

Towards a new framework for integration in the US

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The view of integration in US resettlement policy is currently disconnected from the views of integration held by refugees themselves.

Integration is a central challenge for resettled refugees if they are to establish themselves and succeed in their new communities. The United States (US) resettlement regime, founded on the Refugee Act of 1980, defines indicators of successful integration and resettlement.¹ However, the current US resettlement regime ultimately leaves some, maybe many, refugees struggling even after the official period of resettlement is long over. The consistent poverty and low incomes experienced by many refugee communities,² climbing rates of suicide among certain communities³ and accounts of frustration and isolation expressed by resettled refugees are only a few of the indicators that suggest that current US resettlement policy is ultimately not enabling broader, long-term success for the population that it is designed to serve.

From ethnographic studies of the Iraqi and Bhutanese-Nepali communities in Chicago in 2013 and analysis of US resettlement policies (primarily the Refugee Act), I found several clear points of divergence in ideas of integration between policy and refugee populations as well as some differences in integration between the two refugee communities.

Indicators of integration in US policy

Integration in US refugee resettlement policy relies upon neoliberal notions of a productive citizen, such as self-sufficiency and independence. The specific provisions made in the Refugee Act for federally funded integration activities, and the majority of activities funded by federal and state grants, are those that focus on basic English language acquisition and employment placement. It is clear that this approach establishes economic self-sufficiency as the primary indicator of successful integration. Indeed, footnote (1)(A)(i) of Section 411 of the Act⁴ specifically stipulates that the purpose of

the Office of Refugee Resettlement is to “make available sufficient resources for employment training and placement in order to achieve economic self-sufficiency among refugees as quickly as possible.”

English language acquisition is seen as important only in its role in helping refugees find employment and become economically self-sufficient. The Act specifies that English is to be taught to an adequate level to enable refugees to find jobs; there is no emphasis on learning English to fulfil social functions or even to allow further autonomy in navigating US infrastructure. The economic orientation of policy indicates that resettlement is much more about integration into the local economy rather than into the community at large. This particular insight proved a point of immediate and stark contrast with integration as perceived by the Bhutanese-Nepali and Iraqi refugees.

Indicators of integration among refugees

For the Bhutanese refugees, indicators of integration are English language acquisition, cultural visibility and cultural preservation, and for the Iraqi refugees, English language acquisition, relationships with Americans and socio-economic mobility, with a lesser emphasis on cultural preservation.

English language acquisition was clearly viewed as important in and of itself, rather than just as a facilitator of economic self-sufficiency. Iraqi and Bhutanese refugees recognised the need for English if they were to obtain employment and become economically self-sufficient but English language acquisition was also seen as central to the formation of social relationships and navigation of their new surroundings. Both Bhutanese and Iraqi refugees wished to become proficient in English rather than learning just enough to enable them to get a job.

Cultural preservation was seen by the refugees as providing a way both to establish and strengthen relationships within families and the wider refugee community and to feel more integrated as a result of being able to hold onto their culture in a diverse society. Activities related to cultural preservation also mitigate psychological stress associated with the resettlement process and, as such, undoubtedly diminish barriers to integration. While cultural preservation was an indicator of integration for both refugee groups, there is not a single mention of cultural preservation in the Refugee Act.

Economic issues did not loom as large in the Bhutanese view of integration but they were important indicators of integration to the Iraqi refugees, who were concerned with achieving economic self-sufficiency, even if they did not view achievement of that as marked largely by independence from public assistance. The Iraqi refugees were more concerned than the Bhutanese with socio-economic mobility as an indicator of integration, as demonstrated by their concerns with furthering their English language skills and pursuing other formal education that would enable them to access a wider range of employment options.

An interesting indicator of integration held specifically by the Bhutanese-Nepali refugees was cultural visibility. The almost universally conveyed feeling of being a relatively small and new community within Chicago contributed to a sense of alienation from the broader American population. Because Bhutanese-Nepali immigrants had not lived in Chicago prior to 2008, there were no pre-existing communal resources to facilitate their integration. However, the Refugee Act of 1980 does not provide a framework for the development or funding of programmes that could provide support for those without an established community.

Bridging the gap

Overall, there were only a few areas of convergence between the policy and refugees' views of integration and only one point – English language acquisition – featured within all views of integration. There were far more clear differences between the ways in which

each refugee population perceived integration and the way in which it was encoded into resettlement policy, indicating an important disconnect and a possible reason for less than desirable resettlement outcomes.

The current framework of US resettlement policy correlates public outcomes – such as obtaining a job that gets a refugee off public assistance and acquiring the bare minimum of English required to get that job – with 'successful' integration, leaving gaps between refugees' understandings of successful integration and the assumption in the policy.

In recent years, researchers and resettlement professionals have noticed the ineffectiveness of the current US resettlement regime. In order to offer more effective resettlement aid within the US, it will be necessary to establish a framework of resettlement that bridges the gap between policy and the lived experience of integration, taking distinct cultural considerations into account in the formation of new policies and practices. While creating resettlement policies for each refugee group may be problematic, it is still necessary to take into account the factors that allow refugees to feel integrated in order to serve them effectively.

If indicators of successful integration derived from refugee populations are taken into consideration during policy creation, long-term outcomes for resettled populations could be improved. Future research on how many resettled refugees consider themselves unintegrated and how this correlates with unsuccessful outcomes both by current policy indicators and refugee indicators might spur governmental action to amend current resettlement policy in the US.

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2. Capps R and Newland K (2015) *The Integration Outcomes of US Refugees: Successes and Challenges*, Migration Policy Institute www.migrationpolicy.org/research/integration-outcomes-us-refugees-successes-and-challenges

3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013) *Suicide and Suicidal Ideation Among Bhutanese Refugees – United States 2009 – 2012* www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6226a2.htm

4. www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/the-refugee-act