

Summary: **‘Redefining Refugee Resettlement: Repairing the Cracks in the Pathway to the American Dream’**

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Redefining Refugee Resettlement: Repairing the Cracks in the Pathway to the American Dream

Executive Summary

- The United States' refugee resettlement program has dwindled over time.
- The high cost of resettling in the United States has resulted in community service groups, such as religious congregations, assisting migrants with food, rent, and supplies.
- Expanding ethnic-based community-led sponsorship will help bolster the existing refugee resettlement regime.
- The funding structure of refugee resettlement should be modified to better meet resettlement goals. A federal contingency fund should also be created to stabilize refugee integration.
- These solutions will promote resettlement in the United States and improve resettlement opportunities for refugees in other parts of the world.

The History of Refugee Resettlement in the United States

- The influx of immigrants and economic instability have caused tensions in the American immigration system, creating challenges for the future of refugee resettlement in the U.S.

A. An Overview of Immigration Regulation Prior to The Refugee Act of 1980

- In the early 1900s, states individually regulated immigration through an immigration station in Manhattan, New York. The federal government then built an immigration station on Ellis Island, New York, and placed restrictions on immigration (e.g., literacy tests), resulting in a dip in immigration in the 1920s. In the 1940s, the Ellis Island inspection process was replaced with a paper-based process, and a medical evaluation was completed at the consulate.

B. The Refugee Act of 1980

- The Refugee Act of 1980 governs the admission of refugees into the U.S.
- Refugees are referred for resettlement to the U.S. by the UNHCR. Applicants undergo an initial screening to collect biographical information, and in-person interviews to determine if they meet the refugee definition and U.S. admissibility requirements. Applicants then undergo a health screening. Many also receive a cultural orientation before arrival.
- Upon arrival, refugees are welcomed by a representative from one of nine Resettlement Support Centers (RSC), who help them settle into their new homes and their new lives.
- Refugee resettlement is funded by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of State (DOS). Resettlement agencies receive a one-time sum per refugee to cover their first one to three months in the U.S. After these funds are used up, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) works with governmental and non-governmental organizations to provide refugees with cash and medical services.

- Voluntary agencies connect refugees to private partners for assistance with housing, transportation, and literacy. There is a need for more private partners to help newcomers.

C. Successful Private Refugee Resettlement Under the Reagan Administration

- The Private Sector Initiative (PSI) was launched in 1986. The PSI allowed for private organizations to sign agreements with the DOS to resettle refugees, from helping prepare their applications to providing food, housing, medical insurance, and other resettlement basics for two years after arrival in the U.S. or until receiving permanent residency.
- The PSI was not renewed due to the high costs of providing medical coverage to refugees. Sponsors expressed frustration about providing financial support to refugees who rejected job offers; the onerous enrollment process for sponsors; and selection bias towards established immigrant populations.

The Current U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program: Barriers and Paths to Reform

- The U.S. has long tried to secure bipartisan support for refugee resettlement.
- The transition from a government that curbed resettlement to one that seeks to strengthen it highlights the program's instability and the need for legislation to ensure its longevity.

A. Political Ideology Detracts from Resettlement Goals

- The Trump administration claimed that the entry of more refugees was detrimental to national interests, lowering the number of annual refugee admissions to 45,000.
- The case of *Trump v Hawaii* opened the door for future limits on refugee admissions with the Supreme Court ruling that discriminatory policies towards migrants may stand as long as the government supports these policies with a *prima facie* plausible rationale.
- The Biden administration has tried to reverse the previous government's policies and is working to revitalize the resettlement program.

B. Unilateral Control on Refugee Admissions

- The President has full control over refugee resettlement policy, making refugees vulnerable to changes in government. This practice cannot continue if resettlement is to be sustainable.
- Lawmakers from all branches and parties must collaborate to make resettlement long-lasting.

C. Successful Refugee Resettlement

- The U.S. can learn from other countries' approaches to resettlement. The Canadian model is a useful precedent both in terms of its strengths and its weaknesses, such as long wait times between submitting the sponsorship application and the arrival of sponsored refugees.

D. The COVID-19 Pandemic

- The pandemic led to a drop in refugee resettlement in 2020 due to pandemic-related barriers.

Recommendations

- The U.S. resettlement program must be improved to address the global refugee crisis. This can be done through greater inclusion of private citizens and an increase in public funding.

A. Expansion of Ethnic-Based Community-Led Resettlement

- The Sponsor Circle Program, where groups of five or more adults support Afghan refugees for at least 90 days, has been successful and could be expanded to other refugee populations.
- More people of colour need to be engaged by resettlement organizations to overcome racial disparities in leadership. Ethnic community-based organizations in particular can help refugees better integrate into American society while fostering pro-immigrant sentiment.

B. The Funding Structure of the Reception and Placement Program and the Office of Refugee Resettlement Must Be Modified

- The funds provided by the DOS have not been adjusted according to the increasing cost of living and changes to refugee demographics. The short duration of federal funding also does not allow refugees to become financially independent and is burdensome on local partners.
- Congress should implement a contingency fund to stabilize federal funding and coordinate with the President to allow individual states to better plan for annual refugee arrivals.
- The U.S. must also be better prepared to react in case global resettlement emergencies arise.

Counterarguments to misconceptions

- Misconceptions about refugee resettlement from politics and the media must be addressed.

A. Refugees Help to Facilitate Community Integration Rather than Create Economic Instability

- Refugees do not take job opportunities away from citizens. Greater public education, skills development, and safety nets should be given to all workers regardless of immigration status.
- Research has found that refugees' economic contributions outweigh initial settlement costs.

B. Refugees Do Not Jeopardize National Security

- Data suggests that immigrants, especially refugees, have a lower likelihood of committing crimes than native citizens.
- Refugee resettlement promotes national security interests by helping American operations abroad (e.g., collecting intelligence and building alliances with other countries).

Conclusion

- Ethnic-based community-led resettlement has the potential to improve refugee integration and independence in the U.S.
- Community-led resettlement will benefit from additional federal funding.