

**URBAN**

INSTITUTE · ELEVATE · THE · DEBATE



June 24, 2019

Southeast by Southeast mural in South Philadelphia

## Building Evidence on Refugee Integration in the U.S.

*Hamutal Bernstein, Senior Research Associate  
Urban Institute*

# 2018 report: gap between the evidence and the debate on refugees in the U.S.

- Policy debate is focused on security, economic, and cultural threats
- The research shows that after a period of adjustment, refugees integrate on economic, linguistic, and civic measures
  - On average, they participate in the labor force at high rates, their earnings rise, and their use of public benefits declines
  - Their English language proficiency improves, most become U.S. citizens, and many become business and home owners

# “Refugees” are not a monolith: Diverse backgrounds and needs

- Many refugee experiences
- Variation by national origin group, gender, education level, health condition, etc.
- Varying starting points and trajectories will impact outcomes

# Gaps in the evidence base

- Little evidence about the impact and effectiveness of refugee resettlement programming
- Lose contact and data after the initial period of arrival in the U.S., but integration is a long-term process
- Impacts of recent changes to refugee and immigration policies
- Beyond economic self-sufficiency, understanding the multidimensional process of integration and wellbeing

# Other indicators important for understanding integration

- Moving beyond self-sufficiency
- Consider health, well-being, social connection/isolation
- Considering receiving community – from refugees' and community perspectives

# The Annual Survey of Refugees and Redesign Projects

# What is the Annual Survey of Refugees?

- Conducted annually since the early 1980s
- The ASR is the only U.S. national survey of recently arrived refugees – unique data source
- Offers representative sample of refugees resettled in the U.S. in the previous five years
- Has been used to meet Refugee Act annual reporting requirement; results are reported each year in the Office of Refugee Resettlement's Annual Report to Congress

# How has the ASR pursued its objectives?

- Parallel Urban Institute projects: 2016, 2017, and 2018 ASR collection and ASR Redesign effort
- Interview principal applicants by telephone
  - Collect data on all eligible adults in household
  - Demographic information on all household members
- Most recent (2018) survey collection of FY2013-2017 arrivals: 1500 households, 17 languages including English
- Public use dataset(s) available at University of Michigan ICPSR

# In parallel to continued survey collection, an ASR Redesign began in 2016

- Effort to update and improve the old ASR
- Move beyond focus on employment and public benefits receipt and more effectively capture integration and self-sufficiency
- Correct issues in the questionnaire design
- Consider changes to survey administration procedures, e.g. tracing, outreach, mode alternatives

# Multi-phase research process



# Design of the Pretest



Refugee  
Voices

- Used 2016 ASR respondent pool, all telephone interviews
- Combined quantitative and qualitative data
  - 109 survey interviews
  - 47 cognitive interviews, plus interviewer debriefing
  - 58 semi-structured in-depth interviews



Stakeholder  
Voices

- Site visits and focus groups with service providers, volunteers, and employers
  - 24 interviews in Philadelphia, PA and Boise/Twin Falls, ID
  - 4 focus groups in Boise, Louisville, KY and Arlington, VA

# Annual Survey of Refugees

## Redesign expanded content

Demographics

Experiences before arrival in the U.S.

Human Capital

Economic Self-Sufficiency

Home country

Displacement period

Characteristics on arrival

Progress since arrival

Employment

Current and previous work, Wages and income, Barriers, First job, Career advancement

Sources of Support

Family income, Public benefits

Receiving Community

Local navigation

Assets

Housing

Safety

Discrimination

Social Connection

Family

Ingroup

Outgroup

Welcome

Civic engagement

Connection

Health

Routine health services

Recent health services

Health status

Health insurance

Children and Schools

Children's schooling and experiences

Parental engagement with schools

# Pretest Findings

# Which parts of the revised questionnaire did and didn't work?

- Combination of data sources pointed to some straight-forward adjustments
- Over-arching challenges with proxy reporting
  - On receipt of public benefits and health insurance coverage
  - On date-specific demographics for other HH members
  - On employment details for other HH members



*I don't know anything about this thing. I just got help from people.*

# How can we improve survey administration?

- Government sponsorship was mostly seen as a positive, though concern for some
- Telephone mode is preferred
  - Barriers for some with limited native language and/or digital literacy
  - Personal contact important: culture and gender match foster rapport between interviewer and respondent
  - Could consider use of texting and testing online or app version
- Refusal to participate is rare, but identifying accurate contact information is still a major challenge
  - Possible use of administrative data sources

## Hopeful...

*I had no worries that the government was reaching out to me to participate in this survey. I think it is a good thing because for me it shows the government cares if they want to know how we are doing.*

## Concerned...

*Over the past weeks, I have thoughts about this survey and wondered if you people will just be speaking to us without any solution, we tell you our story but you don't change things.*

## Preference for telephone...

*No, I prefer speaking to someone, the way you are talking to me.*

*Nope, I like to talk on the phone, because I don't know how to use the internet. I am not good at IT.*

*[Without the telephone] I may not understand something, and you were here to explain and repeat, but with another technology there wouldn't be that opportunity.*

# Looking forward

- Further development on revised questionnaire
- Keeping survey content relevant and updated
- Analyzing longer-term outcomes, beyond the first six years in the U.S.
- Combining survey results with qualitative findings to fill in the why and how

# Feel free to reach out with any questions

Hamutal Bernstein,  
Senior Research Associate  
[hbernstein@urban.org](mailto:hbernstein@urban.org)

Sign up for the Urban Institute Immigrants and Immigration  
newsletter and find other immigrant and refugee work at  
[www.urban.org/immigration](http://www.urban.org/immigration)