettle fewer than half of that number. It has also tightened special clearance procedures for refugees from mostly Muslim-majority states so that virtually none can enter; cynically slow-walked the interview, screening, and admissions processes; and decimated the community-based resettlement infrastructure built up throughout many decades (Miliband 2018). At a time of record levels of forced displacement in the world, the United States should model solidarity with refugees and exercise leadership in global refugee protection efforts (Francis 2018a, 102). Instead, the administration has put the United States on pace to resettle the lowest number of refugees in USRAP’s 38-year history, with possible further cuts in fiscal year (FY) 2019.

This article describes the myriad ways in which this program serves US interests and values. The program:

- saves the lives of the world’s most vulnerable persons;
- continues “America’s tradition as a land that welcomes peoples from other countries” and shares the “responsibility of welcoming and resettling those who flee oppression” (Reagan 1981);
- promotes a “stable and moral world” (Helton 2002, 120);

Corresponding Author:

Donald Kerwin, Center for Migration Studies, 307 East 60th Street, New York, NY 10022, USA.

Email: dkerwin@cmsny.org

- reduces spontaneous, unregulated arrivals and encourages developing nations to remain engaged in refugee protection (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan 2017, 42–43); and
- promotes cooperation from individuals, communities, and nations that are central to US military and counterterrorism strategies.¹

In that vein, the article describes the achievements, contributions, and integration outcomes of 1.1 million refugees who arrived in the United States between 1987 and 2016. It finds that:

- the median household income of these refugees is \$43,000;²
- 35 percent of refugee households have mortgages;
- 63 percent of refugees have US-born children;
- 40 percent are married to US citizens; and
- 67 percent have naturalized.

Comparing the 1.1 million refugees who arrived between 1987 and 2016 with non-refugees,³ the foreign born, and the total US population, the article finds:

- Refugees' labor force participation (68 percent) and employment rates (64 percent) exceed those of the total US population (63 and 60 percent, respectively).⁴
- Large numbers of refugees (10 percent) are self-employed and, in this and other ways, job creators, compared to 9 percent of the total US population.
- Refugees' median personal income (\$20,000) equals that of non-refugees and exceeds the income of the foreign born overall (\$18,700).
- Refugees are more likely to be skilled workers (38 percent) than non-refugees (33 percent) or the foreign born (35 percent).
- Refugees are less likely to work in jobs that new immigrants fill at high rates, such as construction, restaurants and food service, landscaping, services to buildings and dwellings, crop production, and private households.
- Refugees use food stamps and Medicaid at higher rates than non-refugees, the foreign born, and the total US population. Their public benefit usage significantly declines throughout time, however, and their integration, well-being, and US family ties increase.

Comparing refugee characteristics by time present in the United States — from the most recent arrivals (2007 to 2016), to arrivals between 1997 and 2006, to those with the longest tenure (1987 to 1996) — the article finds:

- Refugees with the longest residence have integrated more fully than recent arrivals, as measured by households with mortgages (41 to 19 percent), English language proficiency (75 to 55 percent), naturalization rates (89 to 24 percent), college education (66 to 32 percent), labor force participation (68 to 61 percent), and employment (66 to 55 percent) and self-employment (14 to 4 percent).
- Refugees who arrived from 1997 to 2006 have higher labor force participation and employment rates than refugees who arrived from 1987 to 1996.⁵
- Refugees who arrived between 1987 and 1996 *exceed* the total US population, which consists mostly of the native-born, in median personal income (\$28,000 to \$23,000), homeownership (41 to 37 percent with a mortgage), percentage higher than the poverty line (86 to 84 percent), access to a computer and the internet (82 to 75 percent), and health insurance (93 to 91 percent).

¹ Brief for Retired Generals and Admirals of the US Armed Forces in Support of Respondents at 19-21, *Trump v. Hawaii*, No. 17-965 (Mar. 30, 2018).

² This is less than the median household income of the non-refugee population (\$45,000), the foreign born (\$56,000), and the total US population (\$52,800). Most refugees, however, enter the United States without income, assets, or English language proficiency, and they advance dramatically throughout time. This article shows, for example, that the median personal income of refugees who arrived between 1987 and 1996 actually exceeds that of the total US population.

³ The Center for Migration Studies identified non-refugees by removing persons selected as refugees from the population of all foreign born who entered after 1986, by single year of entry. In each year of entry, it then randomly selected the same number as the number of refugees.

⁴ The labor force participation rate refers to the percentage of persons age 16 or older who are employed or seeking work, as opposed to out of the labor force entirely.

⁵ The higher labor force participation and employment rates of refugees who arrived from 1997 to 2006 can likely be attributed to the older age of those who arrived from 1987 to 1996 (20 percent age 65 or older). Many of those who arrived in the 1987 to 1996 period had likely retired by 2016.

Comparing nationals — in 2000 and again in 2016 — from states formerly in the Soviet Union, who entered from 1987 to 1999, the article finds that:

- median household income increased from \$31,000 to \$53,000;
- median personal income nearly tripled, from \$10,700 to \$31,000;
- the percentage of households with a mortgage increased from 30 to 40 percent;
- public benefit usage fell;
- English language proficiency rose;
- the percentage with a college degree or some college increased (68 to 80 percent);
- naturalization rates nearly doubled, from 47 to 89 percent;
- marriage to US citizens rose from 33 to 51 percent; and
- labor force participation rate (59 to 69 percent), employment (57 to 66 percent), self-employment (11 to 15 percent), and the rate of skilled workers (33 to 38 percent) all grew.

The article also finds that refugees bring linguistic diversity to the United States and, in this and other ways, increase the nation's economic competitiveness and security.

In short, refugees become US citizens, homeowners, English speakers, workers, business owners, college educated, insured, and computer literate at high rates. These findings cover a large population of refugees comprising all nationalities, not just particularly successful national groups.

Section I of the article describes the nation's historic commitment to refugees and critiques the administration's rationale for dismantling the resettlement program. Section II sets forth the Center for Migration Studies (CMS) methodology for selecting the refugee data used in this article. Section III discusses the resettlement, national origins, and years since arrival of the refugees in CMS's sample. Section IV details the article's main findings on the achievements, contributions, and integration of refugees throughout time. It compares the characteristics of refugees, non-refugees, the foreign born, and the total US population; and it examines the progress of refugees — measured in 2000 and 2016 — that arrived from the former Soviet Union between 1987 and 1999. This section also references the growing literature on the US refugee program and on the economic and fiscal impacts of refugees. Section V discusses the important role of voluntary agencies in the resettlement process, focusing on the work of Catholic agencies in building community support for refugees and promoting their entrepreneurial initiatives. Section VI identifies the national interests served by the refugee program, recommends ways to address several of the program's long-standing challenges, and urges the president, Congress, Americans with refugee roots, and other stakeholders to work to strengthen and expand the program.

Keywords

refugees, protection, resettlement, integration, labor

I. Introduction

The US refugee program constitutes one of the most successful humanitarian programs in US history. Since passage of the Refugee Act of 1980,⁶ which established the current US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), the United States has resettled more than 3 million refugees (Table 1). However, the US tradition of providing haven to the oppressed and persecuted stretches back far longer. In the post-World War II era, in particular, Congress passed several pieces of legislation to admit large-scale refugee populations (DHS 2003, 49–50). The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 (amended in 1950),⁷ for example, led to the admission of 400,000 refugees, and the Refugee Relief Act of 1953 to another 200,000, beyond then-existing nationality quotas.⁸ The United States also “paroled” — admitted on a temporary basis primarily for humanitarian reasons — more than 30,000 Hungarian refugees following the Soviet-suppressed Hungarian revolution of 1956, 175,000

⁶Refugee Act of 1980, Pub. L. No. 96-212, 94 Stat. 102 (1980).

⁷Pub. L. No. 80-77, 62 Stat. 1009 (1948).

⁸Pub. L. No. 83-203, 67 Stat. 400 (1953). Additional refugee protection legislation from this era included the Act of September 11, 1957, which allowed the admission of “refugee escapees” from communist-dominated nations and refugees from the Middle East who had suffered persecution or feared persecution on account of “race, religion, or political opinion”; the Fair Share Refugee Act of 1960, which provided for the admission of World War II refugees and displaced persons, and vested the Attorney General with authority to grant parole to “refugee-escapees”; and the Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965, which established a “conditional entry” category for refugees (US Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy 1981, 202 and 211).

Table I. Refugee Arrivals (FY 1980–May 11, 2018).

Year	Refugee Arrivals
1980	207,116
1981	159,252
1982	98,096
1983	61,218
1984	70,393
1985	67,704
1986	62,146
1987	64,528
1988	76,483
1989	107,070
1990	122,066
1991	113,389
1992	132,531
1993	119,448
1994	112,981
1995	99,974
1996	76,403
1997	70,488
1998	77,080
1999	85,525
2000	73,147
2001	69,886
2002	27,131
2003	28,403
2004	52,873
2005	53,813
2006	41,223
2007	48,282
2008	60,191
2009	74,654
2010	73,311
2011	56,424
2012	58,238
2013	69,926
2014	69,987
2015	69,933
2016	84,994
2017	53,716
October 1, 2017–May 11, 2018	12,904

Sources: DHS (2014), Bruno (2017), and DOS/PRM (2018a, 2018b).

Indochinese refugees following the fall of Saigon in 1975, and 640,000 Cubans following the communist revolution through May 1979 (USCIR 1997, 215; Kerwin 2010, 4–5).⁹

This tradition should be a source of immense national pride. The US refugee program has advanced the nation’s standing in the world, saved countless lives, and put millions of impoverished refugees on a path to work, self-sufficiency, and integration. It has admitted future leaders in science, health care, business, the law, government, education, and the arts,¹⁰ as well as countless new Americans who have strengthened the nation’s social fabric through their work, family, faith, and community commitments. Refugees embody and serve as living reminders of the ideals of freedom, endurance, hard work, and self-sacrifice. Their presence closes the gap between the nation’s ideals and practices.

Yet the current administration has worked to dismantle this program as part of a broader attack on legal immigration programs like Temporary Protected Status (TPS), Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and the Central American Minors (CAM) program (Kerwin 2017). Most recently, the administration ratcheted up its efforts to deter asylum seekers from attempting to access

⁹ Congress has also regularly passed legislation to extend lawful permanent resident (LPR) status to “parolees” and other refugee-like populations admitted on a temporary basis (USCIR 1997, 215; Kerwin 2010, 5–6).

¹⁰ A short list of prominent US refugees includes Madeleine Albright, Sergey Brin, Marc Chagall, Albert Einstein, Enrico Fermi, Andrew Grove, Henry Kissinger, George Soros, and Elie Wiesel.

Being a refugee wasn't a choice, and growing up in the refugee camp, I felt like a bird forced to remain in a cage and not able to fly. The US refugee program gave me hope for a better future. Without it, I wouldn't be here and able to pursue higher education. I am thankful for the opportunity to be resettled in the United States. Despite the many challenges, the US refugee program opens the door and gives people like me a chance to live, dream, and achieve goals and a better future. There are many refugee children, women, and men who have to live in fear without many resources. The US refugee program makes a positive impact for many others, including myself. I hope the program can continue to open the door to those in need and give them a chance.

Paw Say Ku, Heartland Care Alliance, Youth Substance Abuse Prevention Program Coordinator

US territory by removing children from their parents' custody at the US–Mexico border and expanding the practice of criminally prosecuting the parents, mostly for illegal entry (Gamboa and Silva 2018).

In September 2017, the administration set an extremely low refugee admissions ceiling (45,000) for fiscal year (FY) 2018, but the United States will likely admit fewer than half of that number. It tightened the special clearance procedures for refugees from mostly Muslim-majority states to the point that virtually none can enter; has cynically slow-walked the refugee interview, screening, and admissions processes; and has decimated the community-based resettlement infrastructure built up throughout many decades (Miliband 2018).

The United States admitted more than 3 million refugees between FY 1980 and FY 2018 (year to date) (Table 1). At a time of record levels of forced displacement in the world,¹¹ however, it is on pace to resettle the lowest number of refugees in USRAP's 38-year history (Table 1), with further cuts expected in FY 2019.

This alarming turn of events has been buttressed by meretricious attacks on the program that (1) conflate refugees with terrorists and criminals, (2) aver that the United States lacks the "absorptive capacity" to admit more refugees, and (3) question the willingness and ability of refugees to integrate in the United States. None of these claims can be sustained.

First, refugees do not threaten national security or public safety. To the contrary, they advance the nation's security by contributing to its economic well-being, diversity, and military strength (Kerwin 2016, 91–93). Moreover, every act of refugee protection — from addressing refugee-producing conditions to pursuing permanent solutions for refugees — promotes security (*ibid.*). Criminals and terrorists occasionally attempt to impersonate refugees, but refugees undergo the most intensive screening of any group of travelers to the United States (DOS/PRM 2018c), and of perhaps any refugee population in the world.¹² In addition, resettled refugees belong to groups that are not associated with terrorist or criminal enterprises and that particularly need protection — the elderly, the ill, women with young children, imperiled religious minorities, and persons who worked for the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan (Kerwin 2016, 89, 97–98).

Second, the notion that the United States cannot absorb more refugees mischaracterizes the relationship between refugees and their new communities. Refugees need assistance when they arrive, but they are not passive objects of absorption. The US resettlement program promotes the economic self-sufficiency of refugees through early employment, a goal that it achieves at remarkably high rates.¹³ Moreover, refugees contribute significantly to their new communities. For example, they have revitalized economically depressed communities like North Hill in Akron, Ohio; Bevo Mill in St. Louis; parts of Buffalo and Utica, New York; and Cleveland, Ohio.¹⁴ In addition, throughout time, refugees pay more in taxes than they receive in public benefits.¹⁵

¹¹The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reports that by the end of 2016, 65.6 million persons had been forcibly displaced by persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations, including 22.5 million refugees, 40.3 million internally displaced persons, 10 million stateless persons, and 2.8 million with pending asylum applications (UNHCR 2017). According to the International Disaster Monitoring Centre and the Norwegian Refugee Council, sudden-onset natural hazards displaced an additional 24.2 million persons in 2016 and an average of 25.3 million persons per year since 2008 (IDMC and NRC 2017, 31).

¹²As a result, the chance of dying in a US terrorist attack by a refugee is negligible (Nowrasteh 2016).

¹³In FY 2015, 67 percent of the 29,765 refugee participants in the US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS/ORR) Matching Grant public-private partnership program achieved economic self-sufficiency within 120 days, and 82 percent within 180 days (HHS/ORR 2017, 20). HHS/ORR defines economic self-sufficiency as "earning a total family income at a level that enables the case unit to support itself without receipt of a cash assistance grant," meaning in practice "earnings that exceed the income eligibility level for receipt of a TANF [Temporary Assistance for Needy Families] cash assistance grant in the state and the ability to cover the family living expenses" (*ibid.*).

¹⁴Refugees helped to "create and preserve" an estimated 1,156 manufacturing jobs in Akron (NAE 2016). The Cleveland area's 7,649 refugees supported 1,220 local jobs in 2016, and they contributed \$2.7 million in taxes to the State of Ohio and \$1.8 million to county and city governments (Chmura Economics & Analytics 2017). In Franklin County, Ohio, refugees own businesses at twice the rate of the overall population (13.6 vs. 6.5 percent): the 873 refugee-owned businesses in the Columbus metropolitan area generated \$605.7 million and supported 7,851 jobs in 2015 (Community Research Partners 2015). Refugee service agencies also contribute economically to local communities. In the Cleveland area, refugee organizations spent \$17.7 million in 2016 and employed 340 people (Chmura Economics & Analytics 2017). In Georgia, refugee agencies contributed an estimated \$2.7 million to the state's economy in FY 2015 (CRSA 2016).

¹⁵Across the United States, 2.3 million refugees earned \$77.2 billion in household income in 2015 and contributed \$20.9 billion in taxes, including \$14.5 billion to the federal government and \$6.4 billion to states and localities (NAE 2017). After eight years, refugees begin to pay more in

Large-scale, chaotic migration poses a challenge to refugee integration. USRAP is, however, a case study in safe, orderly, and controlled migration, and the pool of refugees eligible for resettlement is modest. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refers only a fraction of 1 percent of the world's refugees for resettlement each year, making those resettled to third countries a highly select and well-screened group (UNHCR 2017, 27).

The United States can accommodate more refugees than it does. By way of comparison, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt — with a combined gross domestic product (GDP) of less than \$1.5 trillion in 2016 (World Bank 2018) — host more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees, and large populations from other nations as well (UNHCR 2018a). Uganda, Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo — with a combined GDP of \$299 billion in 2016 (World Bank 2018) — host more than 2.4 million South Sudanese refugees (UNHCR 2018b). The United States — with a GDP of \$18.6 trillion (World Bank 2018) — resettled 44 Syrian refugees and 11 South Sudanese refugees during the first seven months of FY 2018 (DOS/PRM 2018). As for lack of community support, local resettlement agencies report that they are overwhelmed by the outpouring of volunteers and offers of cash and in-kind contributions to support this life-saving program. In addition, interest in the private sponsorship of refugees has been growing in recent years (Kantor and Einhorn 2016).

Aya Alkhdair

After fleeing Sudan for Egypt, Aya Alkhdair and her family were settled in Westbrook, Maine, in March 2015. Since arriving in the United States, Aya has participated in several initiatives that promote refugee youth involvement in humanitarian work, and she has assisted refugee populations in their cultural adjustments. She is a certified medical interpreter (Arabic-English) and has worked closely with the refugee and immigrant communities in Maine. In October 2017, Aya cofounded a nonprofit organization with another former refugee that provides personal support specialists to people approved for in-home patient care. Aya and her cofounder hope this venture will also allow them to employ and help to integrate migrants and other former refugees into US society. Recently, after only 2.5 years of study, Aya graduated from the University of Southern Maine with bachelor's degrees in human biology and biochemistry. She plans to become a physician specializing in infectious disease, and she is currently studying for the MCAT and applying to medical schools.

Aya attributes her achievements to the US refugee program, which allowed her to accomplish so much in such a short amount of time. "It is really difficult to make things happen when you are scared for your life and scared you'll be hurt physically and emotionally," she says. "When I was a refugee, I could not do the things I can do now — I couldn't leave my house, go to school, or volunteer. Being here — safe in the United States — is one of the greatest blessings in my life. There are so many refugees that have potential to succeed but are trapped in unsafe situations and by limited resources. But when they are provided safety and opportunities, refugees are given a second life and are able to shine."

Third, there is nothing alien about refugees to the American experience or to a nation open to the "oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions."¹⁶ Refugees strongly embrace defining US values like freedom and the rule of law, having fled situations characterized by their absence. As discussed in this article, they also strengthen the social fabric and make myriad contributions to the success of their new nation.

II. Methodology for Refugee Selection

This article examines 1.1 million of the 2.3 million refugees admitted to the United States from 1987 to 2016. This large sample, containing the full range of demographic data collected in the American Community Survey (ACS), provides a detailed portrait of the refugee population that arrived during this 30-year period.

The 1.1 million refugees were enumerated in the 2016 ACS, which is conducted annually by the US Census Bureau. CMS chose 1987 as its starting point for three reasons: (1) in 1987, large numbers of refugees were just beginning to arrive from the Soviet Union; (2) it sought to identify respondents in the 2016 ACS who had arrived as refugees, and many refugees who arrived before 1987 had died or retired by 2016; and (3) annual data on refugee and immigrant arrivals¹⁷ from the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) were available for every country in the 1987 to 2016 period.

taxes than they receive in public benefits (Evans and Fitzgerald 2017). An HHS study on the fiscal costs of refugees between FY 2005 and FY 2014 found that refugees contributed \$63 billion in taxes, including \$40.9 billion in federal taxes and \$22 billion in state and local taxes (HHS 2017). Moreover, each refugee pays an average of \$4,600 more in taxes than they receive in benefits. The Trump administration rejected the HHS report, reportedly because it speaks to the contributions of refugees and not exclusively about the benefits they use.

¹⁶ See letter from George Washington to Joshua Holmes on December 2, 1783, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99-01-02-12127>.

¹⁷ Source comes from annual statistics, by country, provided by the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Note that the LPR numbers used to prepare this article refer to newly arriving LPRs and not to the total number who received LPR status in a year. The latter would include immigrants who arrived in earlier years but adjusted to permanent resident status during the year.

CMS used the following methodology to identify respondents in the 2016 ACS. First, it compiled DHS statistics on refugee arrivals by country of birth and year of entry.¹⁸ Next, it compiled DHS data for newly arriving lawful permanent residents (LPRs) by country of birth and year of entry. Then, it identified country-by-year cells in which refugee arrivals were *at least twice*¹⁹ the number of new LPR arrivals.²⁰ It used the percentages of refugees in those cells to select refugees randomly from corresponding cells in the 2016 ACS data.

Refugees who arrived from Bosnia in 1997 and appeared in the 2016 ACS illustrate CMS's procedures. According to DHS statistics compiled in 1997, 21,357 refugees and 132 LPRs arrived from Bosnia. Thus, 99.4 percent of the total arrivals from Bosnia in 1997 were refugees. The 2016 ACS counted 15,857 Bosnians who arrived in 1997. Multiplying the ACS estimate of 15,857 by .994 yields 15,762, which is the estimated number of refugees from Bosnia counted in the 2016 ACS. Random selection from the ACS microdata was used to select 15,762 of the 15,857 respondents from Bosnia, producing detailed demographic data for this study.

To compile non-refugees, CMS began with all foreign born who entered after 1986, by single year of entry. It then removed those who had been selected as refugees. Finally, in each year of entry, it randomly selected the same number as the number of refugees. It derived the non-refugee population to have a comparable population (to refugees), controlled for length of stay in the United States.

Appendix A summarizes the selection of refugee data used in this article. Slightly fewer than half (1.1 million out of 2.3 million) of all refugees admitted from 1987 to 2016 are included in this study.

III. Refugee Resettlement, Origin, and Arrival Data

The composition of refugees to the United States changes throughout time. As illustrated by CMS's sample, large numbers arrived from the former Soviet Union and Southeast Asia from 1987 to 1999; from Bosnia in the late 1990s; and from Middle Eastern, African, and South and Southeast Asian countries in subsequent decades (Table 2).

As befits a national program, refugees are widely dispersed throughout the country. California, New York, Minnesota, Washington, Texas, and Florida host the largest numbers of refugees (Table 5). Minnesota, Nebraska, Washington, New York, and Iowa, however, host the most refugees per 1,000 total population (Table 3). Nearly 60 percent of the refugees in CMS's sample live in just 18 metropolitan areas (Table 4), led by the New York–Newark–Jersey City metropolitan area.

The US Department of State and resettlement agencies attempt to place refugees near family members to promote their "long term chance of success in the United States" (DOS/PRM 2018c). Refugees also tend to move to communities with significant numbers of residents from their countries of origin. Not surprisingly, most Cuban refugees in CMS's 2016 sample live in Florida (Table 5). Refugees in Minnesota mostly come from Somalia, Laos, and Burma. Large numbers of Iraqi and Burmese refugees have settled in Texas. Ukrainians and Somalis represent the two largest refugee populations in the State of Washington.

California and New York have the largest and most diverse refugee populations. They are also the states with the largest concentrations of refugees from individual countries of origin (11 and 9, respectively). Florida hosts the largest number of Hungarian refugees, Indiana the most Burmese refugees, Missouri the most Bosnians, and Ohio the most Bhutanese (Table 6).

IV. Findings

The study analyzes the achievements, diverse contributions, and integration outcomes of refugees in three ways. First, it compares the household and demographic characteristics (Table 7) and the economic characteristics (Table 8) of refugees who arrived between 1987 and 2016, to comparable data for non-refugees, the foreign born, and the total US population. Second, it explores the characteristics of refugees by three periods of entry, and it compares those estimates to data for the foreign born and the total US population (Table 9). Third, it examines the characteristics of refugees — measured in 2000 and again in 2016 — who arrived from the former Soviet Union between 1987 and 1999 (Table 10). Its findings largely align with earlier studies that detail the socio-economic attainment of refugees throughout time.²¹

Refugees arrive with few (if any) financial resources and are responsible for repaying to the Department of State their travel loans to resettle to the United States, which the overwhelming majority do within five years (DOS/PRM 2018c).

¹⁸See annual DHS Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, table 14.

¹⁹Using a minimum ratio of 2 to 1 (refugees to LPR arrivals) yielded 2016 ACS data in which roughly 90 percent of the 1,088,000 were refugees. The 90 percent figure is based on the probability of selection within each cell.

²⁰Far more Cubans entered as refugees during the years examined in this article than are counted in CMS's data. To be counted, refugees had to outnumber new LPR arrivals by a 2:1 ratio. In some years, there were roughly as many newly arriving Cuban LPRs as refugees. Thus, most of the Cuban refugees who arrived during these years are not included in CMS's refugee data.

²¹These studies use a range of methods and models to estimate the number of refugees and their economic and fiscal impacts.

Table 2. Refugees in CMS Sample, by Country of Origin and Period of Entry: 2016 (Estimates Less Than 500 Not Shown).

Country of Origin	All Periods of Entry	Entered 1987 to 1991	Entered 1992 to 1999	Entered 2000 to 2007	Entered 2008 to 2015
Total	1,088,600	236,900	403,000	142,000	306,700
Cuba	18,600	—	—	18,600	—
Albania	3,500	1,500	2,000	—	—
Bulgaria	2,700	2,700	—	—	—
Hungary	2,900	2,900	—	—	—
Romania	10,000	10,000	—	—	—
Croatia	4,300	—	2,700	1,600	—
Serbia	2,800	—	2,800	—	—
Bosnia	91,000	—	70,900	20,000	—
Latvia	2,700	1,300	1,300	—	—
Russia	97,700	44,000	53,800	—	—
Byelorussia	27,100	9,900	17,200	—	—
Moldavia	17,600	5,000	8,900	3,800	—
Ukraine	139,500	42,900	96,600	—	—
Armenia	20,800	18,200	2,600	—	—
Azerbaijan	7,200	2,000	5,200	—	—
Georgia	2,200	1,500	700	—	—
Kazakhstan	6,300	2,900	3,300	—	—
Uzbekistan	17,300	3,300	14,000	—	—
USSR, ns	9,600	—	7,300	2,300	—
Cambodia	8,800	8,800	—	—	—
Laos	51,800	33,600	13,200	5,000	—
Vietnam	92,600	28,500	64,100	—	—
Afghanistan	16,400	7,200	1,900	7,200	—
Bhutan	49,600	—	—	—	49,600
Burma	91,000	—	—	10,200	80,800
Iraq	131,100	—	8,800	4,500	117,800
Syria	6,600	—	—	—	6,600
Sudan	13,200	—	2,100	9,700	1,500
Liberia	22,500	—	3,800	18,600	—
Sierra Leone	2,000	—	—	2,000	—
Ethiopia	14,900	10,200	4,700	—	—
Somalia	73,900	—	15,000	31,700	27,100
Eritrea	12,500	—	—	900	11,600
Congo	17,600	—	—	5,900	11,700
Other countries	400	400	—	—	—

Source: Derived from 2016 ACS data, compiled by CMS; see text.

Many arrive with poor English language skills and low educational attainment (Potocky-Tripodi 2004; Connor 2010).²² Some suffer from discrimination (NASEM 2015, 132). Most struggle economically and socially in the years immediately following their arrival.

Not surprisingly, the median household income of the 1.1 million refugees in CMS's sample — which includes arrivals throughout a 30-year period — lags behind that of the non-refugee population (\$43,000 versus \$45,000), the foreign born (\$56,000), and the total US population (\$52,800) (Table 7). This may explain the slightly higher poverty rate and the higher use of food stamps and Medicaid by refugees, compared to these other populations. The high percentage of refugees who have reached retirement age, relative to the other three groups, explains refugees' comparatively higher usage of Medicare.

Overall, refugees have integrated impressively. Thirty-five percent of refugee households have mortgages, 63 percent have US-born children, 40 percent are married to US citizens, and 67 percent have naturalized (Table 7).²³ Refugees are also “more likely to

²²For this reason, outcome-oriented studies only examine the early years following resettlement, when refugees' economic contributions are lowest and their public benefit use is highest (O'Brien and Raley 2018). Similarly, these studies count the education of refugee children as a fiscal cost, but fail to consider their long-term contributions to the nation's economy, or they count only refugees' tax contributions, not their spending or business ownership.

²³Other studies find that refugees naturalize at higher rates than comparable non-refugees (Kallick and Mathema 2016; NAE 2017; Bernstein 2018).

appreciate the security of US citizenship” and “more likely to feel a strong sense of attachment or gratitude to the country that gave them refuge” (NASEM 2015, 174, citations omitted).

The economic characteristics of refugees — given their starting point — are equally impressive. The labor force participation and employment rates of the 1.1 million refugees in CMS’s sample exceed those of the overall US population (Table 8). In addition, 10 percent of refugees are self-employed.²⁴ Refugees’ median personal income (\$20,000) equals that of non-refugees and exceeds the income of the foreign born overall (\$18,700). A higher percentage of refugees (38 percent) are skilled workers, compared to non-refugees (33 percent) or the foreign born (35 percent). Refugees regularly receive rave reviews from employers, who credit

Letter from Steven A. Tetreault, Owner, The Drying Co./ThermalTec, to Commonwealth Catholic Charities in Newport News, Virginia, May 18, 2018

I wanted to reach out to you to express my appreciation for contacting us last year asking me if I needed to hire employees. I was in desperate need of installers for our products and services and had been struggling to find more workers. Our work is helping our customers make their homes more comfortable and energy efficient. So much of our work is in crawl spaces and attics. These are not the most desirable places to work.

You told me about the refugees and how you were helping them get started in this country. I have to admit I was unsure if it was a good idea. I met with seven refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan and hired them all the following week. I was so impressed with their work ethic and just how polite and pleasant they were with my other employees and customers that we hired another 5 shortly after. . . .

It’s been a year now and all the original hires are still with me. I’m not sure how we would have made it through the year without them. We pride ourselves on high quality work and best solutions for our customers, and all the refugee employees have really helped us step up our game. I’ve come to know and love them all. They are working hard for their families and they work hard for me.

Some of them work with the US military and are absent from their jobs with us, but we are very proud of that too. Others have become US citizens while employed by us and others are working on theirs. They are proud people and do outstanding work every day. . . .

Last year in September at a convention we attended with our contracting network, Contractor Nation, they did a story on two of our refugees in front of almost two thousand contractors. The story was about the struggles in their homeland and how they desperately worked to come to the US and how, by building our business, we help people find jobs, buy homes, support families, and contribute to our communities and our country. Everyone was so moved. Many people asked me how they can help refugees get to their towns as they all are experiencing a shortage of labor too. I can’t thank you enough for finding us and introducing us to such great people. It may have saved my business.

them with enhancing or even saving their businesses. They are less likely to work in the jobs that new immigrants fill at high rates, such as construction, restaurants and food services, landscaping, services to buildings and dwellings, and private households.

The longer refugees reside in the United States, the more their public benefit use declines,²⁵ and their integration, well-being, and US family ties increase (Table 9). The refugees with the longest tenure exceed the most recent arrivals as measured by:

- households with mortgages (41 to 19 percent);
- English language proficiency (75 to 55 percent);²⁶
- naturalization rates (89 to 24 percent);
- college education (66 to 32 percent);²⁷

²⁴ Other studies also find that refugees start businesses at a higher rate (13 percent) than the US-born population (9 percent) (NAE 2017) and that, after 10 years, refugee business ownership rates rival those of natives (Kallick and Mathema 2016).

²⁵ Capps et al. (2015, 25) found that 42 percent of refugees living in the United States less than five years participate in the food stamp program, compared to 16 percent of those with 20 or more years of residence. Although 7 percent of recent arrivals receive cash welfare benefits, this figure falls to 3 percent for those with five or more years of residence (ibid.). Twenty-four percent of recent arrivals receive public health insurance, compared to 13 percent after 20 years. Other studies have found that refugees’ Medicaid and Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program (SNAP) participation decreases throughout time (HHS/ORR 2017, 16); there is little difference in welfare and SNAP uptake between refugees and the US-born (Evans and Fitzgerald 2017); and refugees use Social Security, Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), and Medicare at lower rates than the population average after 10 years; participate in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program at a similar level as that of the total population; and use SNAP and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) at higher rates (HHS 2017, 25).

²⁶ Refugees learn English faster than comparable immigrants (NAE 2017). After 10 years, most refugees have become proficient in English (Kallick and Mathema 2016). After five years, only 15.2 percent of adults speak no English (HHS/ORR 2017).

²⁷ Refugees who enter the United States prior to age 14 graduate from high school and attend college at the same rate as the US-born (Evans and Fitzgerald 2017). About 41.8 percent of refugees in Columbus, Ohio, are enrolled in or have graduated from college, compared to 43 percent of the overall population (Community Research Partners 2015).

Table 3. Number of Refugees per 1,000 Total Population, by State of Residence, in 2016 (States with 10,000 or More Refugees in CMS Sample; Ranked by Refugees per 1,000 Total Population).

State of Residence	Refugees in CMS Sample (Thousands)	Total US Population (Thousands)	Refugees per 1,000 Total Population
All states	1,089	323,128	3.4
Minnesota	61	5,520	11.1
Nebraska	15	1,907	8.0
Washington	58	7,288	7.9
New York	124	19,745	6.3
Iowa	18	3,135	5.7
California	178	39,250	4.5
Massachusetts	30	6,812	4.4
Michigan	43	9,928	4.4
Maryland	24	6,016	3.9
Kentucky	17	4,437	3.8
Arizona	24	6,931	3.5
Virginia	29	8,412	3.4
Pennsylvania	44	12,784	3.4
Oregon	14	4,093	3.4
Connecticut	12	3,576	3.4
New Jersey	30	8,944	3.3
Missouri	20	6,093	3.2
Illinois	39	12,802	3.1
Ohio	33	11,614	2.9
Georgia	28	10,310	2.7
Wisconsin	16	5,779	2.7
Indiana	16	6,633	2.5
Florida	46	20,612	2.2
North Carolina	22	10,147	2.2
Colorado	12	5,541	2.1
Texas	57	27,863	2.1
Tennessee	13	6,651	1.9
Other states and DC	65	50,303	1.3

Source: Column 1, data compiled by CMS, see text; column 2, 2016 ACS.

Table 4. Refugees in CMS Sample Residing in the Major Metro Areas (Metro Areas with 10,000 or More Refugees Are Shown).

Metro Area	Refugees
Total refugees in CMS sample	1,088,600
Refugees in CMS sample living in these 18 metro areas	643,800
<i>Percentage that resided in these 18 metro areas</i>	59%
New York–Newark–Jersey City, NY-NJ-PA	121,800
Los Angeles–Long Beach–Anaheim, CA	63,100
Minneapolis–St. Paul–Bloomington, MN-WI	52,100
Seattle–Tacoma–Bellevue, WA	42,500
Chicago–Naperville–Elgin, IL-IN-WI	35,500
Washington–Arlington–Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	33,400
San Diego–Carlsbad, CA	32,100
Detroit–Warren–Dearborn, MI	31,300
Philadelphia–Camden–Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD	28,200
Dallas–Fort Worth–Arlington, TX	27,700
Atlanta–Sandy Springs–Roswell, GA	24,800
San Francisco–Oakland–Hayward, CA	24,500
Sacramento–Roseville–Arden-Arcade, CA	23,500
Miami–Fort Lauderdale–West Palm Beach, FL	22,500
Boston–Cambridge–Newton, MA-NH	21,900
Phoenix–Mesa–Scottsdale, AZ	19,600
Houston–The Woodlands–Sugar Land, TX	15,600
San Jose–Sunnyvale–Santa Clara, CA	12,900

Source: Derived from 2016 ACS data, compiled by CMS; see text.

Table 5. Refugees in CMS Sample, by Country of Origin, Six Top States of Residence: 2016 (State Estimates Less Than 500 Not Shown).

Country	US Total	CA	NY	MN	WA	TX	FL
Total	1,088,600	178,100	124,100	61,400	57,800	57,400	46,300
Cuba	18,600	—	—	—	—	—	16,500
Albania	3,500	—	1,000	—	—	—	—
Bulgaria	2,700	—	—	—	—	—	—
Hungary	2,900	500	—	—	—	—	900
Romania	10,000	2,100	1,500	—	—	—	—
Croatia	4,300	—	—	—	—	700	—
Serbia	2,800	—	—	1,100	—	—	—
Bosnia	91,000	5,200	8,200	2,600	2,800	3,400	3,400
Latvia	2,700	600	—	—	—	—	—
Russia	97,700	17,600	23,500	1,700	2,700	1,700	4,600
Byelorussia	27,100	3,700	9,300	500	700	600	1,100
Moldavia	17,600	3,200	4,900	—	2,500	—	—
Ukraine	139,500	21,900	37,100	1,800	14,300	900	4,500
Armenia	20,800	18,900	500	—	—	—	—
Azerbaijan	7,200	800	2,000	—	—	—	—
Georgia	2,200	—	800	—	—	—	—
Kazakhstan	6,300	—	1,600	—	1,100	—	800
Uzbekistan	17,300	900	9,800	—	—	—	—
USSR, ns	9,600	1,600	1,200	—	700	—	—
Cambodia	8,800	4,200	500	—	—	—	—
Laos	51,800	14,100	—	10,900	2,000	1,600	1,700
Vietnam	92,600	33,900	1,900	4,100	5,500	8,600	2,700
Afghanistan	16,400	7,000	1,700	—	—	—	—
Bhutan	49,600	—	1,600	500	1,900	3,800	—
Burma	91,000	5,000	6,600	7,200	3,800	10,200	3,400
Iraq	131,100	26,000	3,100	—	5,500	12,900	3,200
Syria	6,600	—	—	—	—	—	—
Sudan	13,200	800	—	1,500	—	700	—
Liberia	22,500	500	1,100	4,200	—	2,300	—
Sierra Leone	2,000	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ethiopia	14,900	2,500	900	—	1,600	900	500
Somalia	73,900	1,600	700	24,500	8,100	1,200	—
Eritrea	12,500	2,700	600	—	1,900	700	—
Congo	17,600	1,100	2,900	—	—	4,100	—
Other countries	400	—	—	—	—	—	—

—, Zero or rounds to zero.

Source: CMS estimates of refugees derived from 2016 ACS; see text.

- labor force participation (68 to 61 percent),²⁸
- employment (66 to 55 percent),²⁹ and
- self-employment (14 to 4 percent).

Refugees from the middle group (1997 to 2006) had higher labor force and employment rates than refugees who arrived earliest (1987 to 1996), but this is likely due to the older age of the latter group (20 percent age 65 or older).

²⁸ Refugees entering the United States between ages 18 and 45 initially participate in the labor force at lower rates than the US-born (Evans and Fitzgerald 2017). After two years, their labor force participation rate equals that of the US population (HHS/ORR 2017). After six years, refugees overtake natives by this metric (Evans and Fitzgerald 2017). One study found that refugee employment rates rose from 17 percent in year 1 to 63.5 percent by year 3 (State of Colorado, Office of Economic Security 2016). In Columbus, Ohio, refugees' labor force participation rate (81.8 percent) exceeded the region's average of 77.1 percent (Community Research Partners 2015). Male refugees (67 percent) work at higher rates than US-born men (62 percent) (Capps et al. 2015). Refugee and US-born women work at the same rate (54 percent) (ibid.). The labor force participation rates of refugee women and US natives converge after 10 years (Kallick and Mathema 2016).

²⁹ Refugees also tend to have lower turnover rates than other employees (Kallick and Roldan 2018, 21), and often work in jobs that are unappealing to the US-born (NAE 2017).

Table 6. State of Residence with the Largest Number of Refugees for Each Country of Origin: 2016.

Country	Largest Number of Refugees in Any State	State of Residence of Largest Number
US total	178,100	N/A
Vietnam	33,900	California
Iraq	26,000	California
Armenia	18,900	California
Laos	14,100	California
Afghanistan	7,000	California
Cambodia	4,200	California
Eritrea	2,700	California
Ethiopia	2,500	California
Romania	2,100	California
USSR, ns	1,600	California
Latvia	600	California
Ukraine	37,100	New York
Russia	23,500	New York
Uzbekistan	9,800	New York
Byelorussia	9,300	New York
Moldavia	4,900	New York
Azerbaijan	2,000	New York
Kazakhstan	1,600	New York
Albania	1,000	New York
Georgia	800	New York
Somalia	24,500	Minnesota
Liberia	4,200	Minnesota
Serbia	1,100	Minnesota
Syria	1,800	Maryland
Sierra Leone	500	Maryland
Cuba	16,500	Florida
Hungary	900	Florida
Burma	11,800	Indiana
Bosnia	10,900	Missouri
Bhutan	9,100	Ohio
Congo	4,100	Texas
Sudan	2,400	Virginia
Croatia	800	Connecticut
Bulgaria	400	Georgia

Source: CMS estimates of refugees derived from 2016 ACS; see text.

The most telling comparison may be between long-term refugees and the total US population, which consists mostly of the native-born. The refugees who arrived between 1987 and 1996 *exceed* natives in median personal income, as well as in homeownership (41 vs. 37 percent with a mortgage), percentage living higher than the poverty line (86 to 84 percent), access to a computer and the internet (82 to 75 percent), and health insurance (93 to 91 percent).³⁰

In lay terms, in a relatively short period of time, the refugees in CMS's sample — who arrived penniless — became US citizens, homeowners, English speakers, employees, business owners, college graduates, insured, and computer literate at very high rates. These findings are all the more impressive because they occurred among a large population of refugees comprising all nationalities who arrived from 1987 to 2016,³¹ and not just highly achieving groups.

CMS also examined the characteristics of refugees — measured in 2000 and again in 2016 — from the former Soviet Union in the 1987 to 1999 period.³² Between 2000 and 2016:

³⁰ Refugees' income grows faster throughout time than that of other foreign-born groups (NAE 2017). The median household income of refugees who have lived in the United States for 25 years or more is \$67,000, \$14,000 more than the US average (ibid.). Refugee household income converges with the overall US population's average income after 10 years of residence (HHS 2017).

³¹ National origin, rather than state of settlement, seems more highly correlated with socioeconomic success and integration (Fix, Hooper, and Zong 2017, 20).

³² Notably, this population fell from 510,000 to 336,000 between 2000 and 2016. This suggests that roughly one-third emigrated (from the United States) and a small number died. For the total foreign born who arrived in 1987 to 1999, the comparable rate of "loss" was 20 percent. The

Table 7. Household and Demographic Characteristics of the CMS Sample of Refugees Compared to Three Other Populations: 2016 (in Thousands).

Household and Demographic Characteristics	Arrived in 1987 to 2016 Period			Total US Population
	Refugees	Non-refugees	Foreign Born	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Household characteristics				
Total population	1,089	1,089	32,116	323,128
Number of households	664	990	16,333	126,940
Average household size	1.6	1.1	2.0	2.5
Median household income	\$43,000	\$45,000	\$56,000	\$52,800
Percentage at or higher than poverty threshold	78%	82%	80%	84%
Households that have a mortgage	35%	36%	33%	37%
Households receiving food stamps	27%	18%	16%	12%
Children in household who are US-born (children can be any age)	63%	76%	73%	—
Demographic characteristics				
Years in the United States				
Total	1,089	1,089	32,116	—
Less than 15	36%	36%	51%	—
15 to 24	42%	42%	35%	—
25 or more	22%	22%	13%	—
Male	48%	48%	49%	49%
Marital status				
Total 15 years and older	1,046	1,042	30,387	262,189
Married	58%	54%	53%	45%
Married to US citizens	40%	30%	28%	41%
Age				
Total	1,089	1,089	32,116	323,128
Younger than 18	6%	6%	8%	23%
18 to 64	82%	87%	86%	62%
65 and older	13%	8%	7%	15%
Percentage naturalized	67%	42%	38%	—
Percentage with any health insurance	89%	76%	75%	91%
Percentage receiving Medicaid	36%	20%	20%	21%
Percentage receiving Medicare	14%	7%	6%	17%

—, Zero, not relevant, or not available.

Source: Columns 1 and 2, CMS estimates, see text; Columns 3 and 4, from 2016 ACS.

- the median household income of these refugees increased from \$31,000 to \$53,000;
- median personal income nearly tripled, from \$10,700 to \$31,000;
- the percentage of households with a mortgage grew from 30 to 40 percent;
- receipt of food stamps fell from 27 to 18 percent;
- English language proficiency rose;
- refugees with a college degree or some college increased from 68 to 80 percent;
- naturalization rates nearly doubled, from 47 to 89 percent;³³
- marriage to a US citizen rose from 33 to 51 percent; and
- the rates of labor force participation (59 to 69 percent), employment (57 to 66 percent), self-employment (10 to 15 percent), and skilled workers (33 to 38 percent) all increased (Table 10).

In short, this group successfully integrated during a 16-year period through citizenship, homeownership, work, income, education, and English language proficiency. Although not the subject of this study, the socioeconomic attainment of the children of refugees will likely surpass that of their parents.

relatively higher emigration rate of refugees from the former Soviet Union could reflect long-term improvements in the conditions in their countries.

³³By way of contrast, the percentage of those naturalized by 2016 for all foreign born who entered from 1987 to 1999 was 57 percent.

Table 8. Economic Characteristics of the CMS Sample of Refugees Compared to Three Other Populations: 2016 (in Thousands).

Economic Characteristics	Arrived in 1987 to 2016 Period			Total US Population
	Refugees	Non-refugees	Foreign Born	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Employment status				
Total 16 years and older	1,039	1,037	30,159	257,997
Number in the labor force	703	753	21,395	162,950
Percentage in the labor force	68%	73%	71%	63%
Employed	64%	69%	67%	60%
Self-employed	7%	8%	7%	6%
Unemployed	5.9%	5.2%	5.2%	5.7%
Median personal income	\$20,000	\$20,000	\$18,700	\$23,000
Percentage of labor who carpools (ages 16 and older)	8%	9%	10%	5%
Percentage with access to a vehicle	88%	91%	90%	94%
Hours worked per week (employed only)	39.6	39.5	39.3	39.1
Skilled workers ages 16 and older				
Skilled workers in the labor force	254	233	6,967	62,842
Percentage who are skilled workers	38%	33%	35%	42%
Management, business, and financial	12%	11%	11%	16%
Computer, math, science and engineering	9%	8%	8%	6%
Social services, legal, education, arts, and design	7%	7%	7%	11%
Healthcare practitioners and support	11%	8%	8%	9%
Percentage working in construction, restaurants and other food services, landscaping services, services to buildings and dwellings, crop production, and private households	11%	25%	26%	16%

—, Zero, not relevant, or not available.

Source: Columns 1 and 2, CMS estimates; see text. Columns 3 and 4, from 2016 ACS.

Finally, refugees promote the nation's competitiveness and security through their linguistic skills and diversity (Table 11). In a globalized world, language proficiency is essential to "trade, public safety, human security, cultural exchange, and international cooperation" (Heyman 2013, 70). The US Armed Forces and intelligence and law enforcement agencies rely on the language skills of refugees and immigrants to meet US military, counterterrorism, and law enforcement objectives (Kerwin and Stock 2007, 401).

V. Voluntary Agencies and the Catholic Experience

Resettled refugees strongly benefit from USRAP's public-private partnerships. In particular, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) partners with voluntary agencies to carry out refugee assistance programs and provide core resettlement services. Since 1980, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS) has settled nearly one-third of all refugees in the United States — more than any *nation* other than the United States (Kerwin 2015) — through the national network of Catholic Charities agencies.

The resettlement program has experienced backlash in some communities based on the concern that refugees can strain local resources (Brown and Scribner 2014). Yet voluntary agencies supplement federal funding with significant financial and in-kind support to refugees. One study, for example, found that the federal government funded only 39 percent of the cost of resettling refugees during their first 90 days in the country (LIRS 2009).

Beyond the services and resources they provide, voluntary agencies promote refugee integration through mobilizing communities in support of refugees. To that end, USCCB/MRS created the Parishes Organized to Welcome Refugees (POWR) program, which recruits volunteers to mentor, train, and assist refugees. Since 2010, POWR has provided modest grants to 52 Catholic Charities agencies, which have allowed them to recruit more than 14,500 volunteers, to establish more than 450 parish and community partnerships, and to generate \$8.1 million in cash and in-kind donations and services on behalf of 31,000 refugees from more than 50 countries (Sturm n.d.). Parishes have helped refugees to meet their initial needs for food, housing, furnishings, clothing, orientation, language training, employment, and medical assistance. At the most basic level, POWR has enabled the formation of new and lasting friendships between refugees and members of host communities, and it has promoted their integration.

Omar Al-Muqdad

Just seven years ago I would have never imagined myself as a refugee. But since the revolution started in Syria, my country has been engulfed in what seems like a never-ending war, and my life has been changed forever. When I arrived in the United States in 2012, and I was given my first piece of identification, I felt as if a whole new person had been reborn. When I left Syria, I had nothing but my broken heart. I was no longer welcomed in my country. The tyrant regime had taken away my loved ones, my identity, and my home.

Before the Syrian revolution started, I was a hardworking journalist, but it was almost impossible to practice my profession without constant harassment by the authorities. At one point, I decided to establish a private newspaper, but it was shut down after I wrote an article critical of the government. The Syrian regime used to imprison anyone who dared to criticize the government or question its legitimacy. Unfortunately I was one of the people incarcerated for speaking my mind about the regime.

My trial took place in a military court, and I was sentenced to three years in prison. I spent most of it in a terrible military prison where I was subjected to systematic torture for four months. My torture took many different forms. When my time in prison had ended, they took away my ID and passport and threw me out of prison. I went back to my work, but this time secretly and underground.

In 2011, when the unrest broke out in my hometown of Dara'a, all of us were exposed to barbaric treatment by the Syrian armed forces. I witnessed family members, friends, and neighbors getting detained or killed by the Syrian regime. In one protest, the armed forces stormed the crowd and started shooting randomly at us. One bullet missed me by a few inches, but landed in my friend's chest. I had only two possibilities in that country, death or detention, and I fled from Syria.

In the darkest of days, and in the hardest of times, the people who show up in your life and offer help mean everything to you. They provide you with hope, and a sense that there may be a future for you. Catholic Charities cared, they listened, and they offered me all kinds of help. They followed up and checked on me regularly. They valued me as a human being with dignity, which is more important than food and aid.

I was so fortunate to have found myself a new home in Arkansas, where I experienced the true hospitality and generosity of the South. I was so pleased by how friendly people were. In the little town of Fayetteville, I was welcomed with open arms by everyone I met, and I became part of the community in a matter of weeks. Being in the United States, "the land of the free," gave me a new chance in life, a new beginning. I was finally able to feel the true meaning of freedom. I found the kind of freedom that I needed the most as a human being and, of course, as a journalist. The kind of freedom I wish for all my people who have been suffering bombs, death, and destruction.

My future looks so bright right now, and I have many plans underway — to continue my education and continue my work in journalism and in making documentary films. I'm now in the final stages of producing a documentary about Thomas Jefferson, and there is a short film on its way as well: it's about my own story.

POWR honors Pope Francis's call "to foster a culture of encounter in every way possible — by increasing opportunities for intercultural exchange, documenting and disseminating best practices of integration, and developing programmes to prepare local communities for integration processes" (Francis 2018b).

The work of voluntary agencies builds on the initiative and dreams of refugees. Pope Francis memorably said that refugees are not "pawns on the chessboard of humanity" (Francis 2013), but are agents in their own lives, with hopes and aspirations. To that end, a small but growing number of Catholic Charities agencies support refugee entrepreneurial activities through microenterprise programs that provide training and access to small, credit-building loans for refugees who want to start their own business. Catholic Charities USA has partnered with the SunTrust Foundation to support agencies in piloting microbusiness programs.

The Refugee Assistance in Microenterprise (AIM) Project of Catholic Charities Diocese of St. Petersburg, for example, provides low-interest loans to refugee entrepreneurs in Hillsborough and Pinellas counties in Florida, but it has a wider objective as well, to foster the development of refugees in all their dimensions.

For the past 10 years, Catholic Charities of Camden's Small Business program has helped refugees and immigrants to start dozens of businesses, including food services, lawn care, drain clearing, auto repair, dog grooming, and janitorial work. The process begins with the development of a business plan. The program then assists refugees to access a microloan fund for business start-up costs. As necessary, Catholic Charities also works with refugees to help repair their credit.

Yasmin, an immigrant from Burma, is one of the program's success stories. He was able to save the money to buy a franchise and attend the company's training, as well as secure a \$15,000 loan to start the business. Today, he owns two sushi franchises and fully supports his family.

Catholic Charities of Oregon, in turn, assisted Mohammad to fulfill his lifelong dream of becoming a business owner. While living in Malaysia after leaving his troubled nation of Burma, Mohammad helped run a business with a family who took him in as their own. He could not, however, obtain legal status in Malaysia. "After living in Malaysia for 22 years," he says, "it felt like my own country, but the government would always reject me. Officials would come in all the time and take everything over."

After coming to the United States as a refugee, Mohammad worked hard and used his business skills to start a new life. He now runs a grocery store and works for Catholic Charities and local hospitals as a Rohingya interpreter. His life is still full of challenges, but he has the opportunity to succeed. "I came to the US by myself," he says. "My father still lives in Bangladesh, and I lost my mom in 2009. I've been separated from my family for 23 years. I never had a chance to see them after I left, because

Table 9. Selected Characteristics of CMS Sample of Refugees, by Period of Entry, Compared to Total US Population and Foreign Born Who Entered from 1987 to 2016 (in Thousands).

Characteristics	Total US Population	Entered 1987 to 2016		Entered 1987 to 1996	Entered 1997 to 2006	Entered 2007 to 2016
		Foreign Born	Total			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Total population	323,128	32,116	1,089	516	249	324
Median household income	\$52,800	\$56,000	\$43,000	\$50,000	\$48,000	\$31,200
Median personal income	\$23,000	\$18,700	\$20,000	\$28,000	\$21,600	\$10,000
Households receiving food stamps	12%	16%	27%	18%	25%	46%
Households that have a mortgage	37%	33%	35%	41%	38%	19%
Households at or higher than poverty threshold	84%	80%	78%	86%	83%	62%
Children in household who are US-born (children can be any age)	—	73%	63%	79%	72%	29%
Percentage with access to computer and the internet	75%	73%	77%	82%	80%	67%
Age in 2016						
Total	323,128	32,116	1,089	516	249	324
Younger than 18	23%	8%	6%	—	2%	17%
18 to 64	62%	86%	82%	80%	90%	77%
65 and older	15%	7%	13%	20%	8%	6%
Years in the United States						
Total	—	32,116	1,089	516	249	324
Less than 15 years	—	51%	36%	—	28%	100%
15 to 24 years	—	35%	42%	54%	72%	—
25 years or more	—	13%	22%	46%	—	—
Percentage who speak English well or very well, or speak only English (5 years and more)	—	70%	69%	75%	76%	55%
Some college or a degree (18 years or older)	60%	49%	53%	66%	51%	32%
Naturalized	—	38%	67%	89%	77%	24%
Has any health insurance	91%	75%	89%	93%	88%	84%
Receiving Medicaid	21%	20%	36%	27%	31%	54%
Receiving Medicare	17%	6%	14%	21%	10%	6%
Veterans (ages 18 and older)	7.4%	0.8%	1.0%	1.4%	0.8%	0.4%
Employment status						
Total 16 years and older	257,997	30,159	1,039	516	246	277
Labor force	63%	71%	68%	68%	74%	61%
Employed	60%	67%	64%	66%	69%	55%
Self-employed	9%	10%	10%	14%	10%	4%
Unemployed*	5.7%	5.2%	5.9%	3.8%	5.8%	10.3%
Usual hours worked per week (employed only)	39.1	39.3	39.6	40.7	39.5	37.4
Percentage of labor force who carools (ages 16 and older)	5%	10%	8%	6%	8%	12%

—, Zero, rounds to zero, or not applicable.

*Includes people unemployed or seeking work.

Source: Columns 1 and 2 from 2016 ACS. Columns 3 to 6, CMS sample of refugees from 2016 ACS; see text.

I was never given the legal status to see them. Since 2014, I have been given a chance to go and see them, after 23 years. It has been challenging, to not see them for so long, but by coming to this country, I will finally have the chance.”

VI. Conclusions and Recommendations

During its 38-year history, USRAP has resettled more than 3 million refugees, making it one of the largest, most successful humanitarian initiatives in US history (Brown and Scribner 2014, 102). The administration’s attacks on the program require a return to first principles. Beyond the economic, cultural, and social contributions of refugees, the US refugee program advances the nation’s interests because it:

- saves the lives of some of the world’s most vulnerable persons;
- continues “America’s tradition as a land that welcomes peoples from other countries” and shares the “responsibility of welcoming and resettling those who flee oppression” (Reagan 1981);
- promotes a “stable and moral world” (Helton 2002, 120);

Table 10. Selected Characteristics of Refugees from the Former USSR Who Arrived in the 1987 to 1999 Period, Enumerated in the 2000 ACS and 2016 ACS (in Thousands).

Characteristics	Refugees from Former USSR in CMS Sample, Arrived 1987 to 1999	
	In 2000 ACS Data	In 2016 ACS Data
	(1)	(2)
Refugees from former USSR,* entered 1987 to 1999	510	336
Average household size	2.1	1.4
Median household income	\$31,000	\$53,000
Median personal income	\$10,700	\$31,000
Percentage at or higher than poverty threshold	79%	86%
Households that have a mortgage	30%	40%
Households receiving food stamps	27%	18%
Years in the United States		
Total	510	336
Less than 15 years	100%	—
15 to 24 years	—	62%
25 years or more	—	38%
Percentage who speak English well or very well, or speak only English (5 years and more)	74%	79%
Some college or a degree (18 years or older)	68%	80%
Naturalized	47%	89%
Married	56%	58%
Married to US citizens	33%	51%
Age (in years)		
Total	510	336
Younger than 18	17%	—
18 to 64	69%	78%
65 and older	13%	22%
Employment status		
Total 16 years and older	436	336
Percentage in the labor force	59%	69%
Employed	57%	66%
Self-employed	11%	15%
Unemployed	4.6%	4.2%
Skilled workers (ages 16 and older, in the labor force)	33%	38%

—, Zero, rounds to zero, or not applicable.

*Countries included in the data in this table: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Byelorussia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and USSR, ns. Source: 2000 and 2016 ACS. See text for methods of computation.

- reduces spontaneous, unregulated arrivals and encourages developing nations to remain engaged in refugee protection (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan 2017, 42–43);
- promotes cooperation from individuals, communities, and nations that are central to US military and counterterrorism strategies;³⁴ and
- bridges the gap between US values and practices.

The refugee resettlement program has long struggled with coordination challenges, diverse goals, a narrow metric for integration, attenuated screening protocols, and insufficient federal funding (Brown and Scribner 2014, 110–12). The following recommendations would significantly strengthen the program:

- The program should improve information sharing between its constituent agencies, better coordinate its admission and resettlement programs, and more effectively serve vulnerable refugees.³⁵

³⁴Brief for Retired Generals and Admirals of the US Armed Forces in Support of Respondents at 19-21, *Trump v. Hawaii*, No. 17-965 (Mar. 30, 2018).

³⁵As it stands, insufficient information sharing between USRAP’s participating federal agencies, Congress, states, localities, and nongovernmental stakeholders “negatively affect planning, placement decisions, and provision of support services to refugees with special needs and vulnerabilities” (Brown and Scribner 2014, 114–16).

Table 11. Language Spoken at Home: Refugees in CMS Sample (Based on 2015 ACS Data).*

Language Spoken	Number
Total	1,088,600
Russian	269,600
English	98,100
Arabic	91,600
Serbo-Croatian, Yugoslavian, Slavonian	89,100
Vietnamese	80,800
Hamitic	66,700
Burmese, Lisu, Lolo	48,000
Ukrainian, Ruthenian, Little Russian	43,900
Dravidian	38,900
Tibetan	33,500
Spanish	25,100
Indonesian	24,500
Armenian	23,000
Amharic, Ethiopian, etc.	22,700
Thai, Siamese, Lao	19,100
Chinese	16,100
Near East Arabic dialect	14,300
Rumanian	13,600
Persian, Iranian, Farsi	12,500
Sub-Saharan Africa	10,400
French	8,600
Other Persian dialects	7,800
Other East/Southeast Asian	7,200
All other	23,600

Source: 2015 ACS; refugee data compiled as described in the text for 2016, then controlled to total refugees in 2016.

*ACS data for 2015 were used for this table because language data are not yet available for 2016 in Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS). Languages spoken by fewer than 5,000 refugees are not shown.

- The federal government should seek to reconcile the program's diverse, sometimes conflicting, programmatic goals, including protection of the most vulnerable and refugee integration (ibid., 107).
- The federal government should also broaden the program's overarching and legitimate focus on self-sufficiency through early employment, to a model that comprehensively assesses each refugee's needs and seeks to develop the skills, knowledge, credentials, and human capital that will advance their long-term prospects (GAO 2012, 39; Kerwin 2012, 10; Brown and Scribner 2014, 107).³⁶
- Congress should expedite refugee integration by allowing refugees to enter the United States with LPR status, rather than requiring them to adjust to LPR status after one year.
- The participating federal agencies should shorten the refugee screening process — without sacrificing its rigor — by aligning the expiration dates of health and security screenings, and it should expedite the admission of the family members of refugees (Kerwin 2012, 7; Nezer 2014, 129).
- Congress should pass legislation to permit the private sponsorship of refugees as a complement to (not a replacement for) the current system, while maintaining refugees' access to public programs and benefits that promote their integration and well-being.
- Federal funding for the program — which has fallen sharply since 1980 — should be increased to alleviate the costs borne by local communities and resettlement agencies.³⁷

³⁶ An exhaustive report by the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) on the economic benefits of migration concludes that integration policies should address health care, housing, education, and social and civic issues holistically. Integration policies that address only employment issues disadvantage the already disadvantaged (MGI 2016, 12).

³⁷ In 1980, the federal government fully reimbursed states for the welfare and medical costs of refugees and provided benefits to refugees for their first 36 months in the country (US Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy 1981, 181), and provided refugee cash assistance (RCA) and refugee medical assistance (RMA) during the same period. By 1991, the federal government had reduced the period of RCA and RMA benefits to eight months (Nezer 2014, 138). By October 1990, the federal government stopped covering the state share (for refugees) of Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Medicaid, and SSI (Brown and Scribner 2014, 109).

- The US Department of Education and US Department of Labor should work with states to establish re-credentialing programs that would enable refugees to use their skills to transition into employment in their respective fields while addressing key US labor shortages.
- The administration should expand the Refugee Microenterprise Development program within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which provides microloans and technical assistance to help refugee entrepreneurs establish new businesses.

These recommendations would address longstanding programmatic challenges. However, these challenges do not justify efforts to dismantle the program or otherwise diminish the federal government’s responsibility for it. As it stands, the program’s virtues still far exceed its shortcomings. Overall, USRAP should be strengthened and refugee admissions increased, as part of a broad recommitment to US development, humanitarian, and protection programs. Refugees “share a legitimate desire for knowing and having, but above all for being more” (Francis 2013). They should not be viewed as a burden or threat, but as people teeming with possibility and potential who — if given the chance — will continue to strengthen and revitalize our nation.

Appendix A

Table AI. Summary of Data Selection for Refugees in This Article.

1. Total refugees admitted, 1987 to 2016 (Table I)	2,270,000
2. Total refugees in the 39 countries that had at least one year in which refugees exceeded arriving LPRs by at least a 2-to-1 ratio	1,984,000
3. Sum of the country/year cells that had at least a 2-to-1 ratio of refugees to arriving LPRs (this is the number that would have been counted in 2016 if none had died, departed, or been omitted from the ACS)	1,383,000
4. Refugees, as selected in (3) of this list, who were counted in the 2016 ACS	1,088,000
5. Percentage counted in 2016 ³⁸ (5) = (4) divided by (3)	79%

Source: See Section II.

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³⁸The percentage of 79 percent, counted in 2016, line 5, does not represent undercount. It indicates that approximately 20 percent of the refugees who arrived in the 1987 to 2016 period had emigrated by 2016, and it includes a small number who died.

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