



Refugee Integration in the United States

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Introduction and summary

Refugees are admitted to the United States for humanitarian reasons: They face well-founded fear of persecution in their home countries and seek a safe haven here. But they also contribute to the American economy, bringing vitality to areas with declining populations, contributing to the growth of areas whose populations are already increasing, and expanding the labor force as they seek and find work to make better lives for themselves and their children.

Around 3 million refugees have been admitted to the United States.¹ This report focuses on four groups—Somali, Burmese, Hmong, and Bosnian refugees—that are identifiable in U.S. Bureau of the Census data and that together constitute about 500,000 U.S. residents.

Refugees come from a wide range of backgrounds and regions, so no single group can be considered typical. The groups examined here, however, show that there are some broad trends among them, as well as some distinctions.

Other studies have illustrated that refugees quickly become self-sufficient in the United States, a central goal of federal resettlement policy.² What this report examines is how these groups fare in the long run, finding that over time, refugees integrate well into their new communities. After being in the United States for 10 years, refugees are in many regards similar to their U.S.-born neighbors, with similar rates of labor force participation and business ownership. The large majority have learned to speak English after being in the country for 10 years and have become naturalized U.S. citizens after being in the country for 20 years.

This report uses “Burma” and “Burmese” throughout to refer to the country also known as Myanmar and to the people from that country. These are the terms used in the decennial census and the American Community Survey, and they are also common usage among refugees from that country.

The following are among the report's major findings, which are based on an analysis of 2014 American Community Survey, or ACS, 5-year data for Somali, Burmese, Hmong, and Bosnian refugees:

Refugee groups are gaining a foothold in the labor force

- **Refugee men quickly move into the labor force.** The labor force participation rates of men in these refugee communities often exceed that of U.S.-born men.
- **Refugee women become increasingly integrated into the labor force over time.** Recently arrived Somali, Burmese, and Hmong women have lower-than-average labor force participation rates, but those who have been in the United States for more than 10 years have rates about as high as or sometimes higher than those of U.S.-born women. Bosnian women have high labor force participation rates soon after arrival, which become higher still after they have been in the United States for 10 years.

Refugee groups are advancing in their careers and starting businesses

- **Once established in the United States, refugees often see substantial wage gains.** Burmese refugees see the biggest gains. Recently arrived Burmese men have a median wage of \$23,000 per year, while the median for those who have been in the United States for more than 10 years is \$54,000. The median wage for Burmese women who have been in the United States for more than 10 years is \$50,000, up from \$21,000 for recent arrivals.
- **Refugees move up the occupational ladder as they become rooted in the United States.** Among Somalis who are recent arrivals, for example, 23 percent work in white-collar jobs, while far more—43 percent—do so after having been in the United States for 10 years or more.
- **Refugees start businesses, which helps expand local economies.** Thirty-one out of every 1,000 Bosnian refugees in the labor force are business owners, as are 26 out of every 1,000 Burmese, 22 out of every 1,000 Hmong, and 15 out of every 1,000 Somalis. By way of comparison, 31 out of every 1,000 U.S.-born people in the labor force are business owners, as are 36 out of every 1,000 foreign-born people in the labor force.

- **Refugee wages are in the middle of the range of wages for U.S.-born workers.** Refugees enter a U.S. economy that is characterized by well-documented wage gaps based on race and gender. Refugee earnings are generally higher than those of the lowest-earning U.S.-born race and gender group, black women, but lower than those of the highest-earning U.S.-born group, white men. No refugee group—men or women—has a median annual wage at the level of U.S.-born white men, either among high school graduates or among college graduates. For refugees who are high school graduates, the highest earnings rate is 87 percent of the level of U.S.-born white men, even after restricting the sample to refugees who speak English at least “well.” For refugee college graduates, the highest rate is 74 percent of the earnings of comparably educated U.S.-born white men. On the other hand, among both high school and college graduates, the majority of the refugee groups considered earn more than black women, who are in both cases the lowest-earning U.S.-born group. Also interesting is that the gender wage gap is often considerably smaller within these refugee groups than for U.S.-born workers. Indeed, the gender gap is sometimes reversed. Somali and Burmese women with college degrees earn more than their male counterparts, and Hmong women earn the same as Hmong men, though the earnings level is low for both. In contrast, U.S.-born women earn less than U.S.-born men in general and also when disaggregated by race and educational attainment.

Refugees integrate into American society over time

- **Refugees learn English over time.** After living in the country for more than 10 years, 86 percent of Somalis speak English at least “well,” and 61 percent speak English “very well” or exclusively. Among Hmong who are in the United States for more than 10 years, 67 percent speak English at least “well,” and 43 percent speak English “very well” or exclusively.
- **Refugees who have been in the United States longer generally own their own homes.** Seventy-three percent of Burmese refugees and 72 percent of Bosnian refugees who have been in the United States for more than 10 years live in homes they own themselves—higher than the rate for U.S.-born people at 68 percent. Only Somalis have a considerably lower home ownership rate: 21 percent of Somalis who have lived in the United States for more than 10 years own their own homes.

Throughout this report, “white” refers to non-Hispanic white, “black” to non-Hispanic black, and “Asian” to non-Hispanic Asian.

- **Refugees become U.S. citizens.** Among the people in each of the four refugee groups, more than three-quarters who have been in the United States for more than 20 years have become naturalized citizens.

States and metropolitan areas where refugees make the biggest difference

- **These four refugee groups are playing a particularly big role in certain states and metropolitan areas.** Somali, Burmese, Hmong, and Bosnian refugees are part of the economic revitalization of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. They are also helping spur growth in St. Louis; Fargo, North Dakota; and Columbus, Ohio, where political leaders have welcomed their contributions. In Wisconsin, the Wausau, Sheboygan, Eau Claire, Appleton, and Green Bay metropolitan areas all stand out as places without large numbers of immigrants but where these refugees make up a significant share of the immigrant population.

Refugees have recently been on the front pages of newspapers around the world on a daily basis. The Syrian crisis—to name just one of numerous situations around the world causing massive population displacement—has resulted in hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers in Europe, even larger numbers of Syrians living in Lebanon and Turkey, and significant political tensions around resettlement in the United States.³

Refugees undoubtedly breathe huge sighs of relief when, after tremendous hardship, they arrive in a place where they can feel safe, and the communities that welcome them should feel good about the humanitarian aid they provide. This report's strong findings about economic and social integration over time show that local areas should also feel confident that resettled refugees will find a place in the labor market. Economic growth is not the primary reason refugees are resettled, but it is a positive byproduct of giving people with nowhere to turn a new place to call home. This report illustrates the many ways in which these four refugee groups are already thriving, while also pointing to some areas where further attention could help them do better. As a growing number of local political leaders are realizing, doing what is good for refugees is also good for American communities: Their success is our success.

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