

THE INTEGRATION OUTCOMES OF U.S. REFUGEES

Successes and Challenges



By Randy Capps and Kathleen Newland
with Susan Fratzke, Susanna Groves, Gregory Auclair,
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Executive Summary

There are currently more than 16 million refugees worldwide. In 2013, the United States, with the largest resettlement program in the world, accepted two-thirds (66,000) of the 98,000 refugees who were permanently resettled that year.

The scale of the U.S. resettlement program and the increasing diversity of resettled refugees pose challenges for refugee service providers. The budget of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has not kept pace with inflation, while ORR's mission has expanded greatly to include programs serving growing numbers of trafficking victims and unaccompanied child migrants encountered at the U.S.-Mexico border. At the same time, many refugees need intensive services to find employment and improve their economic self-sufficiency, with some recent groups arriving with very low levels of both English proficiency and native-language literacy. It is not surprising that in this challenging environment the resettlement program has been criticized for inadequately supporting refugees and that political resistance has emerged in some jurisdictions.

The scale of the U.S. resettlement program and the increasing diversity of resettled refugees pose challenges for refugee service providers.

The goal of this report is to inform public debates about U.S. refugee resettlement with new analyses of the characteristics of arriving refugees and their long-term integration outcomes. Using U.S. Department of State Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS) data that have not been previously publicly released, this report provides new findings on arriving refugees' characteristics. For a snapshot of the overall refugee population, including those with long-term U.S. experience, the findings draw from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). Key findings include:

- ***The origins of U.S. refugees are increasingly diverse.*** The nationalities represented among new arrivals rose from 11 in 1980 to 64 in 2013, and the number of primary languages spoken rose from 114 in 2004 to 162 in 2013. This growth in diversity reflects efforts by the U.S. government to be more responsive to refugee crises worldwide. Greater diversity also means that refugees resettled today have a wider range of education levels and linguistic backgrounds, potentially complicating service delivery for resettlement providers.
- ***The refugee resettlement program's key goal of promoting early employment is largely being achieved.*** Refugees are more likely to be employed than the U.S.-born population. During the 2009 – 11 period, refugee men were more likely to work than U.S.-born men (67 percent versus 62 percent), while refugee women were as likely to work as U.S.-born women (54 percent). Only three out of the ten largest origin groups of refugee men (Burmese, Iraqis, and Somalis) had lower employment rates than U.S.-born men, and each group was resettled relatively recently.
- ***Refugees' incomes rise substantially with length of U.S. residence, but remain low overall.*** In 2009 – 11 the median annual household income of refugees with at least 20 years of U.S. residence was \$31,000 higher than the median income of those with five years or less of residence. Yet, even with 20 years of residence, refugees' household income remained below the average for the native born—in contrast to 2000, when there was no income gap between refugees with 20 years' residence and natives. Lower starting incomes and less income



progression over two decades for more recent arrivals suggest that the economic climate for refugee integration may have become more challenging since the 2007 – 09 recession.

- ***Refugees' participation in public benefit programs declines as their length of residence increases.*** In 2009 – 11, food stamp participation was relatively high (42 percent) for refugees with five years or less of U.S. residence, but fell sharply to 16 percent for those with more than 20 years of residence. Similarly, cash welfare participation dropped from 7 percent for refugees with five years or less of U.S. residence to 2 percent for those in the United States for more than two decades. Public health insurance coverage also declined from 24 percent to 13 percent. Despite these declines, refugees remained slightly more dependent on public benefit programs than the U.S. born 20 years after resettlement. Nonetheless, declining public benefit participation suggests that refugees' economic self-sufficiency increases with time in the United States.
- ***Recent refugees of several common nationalities arrive with very low language skills and education levels.*** Among refugees arriving from Burma, Bhutan, Liberia, and Somalia during 2004 – 13 half or fewer were literate in their primary language. More than 40 percent of Somali refugee women residing in the United States in 2009 – 11 lacked a high school education, as did more than 40 percent of Burmese and Bhutanese men and women. The educational attainment of refugees does not appear to have changed much over time: 31 percent of refugees arriving during 1980 – 89 had less than a high school diploma versus 29 percent of those arriving in 2006 – 11. The U.S. resettlement program's heavy emphasis on getting refugees into jobs quickly may leave little room to support their ongoing education.
- ***Most refugees have limited English skills.*** Like other immigrants, refugees' English proficiency increases with time in the United States. Nonetheless, in 2009 – 11, 58 percent of refugees who had been in the United States for 20 years or more were Limited English Proficient (LEP). Limited English skills may slow the integration of some groups of refugees in particular (e.g., Cubans and Vietnamese) and lead to lower incomes and higher dependence on public benefits.
- ***Recent refugees with low education and literacy levels have low incomes.*** In 2009 – 11 more than half of refugees from Somalia, Iraq, Burma, Bhutan, and Liberia had household incomes below twice the federal poverty level—versus one-third of U.S. natives.
- ***Factors other than human capital may help decide refugees' economic trajectories.*** The United States' two largest refugee-origin groups, Cubans and the Vietnamese, have widely divergent economic outcomes. Fifty-six percent of Cuban refugees in FY 2009 – 11 had household incomes below twice the poverty level, versus 35 percent of Vietnamese refugees. Both groups had similar English proficiency and educational attainment levels at arrival. Thus, factors other than human capital likely contribute to differing economic trajectories.

Policymakers might consider how to better meet the needs of refugee groups that are at particular disadvantage upon arrival in order to support their long-term integration. Refugees often wait in refugee camps and other locations for months or even years for resettlement, and enrollment in predeparture programs during this time could help fill gaps in their literacy, language, and job skills.

U.S. refugee resettlement programs generally have limited budgets, and focus on serving the most recent arrivals. Expanding the education and language-learning opportunities of disadvantaged refugees already in the United States will require improving their access to mainstream education and job training programs.

On a broader policy level, the number of refugees worldwide is surging—particularly in the Middle East—and the United States continues to admit more refugees for permanent resettlement than any other country. Despite challenges, the U.S. refugee program has decades of experience in successful



resettlement. Maintaining financial and political support for this program is critical as the number of refugees in need of resettlement continues to increase.

I. Introduction

Nearly 17 million refugees were displaced worldwide as of mid-2014, a number that was almost certain to grow amid raging conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere.¹ As the world's foremost destination for refugee resettlement, the United States has provided a durable resettlement solution for millions. Approximately two-thirds of refugees resettled globally in 2013 (66,000 out of 98,000) came to this country.² Public doubts and political resistance have emerged in the absence of solid data on the outcomes of resettlement efforts. One recent criticism is that the U.S. program invests too little in integration support, particularly at the local level.³ A lack of data also makes it difficult to identify problems that may have policy solutions, or that may be specific to particular groups of refugees rather than to the resettled population as a whole.

To better understand trends in refugee resettlement and integration in the United States, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analyzed recent, previously unpublished administrative data from the U.S. government agencies that operate the resettlement program and data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS). Drawing on these data, the findings in this report highlight specific factors underlying the integration challenges facing refugees and U.S. resettlement service providers.

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for millions.*

This report begins by exploring existing resettlement policies and trends in refugee arrivals to the United States. It then draws on ACS data to examine refugee integration outcomes over time (with specific attention to educational attainment, English language proficiency, household income, and participation in public benefit programs). The report finds that, as their years in the United States increase, refugees' income levels and benefits use approximate those of the U.S. born, suggesting that most refugees become self-supporting over time—a core goal of the U.S. resettlement program. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that certain groups of recent arrivals may be at a particular disadvantage relative to older cohorts in terms of their English language skills and education levels at arrival. The minimal level of support for employment, education, and language services provided through the resettlement program may be insufficient to meet the greater needs of these groups. Based on these findings, the report concludes with several recommendations for further exploration and policy development by resettlement authorities.

1 UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR: Mid-Year Trends 2014* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2015), 21, www.unhcr.org/54aa91d89.html.

2 UNHCR, *War's Human Cost: UNHCR Global Trends 2013* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2014), 20–1, www.unhcr.org/5399a14f9.html.

3 Anastasia Brown and Todd Scribner, "Unfulfilled Promises, Future Possibilities: The Refugee Resettlement System in the United States," *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 2, no. 2 (2014): 101–20, <http://jmhs.cmsny.org/index.php/jmhs/article/view/27>.



Box I. Data Sources

Refugee Characteristics at Arrival

The profile of refugees arriving in the United States during fiscal year (FY) 2000-13 presented here is based on administrative data provided to the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) by the Department of Homeland Security, the Office of Refugee Resettlement, and the Department of State's Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS), among other sources. These administrative data are limited in some ways, but they represent the best available information about arriving refugees. The data are generally self-reported during the resettlement application process.

MPI's analysis of these data focuses on the ten largest national origin groups arriving during the FY 2000-13 period: Burmese, Iraqis, Somalis, Bhutanese, Cubans, Iranians, Ukrainians, Liberians, Russians, and Vietnamese.

Refugees' Integration Outcomes

The section of the report focusing on integration outcomes uses American Community Survey (ACS) data from the U.S. Census Bureau to analyze population characteristics and socioeconomic outcomes for refugees who arrived in the United States since the refugee program officially began in 1980. Refugee status is assigned based on characteristics available in the ACS (see Appendix for further details).

More than two-thirds of the ACS population assigned refugee status arrived before 2000: 28 percent arrived in 1980-89, and 40 percent in 1990 through 1999. The remaining 32 percent arrived in 2000 through 2011. Fifty-seven countries of origin comprise the refugee population captured by the ACS sample. Vietnam and Cuba are the most common countries of refugee origin, each accounting for 20 percent. The next largest origin countries are Russia and Ukraine, at 7 percent and 6 percent, respectively. Laos, Iran, Iraq, Bosnia, and Cambodia each account for 3 to 4 percent of the refugee population. No other country comprises more than 3 percent of the refugee population.

The report disaggregates the ten countries with the most refugee arrivals during FY 2000 through FY 2011, according to administrative data. These countries are Bhutan, Burma, Cuba, Liberia, Iran, Iraq, Russia, Somalia, Ukraine, and Vietnam (see Appendix for a complete list of countries for which ACS data are available). The report does not disaggregate those countries with high refugee inflows before 2000 that were not in the top ten after 2000.

The ACS does not identify Bhutan, one of the ten national origins represented by the most refugee arrivals, and so this report uses 2010 Census tables for persons reporting Bhutanese ancestry. Almost all individuals who reported Bhutanese ancestry in the 2010 Census arrived after 2000, and the estimated population closely approximates the number of Bhutanese refugee admissions. Assessments of refugee progress over time are based on cross-sectional analyses of groups, not longitudinal analyses of individuals.

The global need for resettlement is likely to remain high in the coming years amid growing and protracted displacement in Syria and Iraq. As of March 2015, at least 3.9 million people had sought refuge outside Syria according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and at least 6.5 million remained internally displaced.⁴ More than 425,000 Iraqis were refugees in July 2014, although this number has likely grown substantially since an outbreak of violence in the summer of 2014; estimates

4 UNHCR reported 3.9 million registered refugees from Syria as of May 5, 2015. A further 11,300 were awaiting registration, and reports indicate many more may have chosen not to register with authorities. See UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response: Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal," accessed May 5, 2015, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>; UNHCR, "2015 UNHCR country operations profile – Syrian Arab Republic," accessed April 3, 2015, www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486a76.html.



put the internally displaced population in Iraq above 3 million as of January 2015.⁵ Most Syrian and Iraqi refugees are hosted by a handful of neighboring countries, such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon.⁶ The international community is focusing on mechanisms for other countries, including the United States, to share responsibility of caring for refugee populations. Understanding outcomes and trajectories for resettled refugees in the United States will be crucial to designing new initiatives and retooling existing programs to meet these increased demands.

II. U.S. Resettlement Policies

The U.S. refugee resettlement program is the largest—and one of the oldest—in the world. In recent years, the program has aimed to resettle between 70,000 and 80,000 individuals per year. These numbers declined with processing delays and security restrictions in the late 2000s, when they were well below the ceilings set by the U.S. president following consultations with Congress.⁷ Arrivals recovered recently, nearly reaching the ceilings in fiscal years (FY) 2013 and 2014.⁸

Box 2. Who Is A Refugee? The U.S. Government's Definition

The United States defines a refugee as “any person who is outside any country of such person’s nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.” The president may also designate as refugees persons who are within their country of nationality or habitual residence. The term does not include any persons who ordered, incited, assisted, or otherwise participated in the persecution of others.

Source: U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act 101(a) (42).

- 5 UNHCR, “2015 UNHCR Country Operations Profile—Iraq,” accessed February 17, 2015, www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486426&submit=GO; Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), “Iraq IDP Figures Analysis,” updated January 15, 2015, www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/iraq/figures-analysis.
- 6 As of late March, Turkey hosted more than 1.7 million registered Syrian refugees, Lebanon had registered 1.1 million, and more than 627,000 were registered in Jordan. Beyond the Syrian conflict, UNHCR figures indicate that approximately 86 percent of the world’s refugees are hosted by developing countries, most of them neighbors of countries in conflict. See UNHCR, “Syria Regional Refugee Response: Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal,” UNHCR, *UNHCR: Global Trends 2013* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2014), 2, www.unhcr.org/54aa91d89.html.
- 7 See Department of State (DOS), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2013: Report to the Congress* (Washington, DC: DOS, DHS, and HHS, 2012), iv–v and 5, www.state.gov/documents/organization/198157.pdf.
- 8 DOS, DHS, and HHS, *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2015*, 5.



Once a refugee has been referred for resettlement, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) determines whether to admit the applicant on the basis of an interview and other evidence.⁹ After a decision to admit an applicant is made, the case is referred to a resettlement agency, a nongovernmental organization that receives funding from the Department of State (DOS) and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to resettle refugees in local communities.

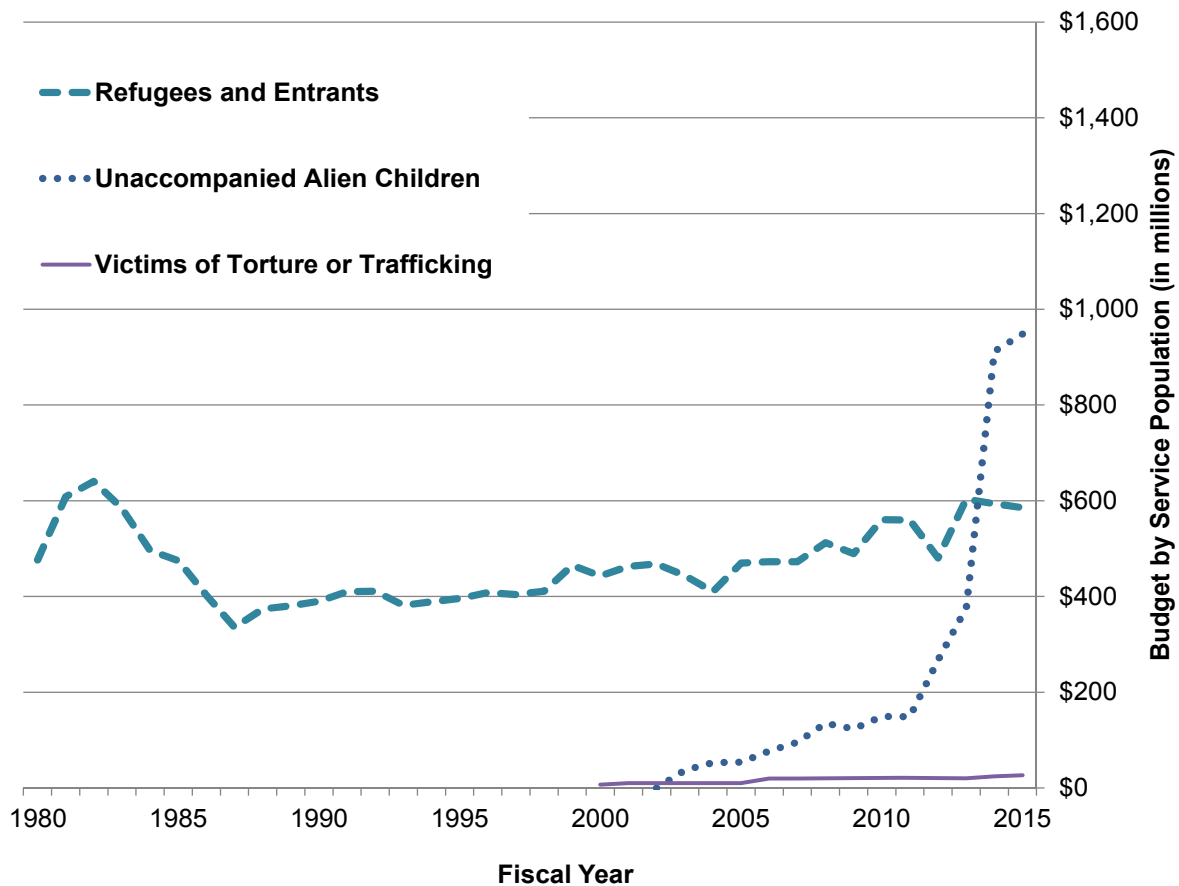
The U.S. resettlement program emphasizes getting refugees in jobs as fast as possible. The DOS Reception and Placement Program provides resettlement agencies with funding to support refugees' reception and accommodation for the first 30 days after arrival, including food, housing, clothing, and support for employment guidance and language training. After this initial period, refugees are expected to enroll in mainstream social benefit systems and/or obtain employment. Local resettlement agencies provide ORR-funded employment, language, and other services to refugees during their first five years in the United States, though these services are mostly concentrated during refugees' first few months in the country.¹⁰

While the scale of the program implemented by the U.S. government and its partners is impressive by almost any international standard,¹¹ it has come under recent criticism for not increasing funding and support for reception and integration sufficiently to address the growing size and needs of resettled populations.¹² ORR's total budget increased sharply starting in FY 2013 in response to a rise in unaccompanied children crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. Funding for services to refugee populations, however, has been flat for almost 25 years (see Figure 1). Additionally, in June 2014 to serve unaccompanied children ORR diverted \$94 million from programs serving formally admitted refugees, although almost \$23 million was returned to refugee programs later that summer.¹³ Another concern has been that ORR-funded employment services focus too heavily on immediate employment at the expense of obtaining better job matches, especially for highly educated refugees. Service providers, for example, have expressed frustration that funding does not allow them to prioritize training or skills development programs that might help refugees find higher-skilled and better-paid work in the longer term.¹⁴

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- 9 The United States accepts resettlement cases through three streams. Priority one (P-1) refugees must be outside their country of origin and are referred by UNHCR, a U.S. embassy, or nongovernmental organization for resettlement on the basis of a fear of persecution or return to a country where they are at risk of persecution. P-1 refugees may also be referred on the basis that a long-term solution to their displacement is not possible in their current country of residence. Priority two (P-2) refugees must be members of groups identified by the United States as a particular protection priority. Nationals of the former Soviet Union, Cuba, and Iraq, and minors in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala may apply for resettlement from within their country of origin; nationals of other priority groups must apply from outside their origin country. Finally, priority three (P-3) individuals are nationals of certain countries who are admitted as immediate family members of refugees already present in the United States, or of U.S. permanent residents or citizens who originally entered the country as refugees. See U.S. Government, "Country Chapter: The United States of America," in *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2014), 4, www.unhcr.org/3c5e5a764.html.
- 10 DOS Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, "Refugee Admissions, Reception, and Placement Program" (fact sheet, December 2012), www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/onepagereleases/202396.htm.
- 11 By contrast, the other two major destinations, Australia and Canada, resettled 13,200 and 12,200 refugees respectively in 2013. Sweden, the fourth largest destination, resettled 1,900 individuals. Most other countries resettled fewer than 1,000 refugees. See UNHCR, *War's Human Cost*.
- 12 Brown and Scribner, "Unfulfilled Promises," U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Refugee Resettlement: Greater Consultation with Community Stakeholders Could Strengthen Program* (Washington, DC: GAO, 2012), 30, www.gao.gov/assets/600/592975.pdf.
- 13 Tina Griego, "Immigration Policy Leaves Refugee Programs Scrambling for Funds," *Washington Post*, August 13, 2014, www.washingtonpost.com/news/storyline/wp/2014/08/13/immigration-policys-unintended-consequences-refugee-programs-left-scrambling-for-funds/?tid=ptv_rellink.
- 14 GAO, *Refugee Resettlement: Greater Consultation with Community Stakeholders*.



Figure 1. U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement Budget, by Service Population, FY 1980 – 2015



Notes: All budget figures are in U.S. dollars, not adjusted for inflation.

Sources: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of budget data from Andorra Bruno, *Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Policy* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, versions updated in 2002, 2006, 2012, and 2015), <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL31269.pdf>; Joyce Violet, *Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Policy: Facts and Issues* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 1999), http://assets.opencrs.com/rpts/98-668_19991206.pdf; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS/ORR), *Annual Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: HHS/ORR, 1980 – 2012), www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/resource/annual-orr-reports-to-congress; HHS/ORR, *Refugee Resettlement Program*, Report to the Congress (Washington, DC: HHS/ORR, 1992), www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/annual_orr_report_to_congress_1991.pdf.

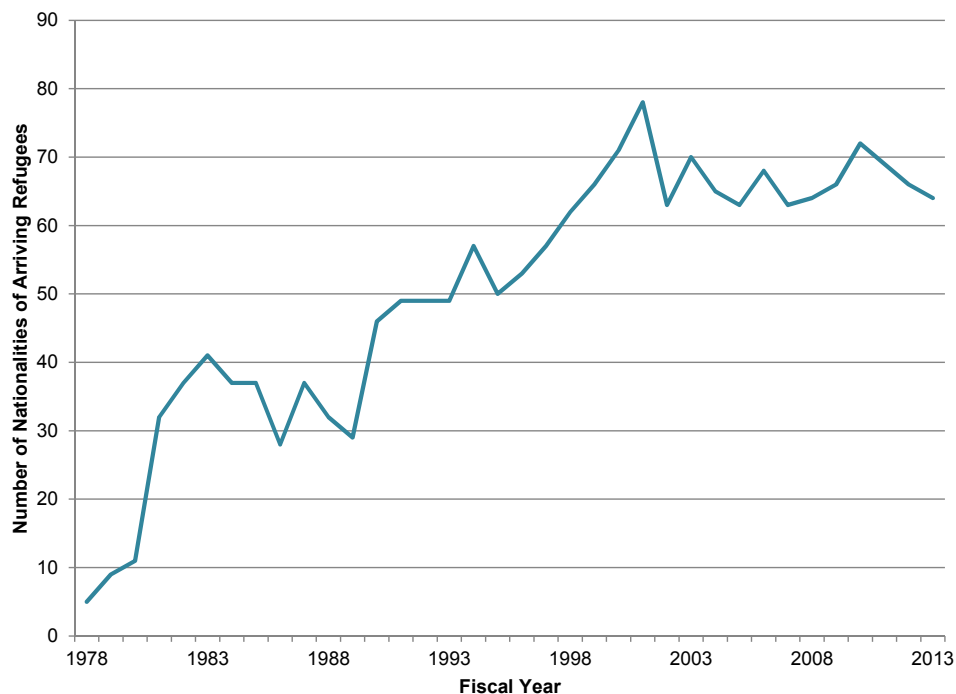
III. Refugees' Characteristics at Arrival, FY 2002 - 13

The characteristics and origins of refugees targeted for resettlement by the United States have evolved substantially since the U.S. program was formally created in 1980. Not only are the refugees being resettled today more diverse in terms of national origin, they also tend to have a wider range of education levels and linguistic backgrounds, potentially complicating service delivery for resettlement providers.

From FY 2002 – 13 the United States admitted 644,500 refugees from 113 countries. The number of nationalities rose steadily during the 1980s and 1990s, and stabilized over the past decade, when refugees came from an average of 66 different nation origins annually (see Figure 2). The increased

diversity reflects efforts by the U.S. government to be more responsive to refugee crises worldwide, rather than a change in the number or nature of these crises.¹⁵

Figure 2. Number of Nationalities of Arriving Refugees, FY 1978 – 2013



Source: MPI analysis of data from the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS) for individual years FY 1978 – 2013.

In addition to more national origins, refugees have increasingly diverse ethnic and socioeconomic characteristics that distinguish even those from the same national origin. For example, many Iraqi refugees who came to the United States before 2000 were from Kurdish regions, while many arriving in the last ten years are from Baghdad.¹⁶ Such intranational differences may not be reflected in the aggregate data employed here, but can greatly affect the needs of refugee groups.

The president, after consultations with Congress, set annual refugee resettlement ceilings at 70,000 for both FY 2014 and FY 2015. Resettlement slots continue to be distributed among a number of priority regions, suggesting that the national origin of refugee arrivals will remain diverse.¹⁷

A. Age Distribution of Refugees

Most recently resettled refugees are working age: The median age of refugees resettled in the United

15 Most resettlement slots are allocated to specific geographic regions and crises, with the exception of a few thousand “unallocated reserve” slots. The most recent refugee admissions report explains the shift in resettlement priorities as a post-Cold War policy shift: “The end of the Cold War dramatically altered the context in which the USRAP [U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program] operated. The program shifted its focus away from large groups concentrated in a few locations (primarily refugees from Vietnam, the former Soviet Union, and the former Yugoslavia) and began to admit refugees representing over 50 nationalities per year.” See DOS, DHS, and HHS, *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2015*, 3.

16 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS) data.

17 DOS, DHS, and HHS, *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2015*.



States in FY 2013 was 25. The majority of arrivals (66 percent) were of working age (16 to 64), while only 3 percent were ages 65 and older. Thirty-four percent were school age (5-18) or younger.¹⁸

Seen in a wider time frame, 28 percent of the refugees resettled in the United States during FY 2002 – 13 were younger than age 14 when they arrived. Some groups were younger than others: 36 percent of Liberian and 34 percent of Somali refugees were under 14, compared with only 13 percent of Iranian and 19 percent of Cuban refugees. At the other end of the age spectrum, Russian, Ukrainian, and Iranian refugees were more than twice as likely as other refugees overall to be 65 and older at the time of resettlement. Burmese, Somali, and Liberian refugees were the least likely to be ages 65 and older.

Table 1. Age Distribution of Arriving Refugees from Ten Largest National Origin Groups, (%), FY 2002 – 13

Country	Under Age 14	Ages 14 to 20	Ages 21 to 64	Ages 65 and Older
Burma	32	15	51	1
Iraq	27	12	57	4
Somalia	34	22	42	2
Bhutan	22	16	58	5
Cuba	19	11	64	6
Iran	13	12	67	8
Ukraine	31	15	46	8
Liberia	36	25	37	2
Russia	27	15	49	9
Vietnam	26	11	57	6

Source: MPI analysis of WRAPS data, FY 2002 – 13 pooled.

Age at arrival can have implications for refugees' integration outcomes. In the short run, refugee groups with more children and fewer adults might be expected to have lower incomes and greater reliance on social benefits. But in the longer term, refugees who arrive as children will almost certainly have more opportunities than adults to complete additional education and develop stronger English language skills.

B. Native Language Diversity

Refugees' linguistic backgrounds are increasingly varied and complex (see Figure 3).¹⁹ From FY 2004 – 13, the United States admitted refugees who were native speakers of at least 228 languages.²⁰ The ten most common native languages of refugees arriving during this period were Arabic, Nepali, Somali, Spanish, Sgaw Karen (a Burmese language), Russian, Farsi, Hmong, Chaldean (a language primarily spoken by Christians in northern Iraq), and Burmese. Sixty percent of refugees were native speakers of one of these languages.

Refugees resettled in FY 2013 spoke at least 162 native languages; 1,277 spoke what can only be

¹⁸ Ibid., 59.

¹⁹ Refugees reported their native languages during prearrival intake interviews. Only one native language is coded per individual even if that individual is proficient in multiple languages. There may be inconsistencies in the way refugees define their native languages, with some individuals reporting languages indigenous to their ethnic groups, and others reporting the languages in which they were educated. Also, there may be cases of incomplete or missing information.

²⁰ Data on the native languages and literacy of refugees admitted to the United States from fiscal year (FY) 2002 – 03 were incomplete, and these years are therefore excluded from MPI's analysis.

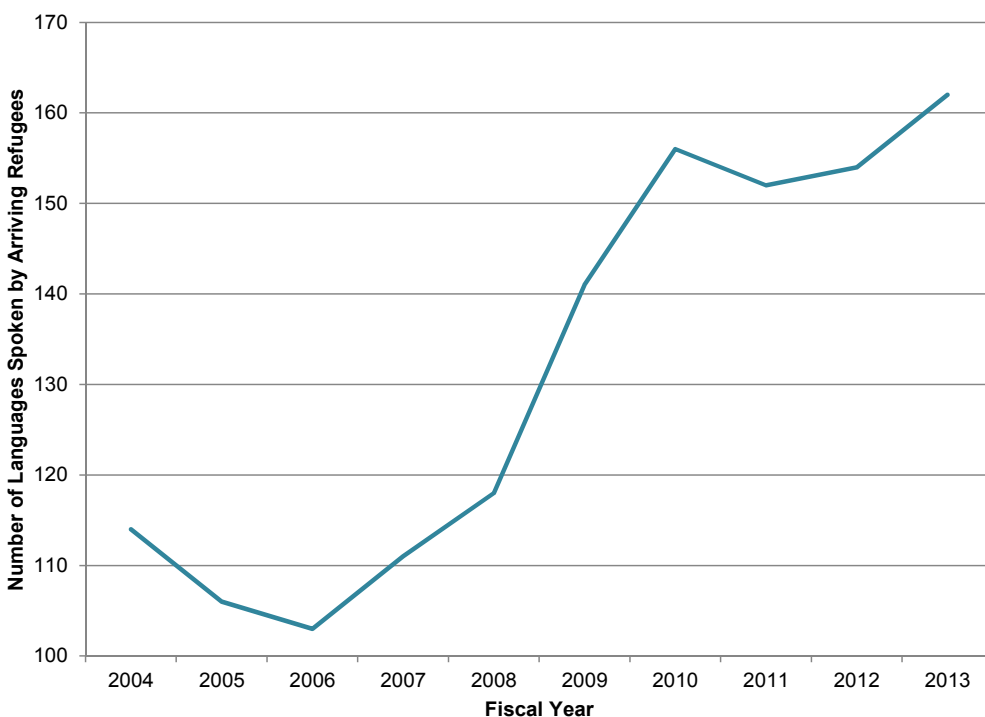


classified as “other minor languages” (see Figure 3). Many of these languages (92) had fewer than 50 speakers in the United States. Refugees arriving nine years earlier, in FY 2004, spoke somewhat fewer native languages—114—most of which (59) also had fewer than 50 speakers.

The linguistic diversity within some origin groups is notable. For example, Somali refugees resettled in FY 2004 – 13 reported speaking 31 native languages, while Burmese refugees reported speaking 61 languages.

It is possible that many refugees who report a native language that is relatively rare in the United States are proficient in another, more widely spoken language. Among arrivals from Iraq, approximately 14,600 refugees who entered the United States in FY 2003 – 13 reported their native language as Chaldean. An informal telephone interview that MPI conducted with a Chaldean human service agency based in metro Detroit revealed that the vast majority of Chaldean-speaking refugees were also able to read and write in Arabic.²¹ However, there are no administrative data on languages that refugees speak other than their native language and English.

Figure 3. Number of Native Languages Reported by Arriving Refugees, FY 2004 – 13



Source: MPI analysis of WRAPS data for individual years FY 2004 –13.

The broad and growing linguistic diversity of U.S. refugees may complicate their resettlement and increase costs for resettlement agencies and for the state and local government agencies that serve them. Providing refugees who are not conversant in English with information and case management in their native language promotes their integration; for instance, one ORR-funded report finds that the development of trust and rapport between case managers and clients is facilitated by speaking a

21 Coauthor telephone interview with staff at the Arab American and Chaldean Council, December 5, 2013.



shared language.²² Language services are also required by law in some cases: under federal regulation 45 CFR 40.156(e), refugee social services must be provided in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner—to the maximum extent feasible—regardless of the number or proportion of refugee arrivals who speak a particular language.²³ More broadly, any agency or organization that receives federal funds is legally mandated to take steps to ensure meaningful access to its programs and services for clients with limited English proficiency.²⁴

Recruiting qualified staff to meet refugees' diverse linguistic needs, however, can be difficult.²⁵ With the exception of Arabic, Spanish, and Russian, refugees' most common native languages are rarely spoken in the United States. According to WRAPS data, Nepali was the second-most commonly spoken language of refugees arriving in FY 2004 – 13, but U.S. Census Bureau data suggest only 35,000 U.S. residents over age 5 spoke Nepali in 2006 – 08. Officials in Virginia reported struggling to find a Tedim Chin translator for a young adult refugee from Burma who needed educational and mental health services. There are fewer than half a million Tedim Chin speakers worldwide, and the United States admitted more than 5,300 in FY 2004 – 13.²⁶

The costs to local communities of providing linguistic services for refugees can be high. In Manchester, New Hampshire, for instance, the Refugee Resettlement Advisory Committee reported that the school system was struggling to adequately meet the needs of the 2,316 students who spoke a total of 76 primary languages.²⁷

C. Language Proficiency at Arrival

Refugees who arrive in the United States with strong English skills may achieve economic self-sufficiency more quickly than those with limited English proficiency. Meanwhile, the wide use of English in business and education around the world has meant that the proportion of refugees who speak at least some English at arrival has risen recently. According to WRAPS data, 33 percent of refugees resettled in FY 2008 – 13 spoke some English, versus 25 percent of those resettled in FY 2004 – 07. However, the percentage of arriving refugees who spoke “good” English remained quite low, at about 7 percent.

Refugees report their own English-language ability during prearrival screenings, and their self-assessments may be inaccurate. Liberian refugees, for example, are the most likely of the groups we analyzed to report that they speak English well prior to their resettlement (44 percent) and at arrival. Their assessment may not accurately reflect their preparation for resettlement in the United States, however, as their English dialect may not be easily understood by speakers of American English.

22 Peggy Halpern, *Refugee Economic Self-Sufficiency: An Exploratory Study of Approaches in Office of Refugee Resettlement Programs* (Washington, DC: DHS, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2008), 28, <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/refugeeselfsuff/report.pdf>.

23 *U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1980*, Public Law 45 U.S.C. § 400.61(c)(1), 400.55, 400.156(e)—Refugee Resettlement Program, www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2011-title45-vol2/pdf/CFR-2011-title45-vol2-part400.pdf.

24 Department of Justice, “Enforcement of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—National Origin Discrimination against People with Limited English Proficiency; Policy Guidance,” *Federal Register* 65, no. 159 (August 16, 2000): 50123–25, www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2000-08-16/pdf/00-20867.pdf.

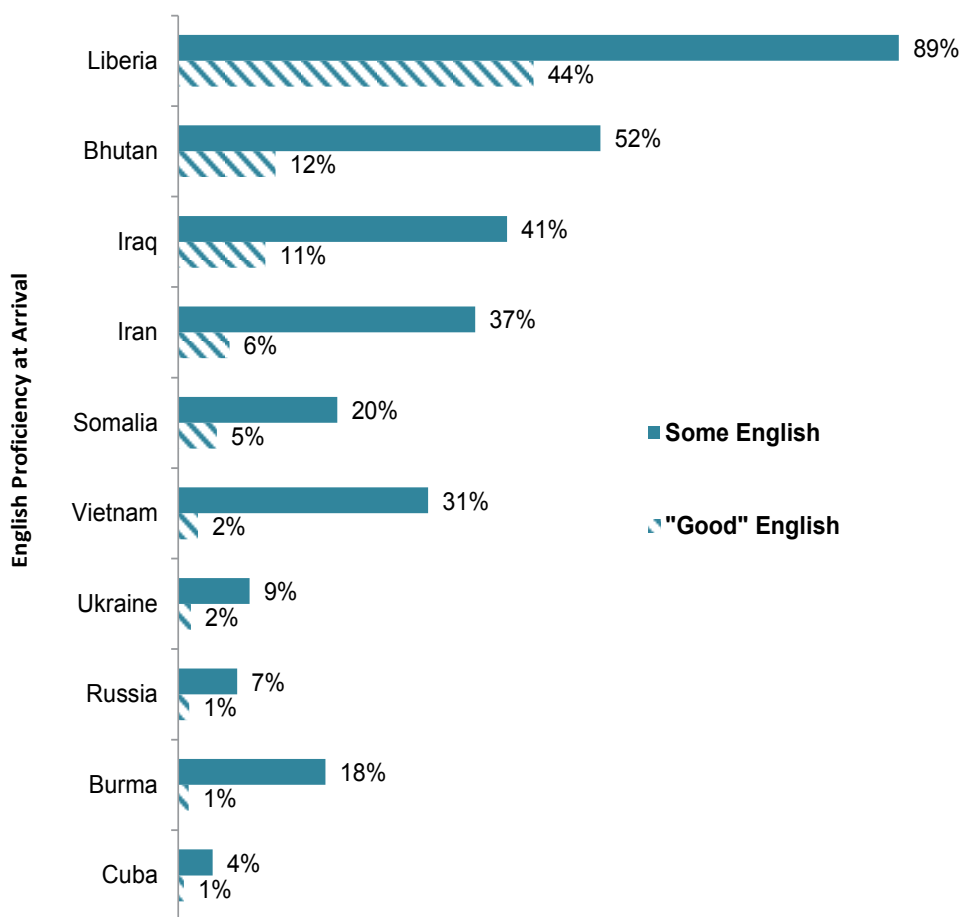
25 Randy Capps, Bret Barden, Everett Henderson, and Mike Mueller, *The Evaluation of the Refugee Social Service (RSS) and Targeted Assistance Formula Grant (TAG) Programs: Houston Case Study* (Washington, DC: The Lewin Group, Urban Institute, and HHS/ORR, 2008), 26, www.lewin.com/~media/Lewin/Site_Sections/Publications/3872.pdf.

26 M. Paul Lewis, Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig, eds., “Chin, Tedim,” in *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 7th edition (Dallas: SIL International, 2013), www.ethnologue.com/language/ctd.

27 Manchester City Government, Refugee Resettlement Advisory Committee, “Report on Refugee Resettlement in Manchester,” in *Board of Mayor and Alderman Meeting Minutes 07/11/2006* (Manchester, NH: City of Manchester, 2006), 3, 11, 24, www.manchesternh.gov/Portals/2/Departments/city_clerk/agendas_and_minutes/BMA/2006-07-11_Meeting_Agenda_with_attachments.pdf.

Reported English proficiency varied greatly by nationality across the largest refugee groups resettled in FY 2004 – 13 (see Figure 4). These differences did not necessarily correlate with previous exposure to formal education, measured by refugees’ literacy levels in their origin countries’ predominant languages (see Figure 5).²⁸

Figure 4. Share of Arriving Refugees among Ten Largest National-Origin Groups Who Reported Speaking at Least “Some” or “Good” English, (%), FY 2004 – 13



Source: MPI analysis of WRAPS data for FY 2004 – 13, pooled.

The DOS resettlement program has taken steps to provide refugees with an opportunity to improve their language skills prior to arrival. Resettlement officials recently launched several pilot programs in Kenya, Thailand, and Nepal that provide English language instruction as part of predeparture orientation. An initial evaluation of the pilot projects found that they successfully provided refugees with basic English skills and facilitated further language learning post-resettlement.²⁹ In fact, the Bhutanese arriving from camps in Nepal have relatively high English proficiency at arrival. Predeparture English classes may be a promising model to build on in other resettlement contexts, particularly if paired with vocational or work-focused language training.³⁰

28 Other studies directly measuring educational attainment have found the same lack of a correlation. See Capps, Barden, Henderson, and Mueller, *Evaluation of RSS and TAG Grant Programs*, 26.

29 DOS, DHS, and HHS, *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2015*, 4.

30 Language instruction that is paired with skills training or includes work-focused vocabulary has been found to be more effective in improving non-English speakers’ access to the labor market or further educational opportunities than English educa-



While low levels of English proficiency may pose initial resettlement challenges, most refugees resettled in the United States improve their English proficiency over time. Russian and Ukrainian refugees in particular have relatively high levels of educational attainment (see Section IV), and are therefore likely to learn English quickly.³¹ Of greater concern are those who do not learn the language after substantial time in the United States; refugees and immigrants without sufficient English skills are among the least likely to be employed—as described later in this report.³²

While low levels of English proficiency may pose initial resettlement challenges, most refugees resettled in the United States improve their English proficiency over time.

D. Literacy in a Native Language

Inconsistencies in data provided by WRAPS unfortunately prevent a direct analysis of education levels among newly arrived refugees.³³ Instead, refugees' self-reported literacy in their native language provides a proxy for basic levels of formal education.

For refugees who arrived in the United States in FY 2004 – 13, literacy rates varied greatly by country of nationality and native language (see Figure 5).³⁴ Among the most common nationality/language groups, the highest literacy levels were found among Cuban Spanish speakers, Iranian Farsi speakers, Russian speakers, Ukrainian speakers, Iraqi Arabic speakers, and Vietnamese speakers. Literacy levels were lower among Afghan Dari speakers, Burmese Sgaw Karen speakers, Nepali speakers from Bhutan, and Liberian English speakers. Some of the lowest literacy rates were found among Somali speakers (25 percent) and Laotian Hmong speakers (18 percent).³⁵

tion alone. See Margie McHugh and A. E. Challinor, *Improving Immigrants' Employment Prospects through Work-Focused Language Instruction* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2011), <http://migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/work-focusedlanguageinstruction.pdf>

31 Thomas Espenshade and Haishan Fu, "An Analysis of English-Language Proficiency Among US Immigrants." *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 2 (1990): 288-305; Barry R. Chiswick and Paul W. Miller, "A Model of Destination-Language Acquisition: Application to Male Immigrants in Canada" *Demography* 38, no. 3 (2001): 391 – 409.

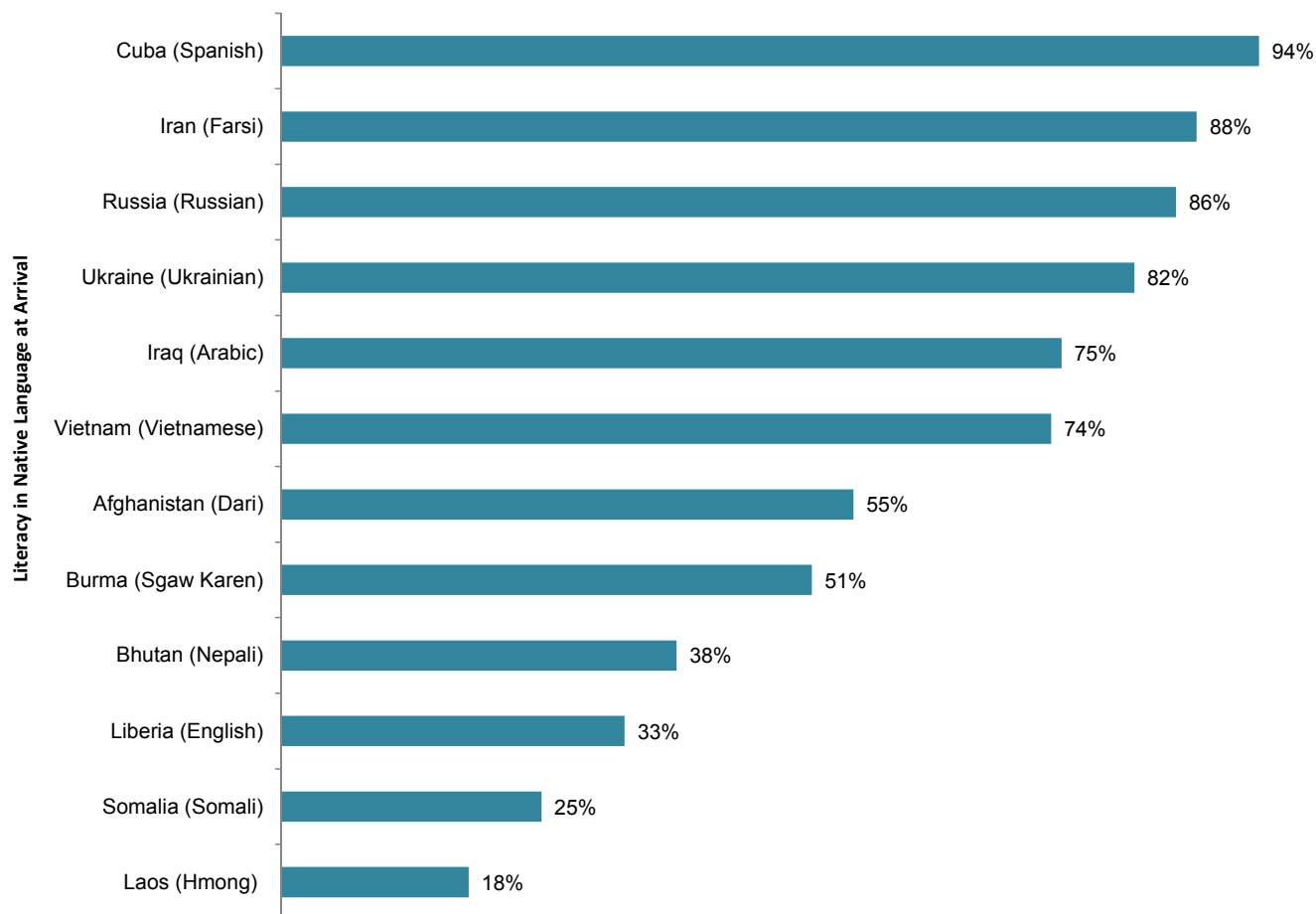
32 HHR/ORR, *Report to the Congress FY 2011* (Washington, DC: HHS/ORR, 2013), 41, www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/orr/fy_2011_orr_annual_report.pdf

33 MPI explored the data on educational attainment provided by WRAPS and found inconsistent recording of educational attainment across years and nationalities, and no data on a substantial share of refugee arrivals.

34 In some cases, the language in which refugees are educated may not be the same as their native language, or their native language may not be commonly written (as in the case of Chaldean among Iraqi refugees, Mai among Somalis, and Krahn among Liberians). For this reason, MPI's analysis excludes languages that are not written and focuses on the most common language spoken by top national origin groups.

35 Here the analysis focuses on the most common nationalities and native languages of refugees arriving in FY 2004 – 13. MPI did not review literacy levels for all refugees because of the complexity of analyzing the data for the many uncommon languages provided by WRAPS.

Figure 5. Arriving Refugees Literate in Their Native Language, Selected Nationalities and Linguistic Groups, (%), FY 2004 – 13



Source: MPI analysis of WRAPS data for FY 2004 – 13, pooled.

Lack of literacy in a first language may impede refugees' integration, as it indicates a lack of basic educational attainment—a needed foundation for building English language skills.³⁶ Refugees without basic literacy skills experience significant challenges finding employment; while they may be able to find entry-level jobs initially, they are likely to face difficulties moving up employment ladders without additional education or training.

Lack of literacy in a first language may impede refugees' integration, as it indicates a lack of basic educational attainment—a needed foundation for building English language skills.

³⁶ Espenshade and Fu, "An Analysis of English-Language Proficiency;" Chiswick and Miller, "A Model of Destination-Language Acquisition."



Those with very low levels of educational attainment (e.g., less than sixth grade) may require basic education in their native languages in order to build foundational literacy skills. Moreover, a basic level of literacy may be required for enrollment in English-language instruction classes. Many of those with fewer than eight years of formal education will not be able to enroll in mainstream workforce training programs because of program design and accountability rules. When the U.S. labor market is weak—as in the years following the 2008 recession—low literacy levels force refugees to compete with other workers at the low-skilled end of the market, where unemployment is highest. Low literacy therefore impedes many of the basic elements of refugees’ self-sufficiency: their educational progress, English language acquisition, and ability to find stable jobs with wages that allow self-sufficiency.

E. Refugee Camp Experience

Having fled their country of nationality, refugees may languish in a country of first asylum for years—with limited rights and no legal status—before they are able to return to their homelands or secure permanent third-country resettlement. Some asylum countries’ governments restrict the free movement and access to legal employment and educational opportunities of refugees living in camps, whether for security concerns or to limit local integration.³⁷ The level at which host countries and international organizations invest in camps varies widely. In many cases, refugees in camps have better services and safety conditions than do refugees outside (many of them in urban areas), who lack access to the protection of international agencies such as UNHCR.

Table 2. Number and Share of Arriving Refugees Whose Last Prior Place of Residence Was a Refugee Camp, Selected Nationalities (%), FY 2002 – 13

Nationality	Number	Percentage
Bhutan	70,729	100
Burma	69,665	59
Somalia	40,347	60
Liberia	11,012	54

Source: MPI analysis of WRAPS data for FY 2002 – 13, pooled.

Whether or not refugees resettled in the United States have had experience living in a camp depends to a large degree on their nationality. Virtually all Bhutanese refugees resettled during the 14-year period studied here lived in one of Nepal’s seven refugee camps prior to their U.S. arrival. The majority of Somali, Burmese, and Liberian arrivals also lived in refugee camps. Given the protracted nature of the Burmese refugee situation, some of these refugees are likely to have spent 20 or more years living in a camp in Thailand with no legal freedom of movement.³⁸

In contrast, virtually none of the Iraqi or Iranian refugees resettled in FY 2002 – 13 lived in camps immediately prior to U.S. arrival. Russian, Ukrainian, and Cuban refugees were also unlikely to have lived in camps.

³⁷ See, for example, Katy Long, *From Refugee to Migrant? Labor Mobility's Protection Potential* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2015).

³⁸ Kitty McKinsey, “Departures of Myanmar Refugees from Thailand Top 20,000 Mark” (UNHCR News Stories, December 11, 2007), www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=475e975b4&query=mae%20la.



There is some correlation between refugee camp experience and low literacy rates. All four groups with a majority of refugees resettled from camps (see Table 2) had the lowest native-language literacy levels (see Figure 5) of all groups except Hmong refugees. Although low literacy likely stems from home-country experiences, it may also be the case that the camps hosting these populations before U.S. resettlement do not provide adequate basic education for children or adults. Further international investment in educational opportunities in these camp settings may be warranted.³⁹

IV. Integration Outcomes of Refugees Living in the United States in 2009 - 11

The U.S. resettlement program aims to help adult refugees enter the labor market within just a few months of arrival. Refugees' characteristics at arrival often correlate with their later socioeconomic integration. As might be expected, groups with more working-age refugees and greater language proficiency usually integrate better. Those with already established communities in the United States also tend to fare better on socioeconomic indicators. Overall, the data suggest that many refugees integrate into the U.S. labor market and society successfully over time.

As might be expected, groups with more working-age refugees and greater language proficiency usually integrate better.

A. Employment

During the 2009 – 11 period, refugee men ages 16 and older were more likely to work than their U.S.-born counterparts: 67 percent versus 60 percent. Among the ten most common origins of recent arrivals, Burmese, Iraqi, and Somali men had employment rates at or below U.S.-born men, while the other seven groups had higher employment rates. Refugee women were as likely to work as U.S.-born women, at 54 percent. Refugees' employment rates exceeded those of U.S.-born women in four of the ten most common origin groups (Vietnamese, Liberians, Ukrainians, and Russians), while six sending groups fell below the U.S. born: Cubans (49 percent), Iranians (46 percent), Burmese (42 percent), Somalis (41 percent), Bhutanese (36 percent), and Iraqis (27 percent).

The relatively low employment rates of women from some refugee groups often translates into fewer workers per household and, in turn, lower household incomes. Nonetheless, with their relatively high employment rates overall, refugees in the main are meeting the U.S. refugee program's goal of promoting refugees' self-sufficiency.

B. Spoken-Language Proficiency

In the long term, improving English language proficiency is crucial to refugees' self-sufficiency and integration. Like other immigrants, refugees gain English proficiency with time in the United States (see

³⁹ Sarah Dryden-Peterson, *Education of Refugees in Countries of First Asylum: What U.S. Teachers Need to Know about the Pre-Resettlement Experiences of Refugee Children* (Washington, DC: MPI, forthcoming 2015); Selcuk R. Sirin and Lauren Rogers-Sirin, *The Educational and Mental Health Needs of Syrian Refugee Children* (Washington, DC: MPI, forthcoming 2015).



Figure 6).⁴⁰ Nonetheless 58 percent of refugees in 2009 – 11 with more than 20 years of U.S. residence were Limited English Proficient (LEP). Among all arrival cohorts, immigrants who are not refugees were more proficient than refugees; this proficiency gap did not differ much between people with more and less U.S. experience.

English proficiency varied widely among the ten largest refugee-origin groups, and did not seem to be correlated to the amount of U.S. experience.

Refugee children reported higher proficiency than adults: 30 percent of refugees under age 18 were LEP, versus 62 percent of those 18 and older. Some of these children may have received English instruction in schools in refugee camps or other settings in first-asylum countries.⁴¹

English proficiency varied widely among the ten largest refugee-origin groups, and did not seem to be correlated to the amount of U.S. experience. LEP rates were relatively high among adults joining the two largest, most established refugee groups in the United States: Cubans (77 percent) and Vietnamese (69 percent). In the case of Cuban refugees, limited English proficiency could be a function of their geographic location, as many Cubans settle in areas of Florida (south Florida in particular) where Spanish is the predominant language.⁴²

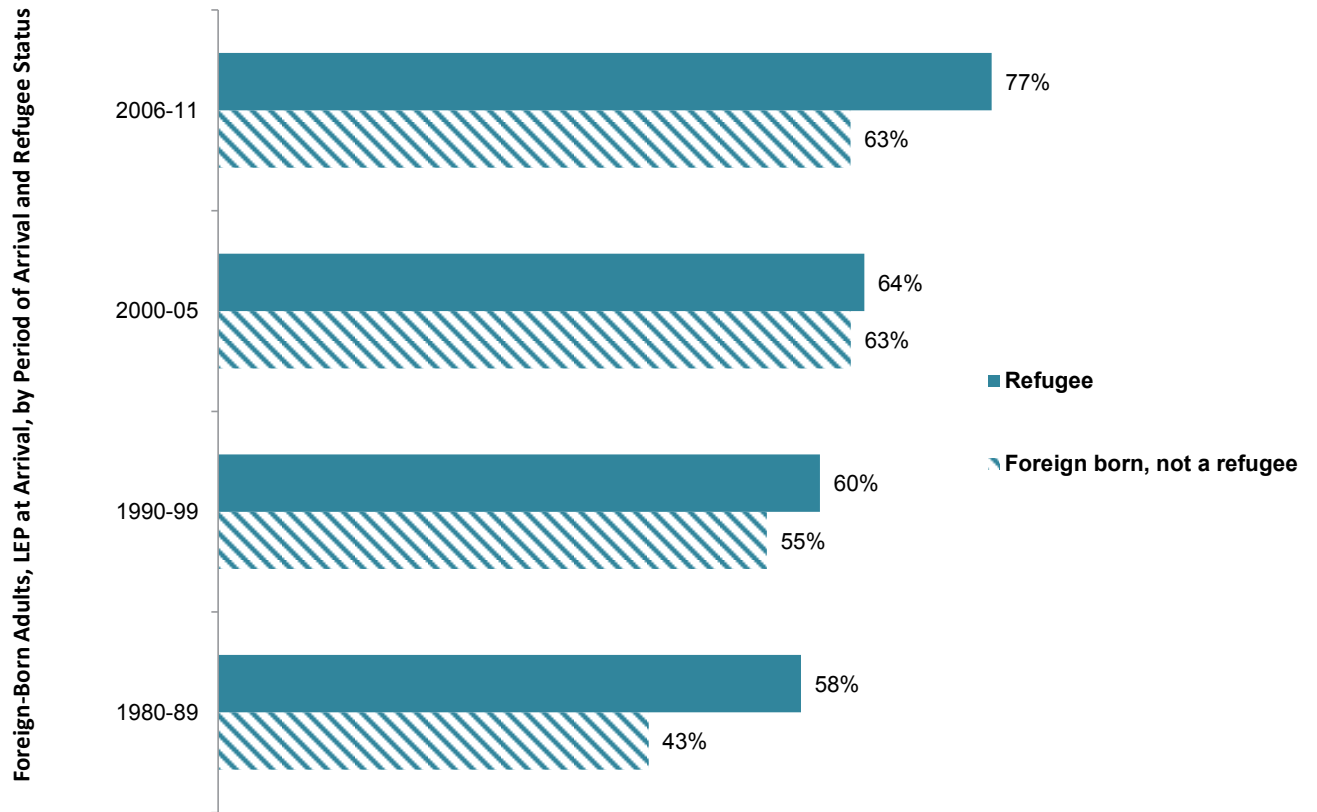
40 According to U.S. Census Bureau convention, the population that reports speaking English less than “very well” is considered Limited English Proficient (LEP), which some may consider to be too high a standard. More specifically, LEP individuals speak English “well,” “not well,” or “not at all”—and speaking English “well” might not be considered full proficiency, though some argue “well” should be the standard. The American Community Survey (ACS) does not include measures of reading or writing proficiency. English proficiency in the ACS is self-reported.

41 Dryden-Peterson, *Education of Refugees in Countries of First Asylum*.

42 Ruth Ellen Wasem, *Cuban Migration to the United States: Policy and Trends* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2009), <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40566.pdf>.



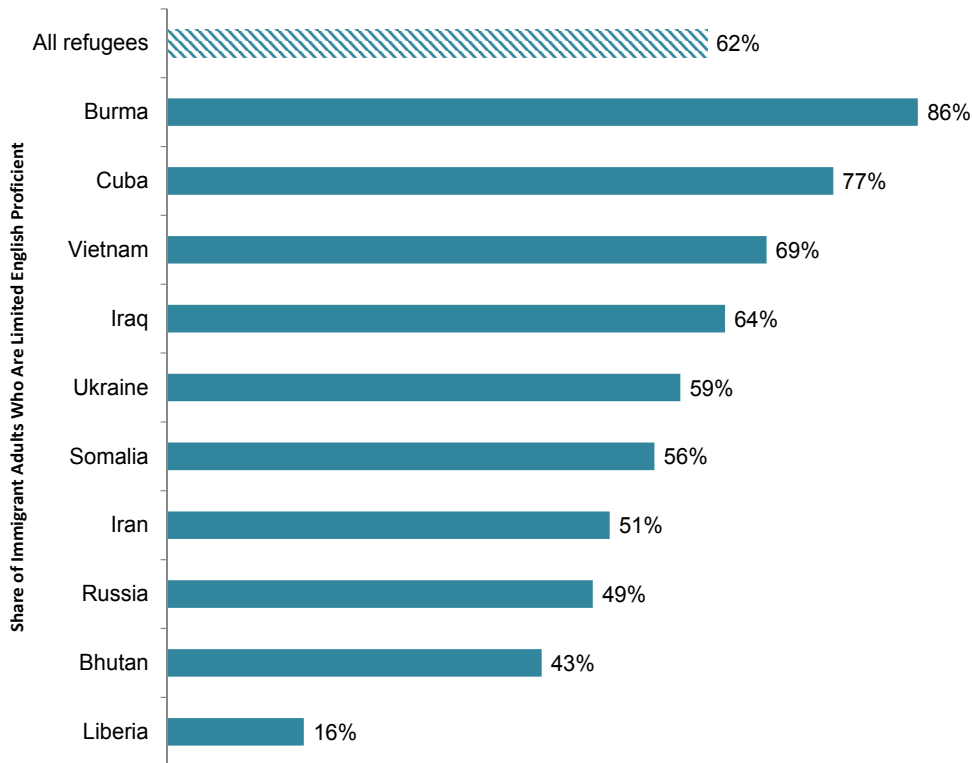
Figure 6. Share of LEP Immigrant Adults, By Refugee Status and Period of Arrival, (%), 2009 – 11



Source: MPI analysis of data from the American Community Survey (ACS), 2009 – 11 pooled.



Figure 7. Share of LEP Immigrant Adults, Overall and Ten Largest National-Origin Groups, (%), 2009 – 11



Source: MPI analysis of 2009 – 11 ACS data, pooled.

C. Educational Attainment

Among all U.S. workers, educational attainment generally correlates with income and other socioeconomic indicators, although many highly educated immigrants are underemployed, particularly in sectors where formal credentials and certifications are highly valued.⁴³

The overall educational attainment of refugees falls between the attainment levels of other immigrants and the U.S. born. During 2009 – 11, refugee adults were less likely than U.S.-born adults to have completed high school, although the two populations were equally likely to have a bachelor's degree. Refugee men were a few percentage points more likely than refugee women to have completed high school, and there was no gender difference in college attainment among refugees overall (see Table 3).

Educational attainment varied by origin. Refugee men and women from Russia, Iran, and Ukraine were the best educated. More than 60 percent of refugee men and women ages 25 and older from Russia had a bachelor's degree—the highest rate among refugees and far higher than the U.S. population (20 percent). The least educated refugees came from Burma, Bhutan, Cuba, and Somalia. More than half of refugees from Burma ages 25 and older did not have a high-school diploma. Likewise, 42 percent of men and 56 percent of women from Bhutan had not completed high school. Refugees from Cuba and Somalia were also less well educated than refugees overall, nonrefugee immigrants, and the U.S.-born population.

⁴³ Madeleine Sumption, *Tackling Brain Waste: Strategies to Improve the Recognition of Immigrants' Foreign Qualifications* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2013), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/tackling-brain-waste-strategies-improve-recognition-immigrants-foreign-qualifications.



The low educational attainment of Cuban refugees—a large and well-settled group—is also notable in combination with their low English proficiency.

Gender gaps in educational achievement vary across groups. Forty-eight percent of Somali refugee women lacked a high school education, compared with 27 percent of men. The gap in college completion between Bhutanese men and women was 17 percentage points. Cuban women were better educated than Cuban men, and there was no gender gap in education among Russian or Ukrainian refugees.

Table 3. Educational Attainment of Refugees, Nonrefugee Immigrants, and U.S.-Born Adults (Ages 25 and Older), (%), 2009 – 11

	No High School Degree (%)		High School, Some College, or Associate's Degree (%)		Bachelor's or Advanced Degree (%)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
U.S. population, ages 25+	15	14	56	58	29	28
U.S. born	12	10	60	61	29	28
Foreign born, not refugee	33	31	39	42	28	26
Foreign born, refugee	23	27	49	45	28	28
Bhutan	42	56	32	35	26	9
Burma	54	58	24	19	21	23
Cuba	29	29	55	52	16	19
Iran	10	14	35	40	55	46
Iraq	27	35	44	39	29	26
Liberia	7	29	62	56	30	14
Russia	5	6	32	31	62	63
Somalia	27	48	59	44	14	7
Ukraine	9	9	42	42	49	49
Vietnam	29	38	47	41	24	20

Source: MPI analysis of 2009 – 11 ACS data, pooled.

Educational attainment did not differ much between refugees with more and less U.S. experience. For example, 31 percent of refugees who arrived in 1980 – 89 had less than a high school diploma, versus 29 percent of those who arrived in 2006 – 11.

It is important to note that ACS data do not report where the respondent's education was obtained. Degrees completed in an origin country or country of first asylum may not transfer directly to the U.S. labor market. The content and quality of degrees obtained abroad may differ from those of U.S. degrees, and employers may not recognize unfamiliar degrees or credentials.⁴⁴ Compared to other immigrant groups, refugees may have difficulty proving their credentials or qualifications if they were forced to flee their country of origin hastily or if conflict in their home country makes education records difficult to obtain.⁴⁵

Education obtained after U.S. resettlement may offer refugees opportunities to fill education gaps or certify existing credentials. Some refugee resettlement providers have criticized ORR for not prioritizing

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Long, *From Refugee to Migrant?*



support for training or certification programs in its resettlement funding. Lack of support for credential transfer and recognition can hold back highly educated refugees from obtaining jobs commensurate with their skills.⁴⁶

ACS data are not longitudinal, and therefore do not enable us to track individual refugees to see if they have made education gains since their arrival. However, it is possible to compare attainment over time among similar groups of refugees by comparing data from the 2000 U.S. Census and the 2009–11 ACS.⁴⁷ Using this method, MPI estimates that an additional 10 percent of refugees arriving in 2000 or before had completed high school by 2009–11, and an additional 5 percent had obtained a bachelor’s degree. The nationalities showing the largest gains were those with relatively low high-school completion rates in 2000. For example, more than 40 percent of refugees from Cuba and Iraq had not completed high school according to the 2000 Census. The high school completion rates of both populations subsequently rose by 15 percentage points, as measured by the 2009–11 ACS. Among the ten origin countries analyzed, Somali refugees’ completion rates rose the most: from 57 percent in the 2000 Census to 77 percent in the 2009–11 ACS.⁴⁸

D. Median Household Income

Despite relatively high educational attainment and employment rates, refugees have lower incomes than other immigrants. Refugees’ median household income in 2009–11 was \$42,000, about \$3,000 below other immigrants’ and \$8,000 less than the median for the U.S. born. Nevertheless, refugees’ income notably rises with length of U.S. residence. The median income of refugees who arrived in 1980–89 was \$31,000 higher than the median income of those who arrived in 2006–11.

Refugees from Vietnam and Russia had the highest median incomes, at \$52,000 and \$50,000, respectively. Both populations have been in the United States for a relatively long period of time: 70 percent or more arrived before 2000. The lowest household incomes (\$20,000 or less) were found among Somali, Iraqi, and Bhutanese households—all recent arrivals. Three groups of refugees—Iraqis, Somalis, and Cubans—showed relatively low income gains with longer U.S. residence.

Despite relatively high educational attainment and employment rates, refugees have lower incomes than other immigrants.

More concerning is that recent refugees’ incomes have dropped relative to those of the U.S. born. This gap suggests that the income gains observed among earlier arrivals may not be replicated for those who arrived more recently. Refugees who arrived in the United States between 1995 and 2000 had median household incomes equivalent to 62 percent of U.S.-born household incomes, as measured in the 2000 Census; but refugees who had been in the United States for five years or less in 2009–11 had median incomes equal to 42 percent of the U.S. born (see Figure 8). Refugee incomes rose steeply relative to the native born in both periods, but in the 2009–11 period, their incomes—even after more than ten years

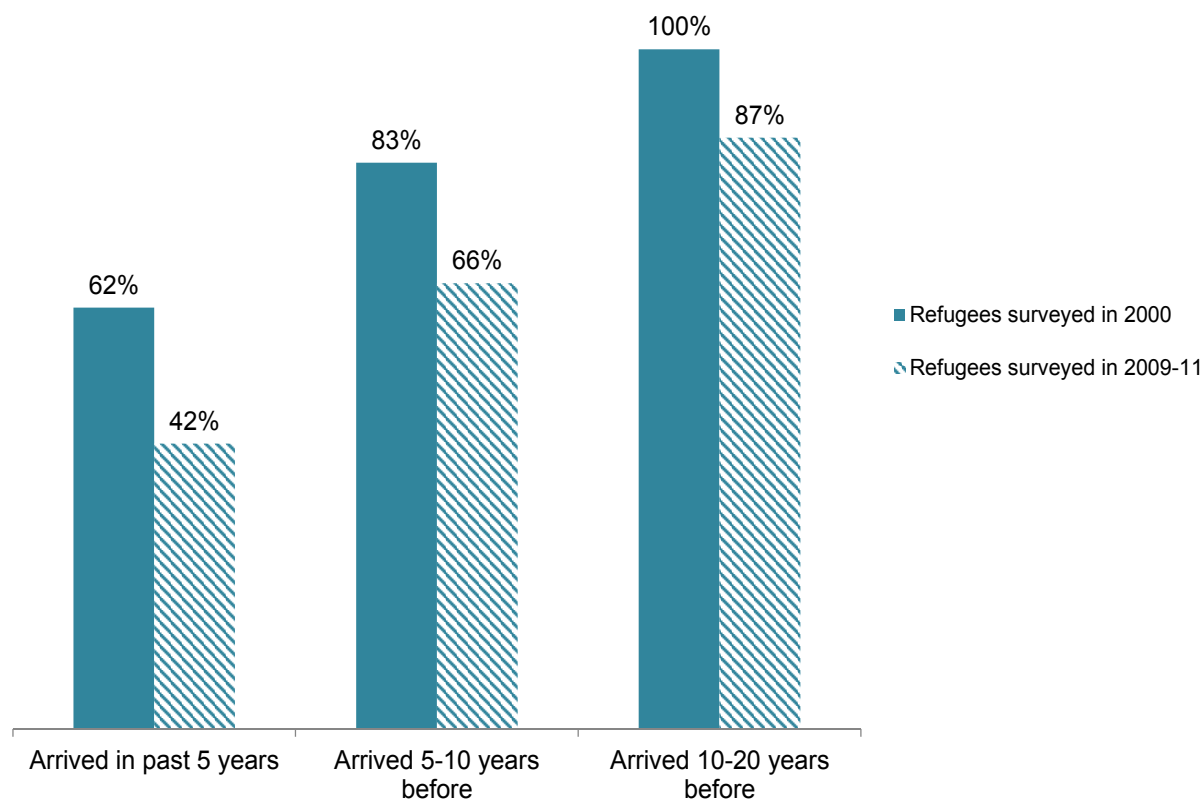
⁴⁶ See, for example, GAO, *Refugee Resettlement*.

⁴⁷ This report cannot track individuals across the 2000 Census and 2009–11 ACS, but it is possible to track groups of refugees who arrived before 2000, assuming that the same group was present in both time periods. Some individuals may have emigrated or died between the two periods, and different individuals may have been sampled.

⁴⁸ This may be a factor of age at arrival. Somali refugees had the second-largest shares under the age of 20 at arrival, and many in this group may have completed high school or college between the two survey periods.

of in the United States—remained substantially below those of the U.S. born.

Figure 8. Median Refugee Household Income Relative to Median U.S.-Born Household Income, by Length of U.S. Residence, (%), 2000 and 2009 – 11



Note: Refugee households are headed by refugees; U.S.-born households are headed by U.S.-born individuals. Median income for U.S.-born households was \$42,000 in 2000 and \$50,000 in 2009 – 11.

Source: MPI analysis of 2009 – 11 ACS data (pooled) and 2000 Census data.

E. Low-Income Status

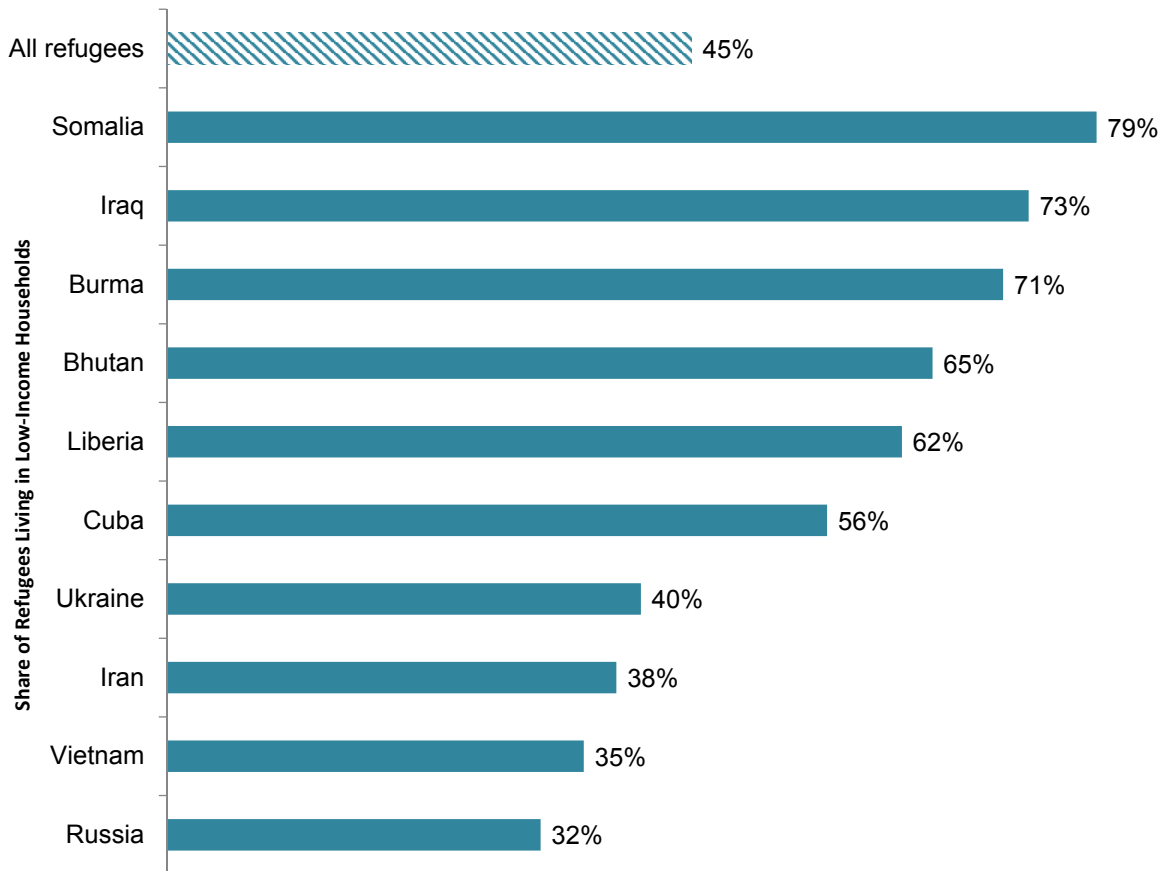
Refugees were more likely than natives and as likely as nonrefugee immigrants to be low-income in 2009 – 11.⁴⁹ Forty-four percent of refugees and 43 percent of other immigrants were low-income, compared with 33 percent of the U.S.-born population.

The low-income share of refugees varied by national origin: more than 50 percent from Somalia, Iraq, Burma, Bhutan, Liberia, and Cuba were low-income (see Figure 9). The low-income share of refugees declined as their stay in the United States lengthened. As of 2009 – 11, about one-third of refugees who had arrived in 1980 – 89 were low-income, compared with two-thirds of those who had arrived in 2006 –11 (see Figure 10).

⁴⁹ Low-income individuals have annual family incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL). The FPL varies by family size and the number of children under age 18. The poverty level is used to help determine eligibility for Medicaid and other means-tested government safety-net programs, for which some refugees may qualify. For example, members of families whose income is no higher than 185 percent of the poverty level may be eligible for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition and health program as well as free or reduced-price school lunches.



Figure 9. Shares of Refugees Living in Low-Income Households, Total and Ten Largest National Origin Groups, (%), 2009 – 11

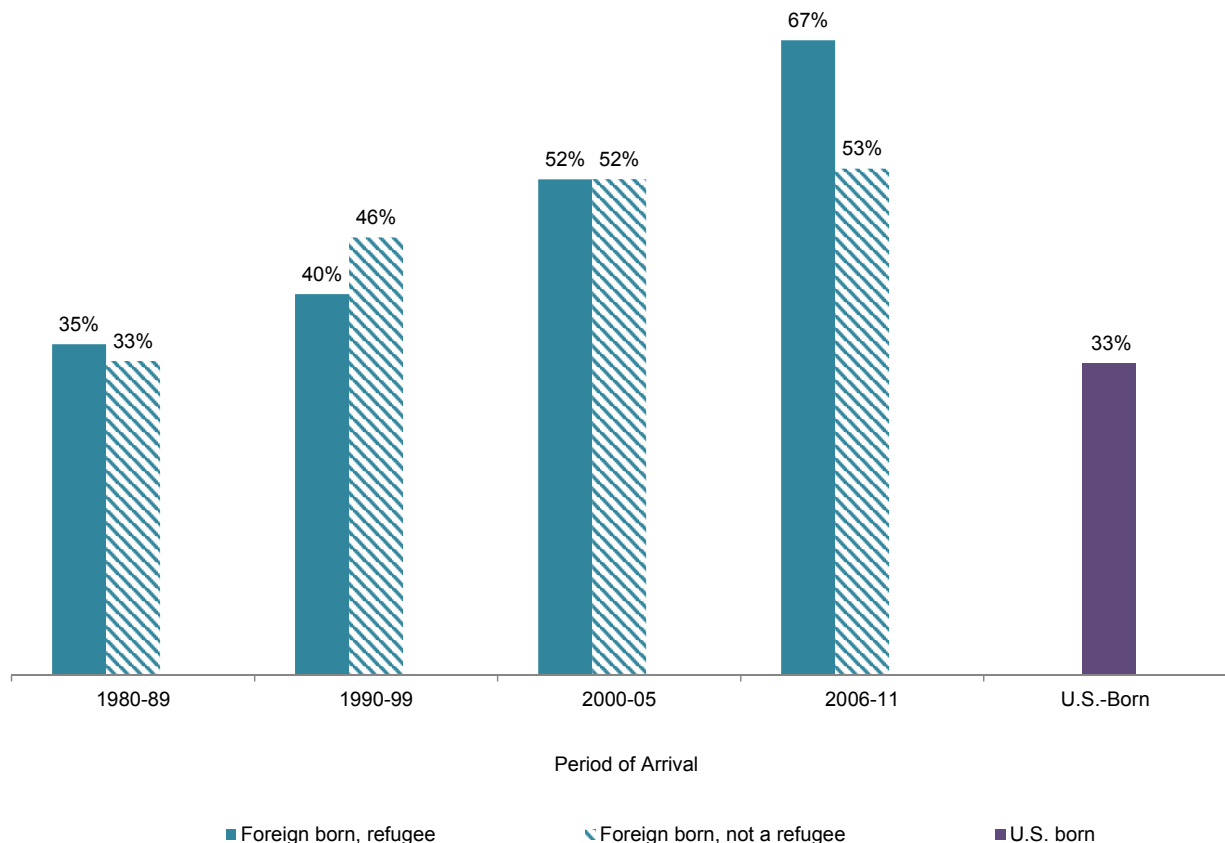


Note: Low-income households have annual incomes below twice the federal poverty level.

Source: MPI analysis of 2009 – 11 ACS data, pooled.



Figure 10. Shares Living in Low-Income Households, by Period of Arrival, Nativity, and Refugee Status, (%), 2009 – 11



Note: Low-income households have annual incomes below twice the federal poverty level.

Source: MPI analysis of 2009 – 11 ACS data, pooled.

F. Public Benefit Receipt

The low incomes of recent refugees underscore the economic hardship many face. But unlike other immigrants, refugees can qualify immediately upon arrival for cash welfare benefits, food assistance, and public health insurance—programs that may mitigate their hardship.⁵⁰

Overall, refugees were more likely to receive food stamps, cash welfare, or public health insurance benefits than either nonrefugee immigrants or the U.S. born. In the 2009 – 11 period, refugees were more than twice as likely as the U.S. born to live in households receiving food stamps: 24 percent versus 11 percent.⁵¹ Refugees were also about twice as likely as the U.S. born to live in households receiving

⁵⁰ In contrast, most other legal immigrants are barred from receiving most of the major federal means-tested benefit programs—Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, or food stamps), Medicaid, and Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP)—for their first five years in the United States. See HHS Assistant Secretary for Assistance and Planning and Evaluation (ASPE), *Summary of Immigrant Eligibility Restrictions under Current Law* (Washington, DC: HHS/ASPE, 2011), <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/immigration/restrictions-sum.shtml>.

⁵¹ ORR’s FY 2010 survey found that 63 percent of refugees who arrived in 2005 through 2010 received SNAP assistance (i.e., food stamps), whereas MPI analysis of 2009 – 11 data estimates this rate at 42 percent. Thus, the figures given in this report may underestimate refugee’s SNAP participation. See HHS/ORR, *Report to the Congress FY 2010* (Washington, DC: HHS/ORR,



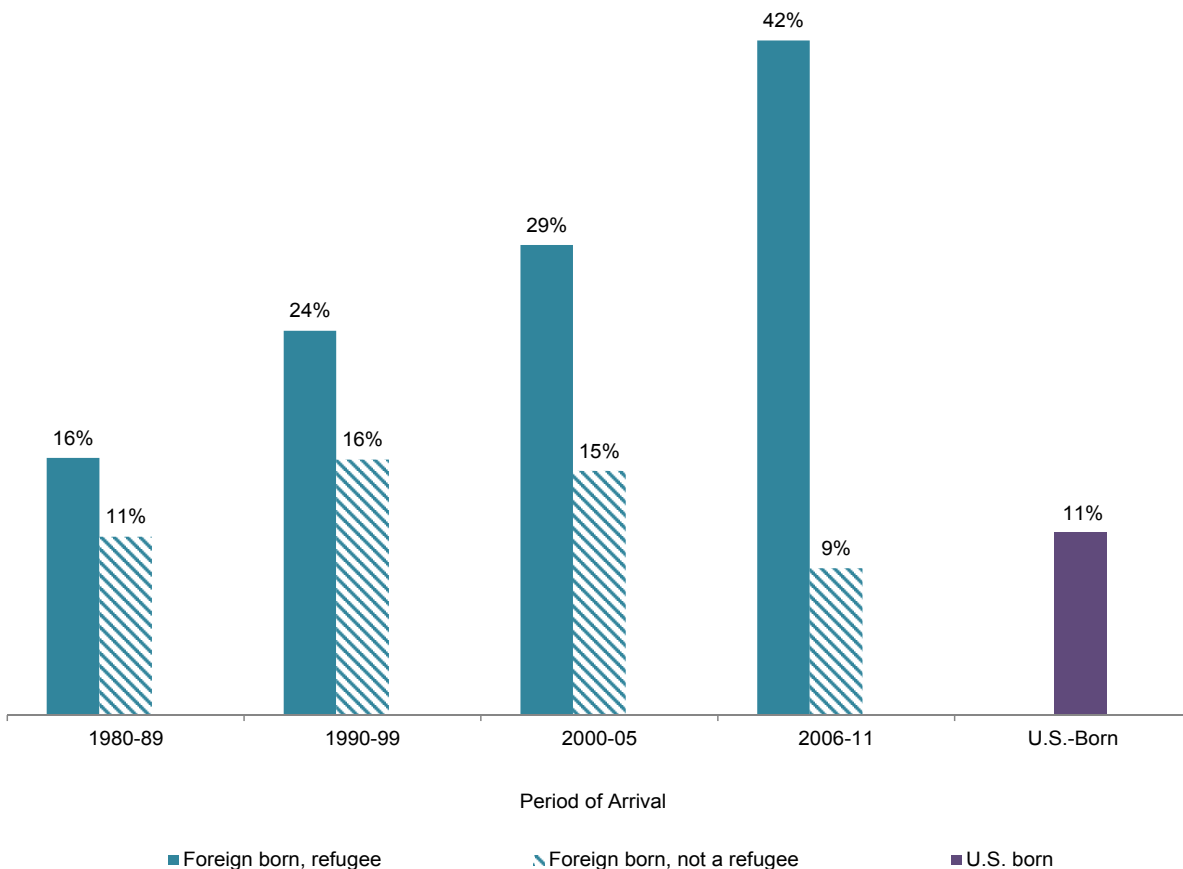
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), at 3.1 percent versus 1.6 percent. And among both adults and children, refugees were more likely than either nonrefugee immigrants or the U.S. born to have health insurance coverage through Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), or similar public programs.

Overall, refugees were more likely to receive food stamps, cash welfare, or public health insurance benefits than either nonrefugee immigrants or the U.S. born.

Refugee reliance on public assistance declined as their time in the United States increased. Food stamp participation was relatively high (42 percent) for refugees with five years or less of U.S. residence, but fell sharply to 16 percent for those with more than 20 years of residence—a rate still higher than that of the U.S. born or of nonrefugee immigrants, regardless of residence length (see Figure 11). Cash welfare participation was much lower than food stamp participation among all groups, but once again recent refugees—who, again, are eligible for assistance immediately upon arrival—had the highest participation rate, at 7 percent. Cash welfare participation rates for refugees with more than five years of U.S. residence were modest (below 3 percent) and only about 1 percentage point higher than the U.S. born (see Figure 12). Public health insurance coverage of refugees similarly declined with longer U.S. residence, but also remained higher than that of nonrefugee immigrants for all periods of residence. Public coverage of refugee adults fell from 24 percent for those with fewer than five years of residence to 13 percent for those with more than 20 years of residence (see Figure 13). The insurance coverage patterns of refugee and nonrefugee children were similar; meanwhile, children had higher rates of public coverage than adults across all nativity and period-of-entry groups. Despite declines in public benefit use, refugees never reach the low participation rates of the U.S. born even with more than 20 years of U.S. residence—most likely because refugees’ incomes do not reach parity with the U.S. born (see Figure 8).



Figure 11. Shares Living in Households Receiving Food Stamps, by Period of Arrival, Nativity, and Refugee Status, (%), 2009 – 11



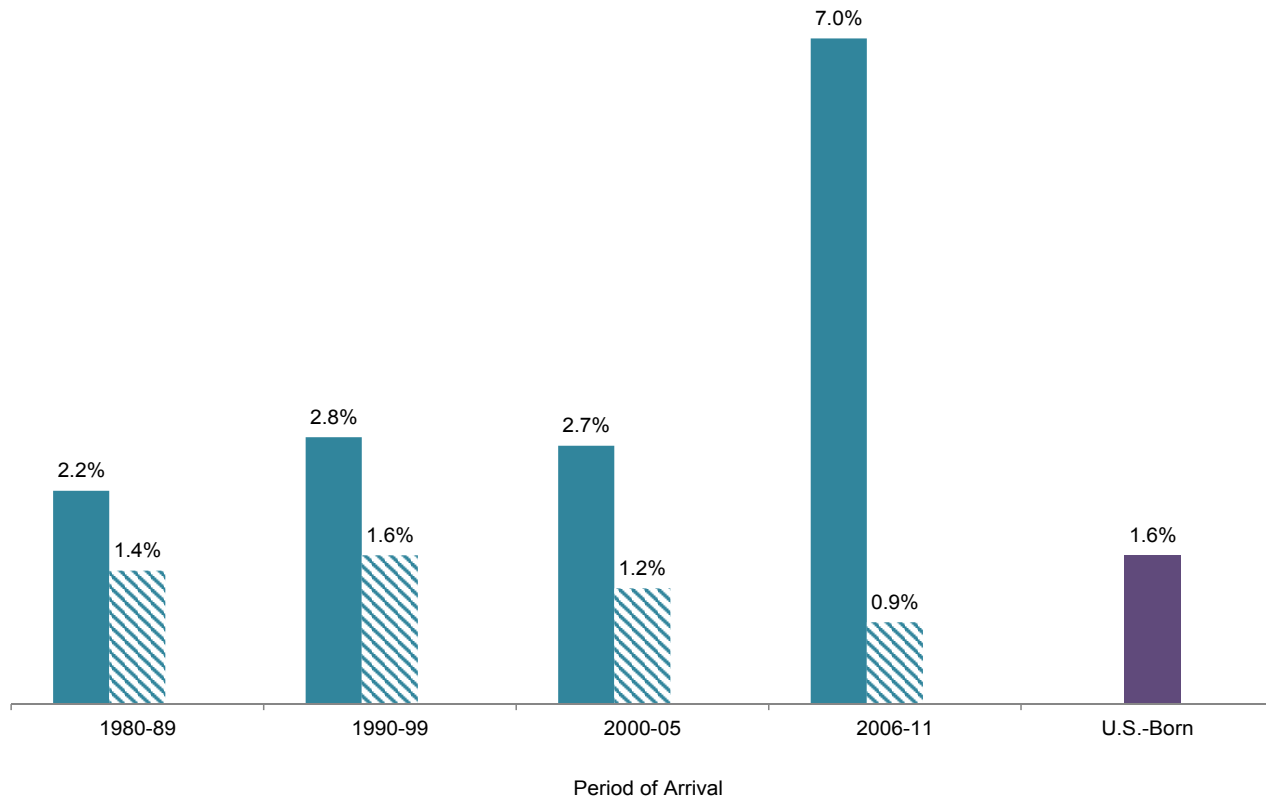
Refugee reliance on public assistance declined as their time in the United States increased.

Note: “Food stamps” refers to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Households received food stamps at any time during the previous year. Nonrefugee immigrants may be ineligible for SNAP depending on their citizenship, immigration status, and length of U.S. residence.

Source: MPI analysis of 2009 – 11 ACS data, pooled.



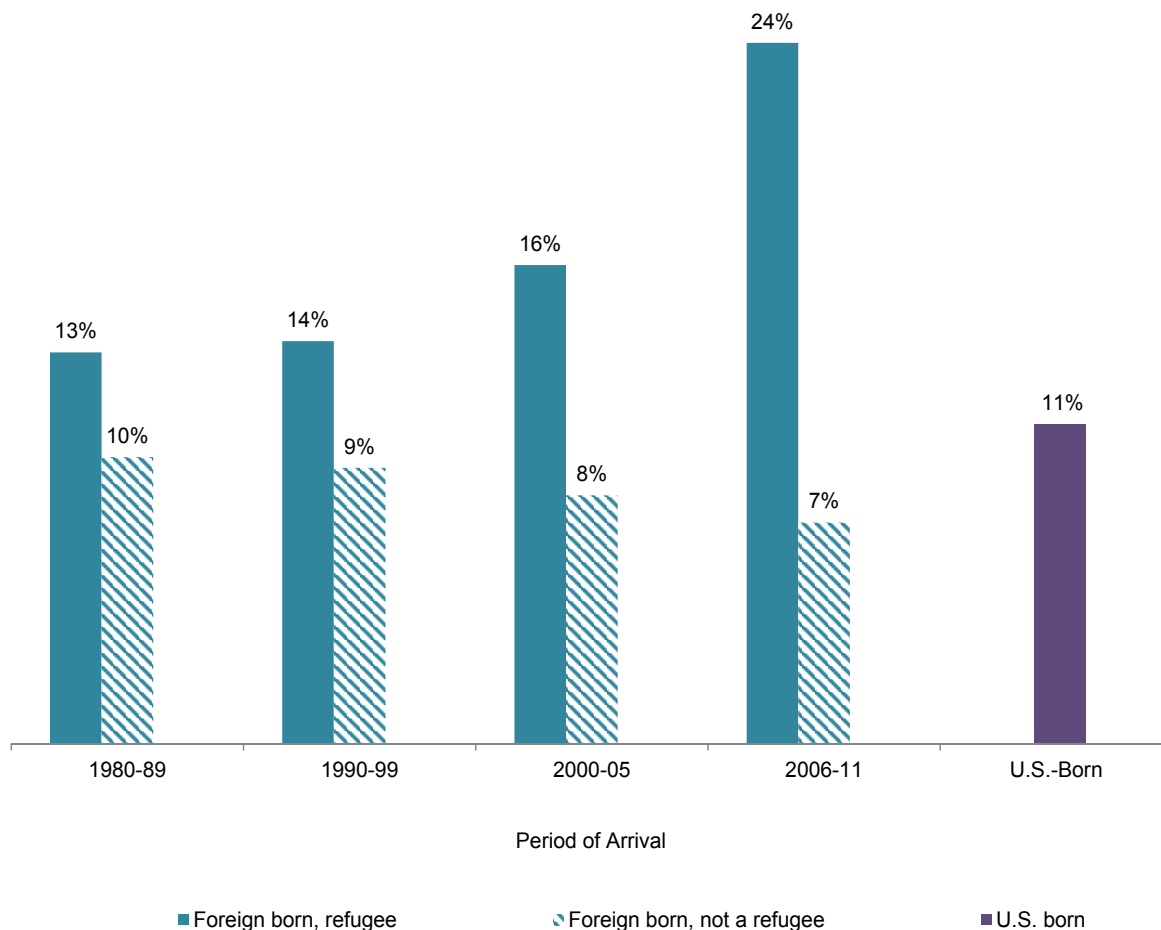
Figure 12. Shares Living in Households Receiving Cash Welfare, by Period of Arrival, Nativity, and Refugee Status, (%), 2009 – 11



Note: “Cash welfare” refers to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA), and state and local general assistance programs. Households received cash welfare at any time during the previous year. Nonrefugee immigrants may be ineligible for cash welfare depending on their citizenship, immigration status, and length of U.S. residence.

Source: MPI analysis of 2009 – 11 ACS data, pooled.

Figure 13. Adults (ages 18-64) with Public Health Insurance Coverage, by Period of Arrival, Nativity, and Refugee Status, (%), 2009 – 11



Note: Public health insurance coverage includes Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA), Medicaid, and other, smaller, federal, state, and local programs.

Source: MPI analysis of 2009 – 11 ACS data, pooled.

V. Conclusions

The United States continues to admit more refugees for permanent resettlement than any other country. Refugee admissions remain relatively high in an era of budget constraints, while the number of nationalities and languages represented is large and growing. The increasing diversity of large U.S. refugee populations may be making it more challenging for both resettlement agencies and local communities to meet refugees' needs.

MPI's analysis of data from ACS and the U.S. Census indicate that as refugees' time in the United States increases, their income levels and rates of public benefit participation approach parity with those of the U.S. born. These findings suggest that most refugees become self-supporting over time—a core goal of the U.S. resettlement program. But a comparison of data from 2000 and 2009 – 11 indicates that refugees resettled in recent years are at an economic disadvantage compared with those resettled earlier.



This relative disadvantage could be due to changing economic conditions: the 2007 – 09 recession in the United States had a significant impact on low-skilled workers, whose employment levels and wages have not yet fully recovered. This disadvantage could also be due to the changing characteristics of refugees: many recent arrivals have particularly low levels of literacy and educational attainment. Indeed, the groups with the lowest incomes include those with the lowest literacy and education levels: Bhutanese, Burmese, Liberians, and Somalis. It remains to be seen whether recent refugee groups with limited human capital will experience the same levels of integration success as earlier, better-educated cohorts of refugees.

As refugees' time in the United States increases, their income levels and rates of public benefit participation approach parity with those of the U.S. born.

The minimal level of support for employment, education, and language services provided through the resettlement program may be insufficient to meet the greater needs of these groups. Only a small share of resettled refugee adults (5 – 10 percent) advance their education once in the United States (this share is somewhat higher among some of the least educated groups, such as Somalis). The U.S. resettlement program's heavy emphasis on getting refugees into jobs fast, and its tight budget, may leave little room to support ongoing adult education.

Limited English proficiency in the refugee population is also a cause for concern. In 2009 – 11 more than half of refugees who had lived in the United States over 20 years were LEP. This number included large majorities of the two largest and longest-settled groups: Cubans and Vietnamese. Like low educational attainment, limited English skills can slow the economic integration of refugees. Of the two factors, a lack of English proficiency may represent the greater barrier to self-sufficiency. Cuban and Vietnamese refugees have similar educational attainment levels, but Cubans have lower English proficiency levels—and their incomes are dramatically lower than those of Vietnamese. While other differences may contribute to the income gap between Cubans and the Vietnamese, English proficiency is likely an important factor.

Policymakers may want to consider how to better meet the needs of refugee groups that are at a particular disadvantage upon arrival (such as those with low literacy rates) in order to support their long-term integration. Refugees often wait months or even years for resettlement in the United States, and predeparture programs during this time could help fill gaps in their literacy, language, and job skills, particularly for populations living in camps where access to education and workforce development opportunities may be otherwise limited. Pilot English language programs recently begun by the State Department in Kenya, Thailand, and Nepal are a step in this direction; these programs should be further tested and, if found to be effective, expanded. Resettlement authorities could also consider combining language classes with job-skills training to help prepare refugees to find employment soon after arrival.

To better serve the needs of disadvantaged refugees already in the United States, national- and state-level policymakers could expand education and language-learning opportunities. Expanding these opportunities would require improving refugees' access to mainstream education and job-training programs—for instance, those funded by the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act*.

On a broader policy level, the number of refugees worldwide is surging—particularly in the Middle East. Despite its challenges, the U.S. refugee program has decades of experience in successful resettlement. It is critical to maintain financial and political support for this program as the number of refugees in need of resettlement continues to increase globally.



Appendix: Data Sources and Methodology

Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System and Other Administrative Data

Administrative data on arriving refugees are collected to support resettlement authorities and agencies in making placement decisions. These data sets generally provide an accurate and comprehensive picture of the arriving refugee population, but in some cases data are incomplete or missing. The administrative data used for this analysis were self-reported during refugees' resettlement application process abroad. The data were collected by a variety of agencies and organizations that participate in the U.S. refugee admissions process, including U.S. overseas embassies and consulates, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Migration Policy Institute (MPI) researchers obtained these administrative data from a number of different U.S. government sources, including the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and its Refugee Processing Center's Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS); ORR; and the DHS annual statistical yearbook. Archival annual reports from the U.S. Department of Justice's Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS)—an agency whose responsibilities are now housed in DHS—provide administrative data on the number and country of nationality of refugee arrivals to the United States dating back to 1946.

This report's analysis of administrative data principally covers refugee admissions from fiscal year (FY) 2002 through FY 2013.⁵² Beginning this analysis in FY 2002 makes sense from a policy perspective, as the September 11 terrorist attacks resulted in an immediate, significant, and enduring shift in U.S. refugee admissions. In addition, FY 2002 is also the earliest year for which detailed demographic information on U.S. refugee arrivals is available from administrative sources.⁵³

For some demographic indicators, data entry and storage were inconsistent at the Refugee Processing Center even following digitization of their records. Some years and some indicators (most notably educational attainment) are excluded due to data reliability problems, as noted throughout the report. In addition, reported U.S. refugee admissions numbers, both by year and national origin, differed among administrative sources such as ORR, WRAPS, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

American Community Survey Data

Administrative data provide a snapshot of arriving refugees as well as information useful for program operation, but administrative sources do not provide data on how refugees fare after arrival. To address longer-term refugee integration, MPI estimated demographic and socioeconomic indicators for the U.S. refugee population resettled between 1980 and 2011, using American Community Survey (ACS) data from the U.S. Census Bureau. The ACS provides a snapshot of the refugee population in 2009 – 11, one that includes refugees with U.S. experience ranging from a few months to 30 years.⁵⁴ For each indicator, comparisons were drawn among refugees, nonrefugee immigrants, and the U.S.-born population, as well as among the ten largest recent refugee national-origin groups, and among refugees by period of arrival.

Three years of ACS data (2009, 2010, and 2011) were pooled in order to increase sample size and

52 Unless otherwise noted, this report uses the U.S. government's fiscal year calendar, which starts on October 1 and ends on September 30.

53 The Refugee Processing Center—where administrative data on refugee arrivals is primarily housed within the federal government—automated its data collection in FY 2002.

54 The median year of entry for refugees in the analysis is 1994, or 15 – 17 years before the 2009 – 11 ACS was administered.



improve the precision of the estimates. Core indicators taken directly from the ACS data include age distribution, English proficiency, educational attainment, employment status, median household income, poverty levels, health insurance coverage, cash welfare receipt, and food stamp receipt.⁵⁵

Since the ACS does not identify refugees separate from other immigrants, the analysis relies on refugee status that has been imputed based on characteristics of immigrants available in the ACS: country of birth and year of arrival in the United States. Immigrants' characteristics available in the ACS data were matched against administrative data on refugee admissions from DHS and WRAPS, which give the number of refugees arriving by year and country of origin. Refugee status was assigned to every country/year combination in which refugee admissions in the DHS and WRAPS data exceeded 40 percent of the estimated foreign-born population identified in the ACS data.

WRAPS and DHS report refugee countries of origin based on either nationality or birth. In some country/year combinations, refugee admissions in the WRAPS/DHS data exceeded 40 percent of the ACS foreign-born population total when country of birth is considered, but admissions were below the 40 percent threshold when country of nationality was used. These are generally cases in which refugees in protracted situations bore children before being permanently resettled in the United States. Discrepancies between country of birth and country of nationality were resolved by using ACS ancestry codes considered to be equivalent to WRAPS and ACS codes for nationality. For example, in some years, refugee admissions from Kenya exceeded the 40 percent threshold when using country of birth, but not nationality, due to the large number of Somali refugees resettled from Kenya. Thus, ACS respondents who report Kenya as their birthplace must also report Somali ancestry in order to be coded as refugees.

Similar to refugee admissions, DHS reports the number of asylum grants by country of nationality and year. Country/year combinations in which asylee admissions exceeded 20 percent of the foreign-born population in ACS data were also assigned refugee status.⁵⁶ Using this method, the foreign-born population in the ACS that was assigned refugee status accounts for more than 80 percent of the total refugee flow from 2000 through 2011.⁵⁷

Internal Consistency and External Validation of Results

MPI's method for assigning refugee status to the foreign-born population in the ACS is not exact as most of the country/year combinations include both refugees and nonrefugee immigrants.⁵⁸ This happens because flows from refugee countries continue for many years, and earlier waves of refugees can sponsor their relatives for admission through family-reunification channels once they become lawful permanent residents and citizens. Moreover, immigrants were only assigned refugee status if they entered the United States between 1980 and 2011; only nonrefugees have entry dates before 1980. Thus nonrefugee immigrants in the ACS sample potentially have more years of U.S. experience than refugees.

Based on the available evidence, refugee assignments within the ACS effectively capture the characteristics of the U.S. refugee population. For example, enrollment in government benefits follows the expected trend: recently arrived refugees receive benefits at considerably higher rates than other recently arrived immigrants because they are immediately eligible for such benefits, while other immigrants

55 All Census Bureau data were accessed from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS): Steven Ruggles, J. Trent Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek. *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0* [Machine-readable database] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010), <http://usa.ipums.org/usa/>.

56 MPI analysts created the refugee status assignments for immigrants entering the United States between 2000 and 2011, using the methods described here. Assignments for immigrants entering between 1980 and 1999 were conducted by Jeffrey S. Passel of the Pew Hispanic Center, using a similar methodology.

57 The number of refugee admissions reported in the administrative data totaled 1.07 million from 2000 through 2011, while refugee population estimated in the ACS sample totaled 883,000.

58 Countries from which large nonrefugee immigrant inflows likely accompany refugee inflows include Iran, Russia, and Ukraine.



are usually ineligible. Over time, benefit participation declines for refugees while participation rises for nonrefugee immigrants. This pattern reflects the fact that refugees integrate and lose refugee-resettlement program eligibility over time, while other immigrants may become legal permanent residents and citizens who are eligible for such benefits.⁵⁹

ORR annual reports to Congress offer another source that may be used to assess the reliability of MPI's refugee assignments and the estimates in this report. ORR conducts targeted surveys of recent refugee populations that include indicators similar to those available in the ACS. ORR's surveys track resettled refugees over a five-year period after their arrival in the United States, and therefore the 2010 ORR survey (covering the 2006 – 10 time period) best matches the 2009 –11 pooled ACS survey employed in this analysis. Where possible, results from the ORR report are noted and compared with results from the ACS analysis for the past six years (i.e., the 2006 – 11 time period), and in general the results line up between the two data sources within a reasonable margin of error—except where noted in the report.

59 Federal welfare reform rules restrict eligibility for nonrefugee immigrants during their first five years of legal permanent residency in the United States. Temporary legal immigrants—such as students and temporary workers—are generally ineligible for these benefits, as are unauthorized immigrants; both of these groups appear in the “nonrefugee immigrant” or “other immigrant” category in the MPI analysis.



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