

**Refugee Education and Economic Integration:  
A Qualitative Study of the United States Refugee Admissions  
Program**

By  
Christopher R. Lester, Jr.

*Submitted to  
Central European University  
Department of Public Policy*

*In partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts in Public Policy*

Supervisor: Dr. Martin Kahanec

Budapest, Hungary

2014

I, the undersigned .....Christopher R. Lester, Jr..... hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program, in English or in any other language.

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Date: .....May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014.....

Name (printed letters): .....Christopher R. Lester, Jr.....

Signature: .....Christopher R. Lester, Jr.....

## Abstract

The United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) takes what some have deemed a “one-size-fits-all” approach to refugee resettlement and economic integration. Under this system, those individuals from professional backgrounds with high levels of education typically receive the same employment services and job placements as those individuals from unskilled backgrounds with low levels of education. Based on the various expectations and desires of individuals from different educational backgrounds, this system may either promote or hinder one’s overall integration. The following research seeks to gain insights into participants’ satisfaction levels with USRAP’s employment services and the difficulties faced by individuals from various educational backgrounds upon arrival. This paper employs qualitative research methods in the form of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with individuals resettled through this process. By engaging the individuals most directly affected by USRAP in deep conversation regarding the system, this project seeks to supplement more general examinations of refugee integration that do not allow for detailed accounts of their own problems and perceptions. Furthermore, it attempts to increase the agency of refugees in the resettlement process by encouraging them to voice their concerns and then developing policy recommendations based on this data.

**Keywords:** *Bhutanese, Charlotte, education, forced migration, integration, refugee, resettlement, USRAP*

*Thank you to all those from Charlotte's refugee community who offered their time to sit down and share their experiences. Without you this research would not be possible.*

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## **List of Abbreviations**

CDC – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
DHS – Department of Homeland Security  
DOS – United States Department of State  
FY – Fiscal Year  
HHS – Department of Health and Human Services  
INA – Immigration and Nationality Act  
IOM – International Organization for Migration  
IT – Information Technology  
ORR – Office of Refugee Resettlement  
PRM – Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration  
R&P – Reception and Placement agency  
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
USRAP – US Refugee Admissions Program  
Volag – Voluntary organization  
WFP – World Food Program

# Introduction

## The US Refugee Admissions Program

Under the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), the United States accepts more refugees for resettlement than any other country in the world. According to the 2014 Proposed Refugee Admissions Report to Congress issued by the US Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services, the US accepted 58,238 individuals in Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 and around 69,500 individuals in FY 2013 (DOS, DHS, and HHS 2013, 5). In order to facilitate the successful integration of these large numbers of individuals into American society and the economy, the federal government partners with nine voluntary organizations (volags) at the national level that place refugees with local affiliates known as Reception and Placement agencies (R&Ps) throughout the country. R&Ps provide a number of services to their newly arrived clients, including the allocation of initial financial support, assistance accessing health and other services, placement in English language classes, cultural orientation, and employment services, among others.

This paper will focus on the employment services offered to refugees by R&Ps and the policies at the national level that impact them. Throughout the paper, the term *refugee* will be used to denote any individual who meets the conditions laid out in section 101(a)(42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), and who has entered into the US through USRAP. According to the INA, a refugee is defined 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 (Refugee Act of 1980).*

By undertaking independent research with individuals resettled through USRAP, this paper will illumine a variety of challenges and frustrations faced by refugees depending on their levels of education prior to resettlement. The data generated by this research will be analyzed and then used to offer policy recommendations for the R&Ps implementing USRAP's employment policies.

Since Congress's adoption of the Refugee Act of 1980, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) has coordinated the US's resettlement process throughout the country. Alongside the establishment of this office within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), these amendments commissioned ORR with the task of "achiev[ing] economic self-sufficiency among refugees as quickly as possible" (*Refugee Act of 1980*). The pervasiveness of language referring to early employment and economic self-sufficiency benchmarks of 120 and 180 days in ORR's annual budgets highlight its continued emphasis on this goal (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2014). Many R&Ps pursue early economic self-sufficiency for refugees by establishing a good rapport with local firms and nudging their clients in the direction of these companies. The formation of these relationships results in a symbiosis of sorts, in which R&Ps and their clients can rely on preexisting channels toward early employment and local firms can rely on consistent flows of generally hardworking individuals to fill entry level positions.

The strength of this policy of economic self-sufficiency and its implementation at the local level lies in its efforts to reduce refugee reliance on social welfare programs by empowering individuals to support themselves and their families from their own wages. By providing financial assistance to refugees for a relatively short period of time, the resettlement program reduces the costs associated with initial placement. Requiring refugees to obtain employment in a relatively short period of time allows for the program to remain palatable if not attractive to legislators and the general public, as they are guaranteed that



these individuals do not receive undue support from the state and that they will not perceive social welfare as a long-term means in and of itself. Furthermore, for many refugees who have spent large portions of their lives in camps without the legal right to seek employment at will, the opportunity to earn a paycheck as soon as they arrive to the US comes with a feeling of empowerment and self-determination. Many refugees are excited to obtain employment and begin work as quickly as possible in order to provide for themselves and their loved ones.

USRAP's requirement of immediate employment, however, is often difficult to achieve for individuals and the R&Ps that assist them, especially in times of economic downturn. By promoting a "sink or swim" policy in the job market, individuals already burdened by the debt associated with resettlement, navigating bureaucratic institutions in an unfamiliar language, a lack of support networks, and culture shock, face even higher levels of stress that may impede their long-term success. Another weakness of this policy and its implementation, which this paper will explore in depth, lies in its one-size-fits-all approach to employment acquisition. Because most large firms with which R&Ps forge employment relationships are interested in hiring low-skilled workers, the system favors individuals from less educated backgrounds. While more highly educated individuals obtain employment at these firms as well, the positions they take often do not utilize their skills and education. Such a situation may prove both unfulfilling for the employee and inefficient for the US economy which could otherwise benefit from professionals using skills that may be in short supply.

### **Charlotte's Bhutanese Refugee Community**

The following research examines the situations of Bhutanese refugees who were resettled to the US through USRAP and who currently reside in Charlotte, North Carolina. In FY 2013, the state of North Carolina accepted 2,419 refugees, 25 percent of whom were resettled to the Charlotte Metropolitan Area (North Carolina Department of Health and

Human Services 2014). Charlotte's Bhutanese refugee community consists of those individuals of Nepali-origin, termed *Lhotshampa* by the Bhutanese government, who resided mainly in the southern part of Bhutan prior to their expulsion from the country. Beginning in the early 1990s, the government of Bhutan began pushing this people group out of the country by force, intimidation, and the denial of legal statuses, after its attempts to target illegal immigrants and impose mandatory cultural practices of the ruling ethnic group resulted in protests by members of the Nepali-speaking community in the south. Well over 100,000 Nepali-speaking Bhutanese fled to the eastern part of Nepal during this time. According to a census conducted across Nepal's refugee camps in May of 2007, 107,923 individuals resided in the seven camps set up in the Jhapa and Morang districts just several months prior to the beginning of the resettlement process to third countries (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and World Food Program 2008, 5). According to statistics released by the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), the US resettled 61,204 refugees of Bhutanese origin between the years of 2008 and 2012 once it and other traditional resettlement countries began accepting Bhutan's refugees from Nepal (Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration).<sup>1</sup>

Since arrival in the US, the Bhutanese refugee community has faced a number of challenges, including among them a disproportionately high rate of suicide. As reports have noted, at 20.3 per 100,000 people, the suicide rate of the Bhutanese refugee community in the US is nearly twice that of the general population in the country (Mishra 2014). According to a study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Massachusetts Department of Public Health on suicide in the Bhutanese refugee community, poor access to services, the inability to find work, and the lack of choice over one's future, among numerous other factors, contribute to an increased risk of suicidal tendencies (Ao et

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<sup>1</sup> Over the course of these five years, the US saw a steady increase in Bhutanese refugee acceptance numbers, going from 0 in FY 2007 to 15,070 in FY 2012.

al. 2012, 13). With such a serious and urgent issue at hand in this community, and to a lesser extent in other refugee communities, direct and detailed research on life and employment satisfaction may help policymakers better address the difficulties that refugees from various backgrounds face after resettlement.

# Chapter 1: Literature Review

## 1.1 Refugee Integration

Integration serves as a highly sought-after goal in any country's resettlement plan. However, despite its prevalence in resettlement discourse, researchers and governments interpret the concept in various ways. As Favell notes, integration policies arise in specific contexts, and are therefore shaped by different forces which may lead to a divergence in how states perceive the concept (Favell 2001 in Sigona 2005, 119). Because of the distinct evolutionary processes of the term in various contexts, integration encompasses a wide range of meanings from those that stress assimilation to those that stress multiculturalism. Opposite nativist sentiments, researchers frequently highlight the importance of a "two-way process" of integration in which both the individual being resettled and the country of reception adapt in order to facilitate the integration of the individual (Castles et al. 2003, 113; European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2005; Hieronymi 2005; Marchi 2005). This approach may be likened to the idea of multiculturalism mentioned above, in which the government takes an active role not merely in assimilating newcomers into the country's current environment, but in also embracing them as contributors to the country's future character. Within the context of integration, refugees become full members of their host societies by achieving levels of social status, economic opportunities and outcomes, political involvement, and other attributes comparable to that of native populations. Within this paper, the term *integration* will assume such a definition.

As Castles et al. note, numerous researchers and migration organizations have focused on identifying and improving what Korac terms "functional integration," or the provisions and rights in place that prove conducive to the integration process (European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2005; Korac 2001 in Castles et al. 2003, 124). Such provisions might

include anti-discrimination legislation, educational institutions that value and promote inclusive societies, legal long-term resident status, or even the extension of certain political rights to these populations. Others have attempted to develop a better understanding of the concept of integration by exploring those attributes that indicate success (Ager and Strang 2004; Castles et al. 2003; Dickerson et al. n.d.). Such indicators may include among them levels of educational attainment, employment rates and job type, location and quality of housing, amount and type of political participation, and a host of others. Still, other researchers have assessed the adequacy of indicators in actually describing refugee integration by comparing these tools with the experiences of those resettled to third countries (Phillimore and Goodson 2008).

As Castles et al. note, problems arise when integration and its indicators are defined by experts alone. They assert that, “if integration is to be understood as a two-way process, refugees should be given the opportunity to contribute to the formulation of determinants that constitute successful integration” (2003, 129). As late as the 1990s and 2000s, researchers continued to critique the one-sided nature of past integration research and stress the importance of generating research based on the perceptions of refugee communities (Castles et al. 2003; Robinson 1998). Robinson asserts that, “since integration is individualised, contested and contextual it requires qualitative methodologies which allow the voices of respondents to be heard in an unadulterated form” (Robinson 1998, 122 in Castles et al. 2003, 133). In other words, because integration deals fundamentally with the human experience, the researcher must use human methods if he or she hopes to gain a better understanding of it.

More recent research has tended to follow this and similar advice by relying on or incorporating qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and surveys into data collection methods (Korac 2003; Mestheneos and Ioannidi 2002; Phillimore and Goodson 2008). While much of the literature in this field has tended to be rather theoretical in nature and therefore

not readily applicable to the work of practitioners, some researchers have sought to bridge the divide between theory and practice by utilizing “mid-level theory” (Ager and Strang 2008; Strang and Ager 2010). This approach seeks to elaborate on case studies produced in local contexts and describe them in theoretical terms. By taking this approach, researchers employ those ideas generated by high-level research in order to create tools and facilitate better understanding for practitioners.

## 1.2 Employment and Integration

As mentioned by Ager et al., many refugees view employment as the “key factor” in the integration process (2002, 10). Due to the crucial nature of this aspect of integration, much research aims to explore the various difficulties relating to employment posed for refugees and those factors that might ease this process (Allen 2009; Bevelander 2011). While many researchers employ quantitative methods in the exploration of this concept, others utilize qualitative methods which are useful in gaining details of the phenomenon and understanding economic integration as it is experienced. Despite the wealth of research available, researchers still emphasize the lack of specific expectations on the part of refugees produced in resettlement research (Gray 2008).

For many, the conception of employment as vital to integration may stop at the freedom to work as one pleases with the full rights of mobility possessed by the native population. However, for others it may involve practice in a particular field in their countries of reception. In this sense, one might differentiate between those who emphasize the importance of *opportunity* and those who emphasize the presence of *opportunities*. By working in a position similar to that which they held in their countries of origin or by obtaining new skills in their reception countries, these individuals hope to use their abilities to contribute to their new societies in the ways they deem most fit. In these cases, the quality

of work translates directly into quality of life, which thereby impacts individuals' perceptions of the integration process.

While the world's traditional resettlement countries allow for high levels of mobility within the labor market and do not often place restrictions on the jobs one can hold, refugees face many difficulties in continuing their previous careers due to a lack of recognition of their degrees and certifications, linguistic and cultural barriers, and the need to become economically self-sufficient soon after their arrival. Many individuals express frustration with the inability to practice the skills they acquired abroad in their new homes (Ager et al. 2002, 10). Often, employers in reception countries do not equate the acquisition of an education in refugees' countries of origin with the acquisition of an education in what they might term "the developed world" (Bloch 2002). In those cases where countries of reception refuse to recognize the foreign qualifications of refugees, researchers have noted mental and emotional problems such as depression. In extreme cases, these feelings have led to thoughts and incidents of suicide, such as is present in the Bhutanese refugee communities in the US (Ao et al. 2012; Knox 1997, 31-2).

### **1.3 US Resettlement Research**

In addition to general research on the labor market integration of refugees, several NGOs and researchers in policy have taken a more pointed and case-specific approach by examining USRAP's integration strategies (Brick et al. 2010; Dickerson et al. n.d.; Farrell, Barden, and Mueller 2008; Nezer 2013). Each of the nine volags that resettle refugees possess policy offices which advocate for issues affecting refugees in addition to conducting their day-to-day activities. Some of these offices are quite active in attempting to influence refugee resettlement and immigration legislation at the national level. Research from these and other organizations aimed at identifying the challenges posed by the current USRAP system frequently cite a lack of funding and insufficient coordination in some capacity as

areas for improvement. In addition to these general critiques, researchers often highlight the system's emphasis on economic self-sufficiency through immediate employment as a problem for the long-term integration of refugees.

Researchers employ a number of methods for data collection, including among them site visits with R&Ps, as well as focus groups and surveys given to refugees (Dickerson et al. n.d.; Farrell, Barden, and Mueller 2008). These tools are used to gain insights into the perceived problems of USRAP for those who resettle individuals and those who go through the resettlement process. While the information gleaned from these projects can help to illumine concerns regarding the system's efficacy, the limited and often non-confidential nature of these research methods may hinder the obtainment of free and honest responses.

## **1.4 Contribution**

In order to overcome the barriers that have arisen in previous research, this paper will rely on in-depth, personal, and confidential interviews with a small number of individuals resettled through USRAP. By taking this approach to data collection, the researcher has attempted to create an environment in which individuals may relay their genuine thoughts and experiences free from the concerns of others' perceptions or the constraints of short, written responses. Data generated includes responses to direct questions as well as anecdotal evidence offered by the project's participants. By relying primarily on responses from individuals having undergone resettlement through USRAP, this project takes to heart the aforementioned critiques posed by researchers such as Castles and Robinson and seeks to counter the often one-sided nature of past research in the field. In enabling individuals to tell their stories and address the issues they feel most pertinent to the refugee experience within the context of employment policy, this research enables refugees to take on a greater level of agency by contributing to the solutions of those problems that affect themselves and their communities.



## Chapter 2: Main Idea and Hypotheses

### 2.1 Main Idea

As previously stated, USRAP's resettlement system emphasizes economic self-sufficiency through immediate employment for incoming refugees. Partnerships established between R&Ps and employers facilitate ease of job attainment for clients, however the jobs offered through these arrangements do not always capitalize on individuals' strengths and capabilities. Individuals with high-level degrees and large amounts of training often find themselves working in industries such as manufacturing, hospitality services, construction, and retail upon arrival. While such jobs are important in driving the economy, the employment of highly-skilled individuals in these positions proves less fruitful for both the economy as well as the employee.

According to their most recent annual *Talent Shortage Survey*, ManpowerGroup revealed that skilled trades again top the list of most difficult positions for employers to fill in the US. Positions in Information Technology (IT), Accounting and Finance, Engineering, Management, and Teaching also made it into the organization's top ten list (ManpowerGroup 2013). Rather than channeling highly-educated refugees into low-skilled, entry level positions alongside those who have not pursued higher education, R&Ps might consider leading them to skilled work and thereby fill positions such as these that are in high demand.

Because highly-skilled refugees hold advanced degrees and often worked in well-respected positions prior to resettlement, the transition to low-skilled labor may yield challenges related to social status in one's community alongside the burdens of resettlement experienced by all refugees. This reality challenges the current USRAP approach in which all refugees receive the same services regardless of educational and work backgrounds. Of course, R&Ps are constrained by their budgets, much of the funding of which comes from

ORR and is largely determined at the national level by Congress. Still, policymakers must consider the possibility that pushing highly-skilled individuals into low-paying jobs early in the resettlement process may hinder refugees' long-term integration by creating a path dependency in which individuals continue to struggle to make ends meet rather than exploring their abilities and pursuing their interests.

## 2.2 Hypotheses

Based on the different backgrounds of individuals resettled through USRAP, this paper predicts disparities in satisfaction levels between those refugees coming from highly-educated backgrounds and those coming from generally-educated backgrounds. The hypotheses of this research may be summarized as follows:

***H1. Participants from highly-educated backgrounds will possess low levels of satisfaction with the employment portion of USRAP.***

***H2. Participants from generally-educated backgrounds will possess high levels of satisfaction with the employment portion of USRAP.***

The following research will explore these hypotheses through in-depth interviews conducted with a small sample of Bhutanese refugees in Charlotte, North Carolina. The data gathered will then be analyzed to understand individual levels of satisfaction and the most pressing concerns for those having undergone resettlement through USRAP.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **3.1 Methods Overview**

The research conducted for this project is comparative in nature and was constructed using a most-similar case design. The unit of analysis is the individual; specifically those individuals resettled to the United States under USRAP. In the selection of cases, non-probability sampling was employed in order to allow for in-depth interviews in which the interviewer could obtain insights into individuals' resettlement experiences otherwise unobtainable through less detailed and targeted methods. Specifically, the research utilizes the method of case-control sampling, in which all participants are selected purposively based on the presence of a number of similar attributes, differing only in terms of the variable under examination. The research generated therefore attempts to understand the impact of this particular variable on the individual.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

Data was collected in Charlotte, North Carolina, over the course of one month, from April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014 until May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014. During this time the researcher sat down with eight individuals from the Bhutanese refugee community and held in-depth, semi-structured interviews with these participants. Interviews were conducted in English, each participant possessing the ability to communicate effectively in the language. Individuals were asked to speak about their educational backgrounds and work histories prior to resettlement, then on their experiences of obtaining initial and secondary employment after arrival. On numerous occasions, participants offered their own suggestions for the improvement of the resettlement system.

These interviews were supplemented by elite interviews, which I conducted with three individuals working with Charlotte's various refugee communities. Two of these individuals

hold roles within each of the two government-funded resettlement agencies in Charlotte, while the other works at the post-resettlement stage with a community based organization (CBO) that offers skills acquisition services and serves as a point of contact for refugees attempting to gain employment. This organization receives its support from the community through charitable donations, and is therefore not affiliated with the formal resettlement program in the US. Interviews lasted from around 25 to 80 minutes each, and were recorded then transcribed in order to facilitate the analysis of data at a later time.

### 3.3 Case Selection

All participants from this study's research group originate from the country of Bhutan and fled to Nepal as their country of first asylum around the year 1992, when the Bhutanese government began expelling its southern Nepali-speaking citizens for fear of political uprising. Participants all come from the same situation of protracted refuge, having remained in Nepal for between 17 and 20 years. Because the average duration of stay in refugee camps worldwide is 17 years, these participants will serve as typical cases. Participants were eventually resettled to the US around the same time period through USRAP between the years of 2009 and 2012. Each participant came to the US as an adult male of working age and ability. Prior to arrival, they possessed comparable English language abilities. Upon resettlement, participants entered a brief language, culture, and employment orientation phase, after which they subsequently began seeking employment with the assistance of various resettlement agencies' employment assistance services.

In exploring the effects of education on individuals' resettlement experiences, participants are divided into two categories. These two categories of individuals will henceforth be referred to as *generally-educated* and *highly-educated*. The category of generally-educated participants includes those whose highest level of education did not exceed the equivalent of a high school diploma prior to resettlement. Many of these

individuals received a substantial proportion of their education in exile due to their protracted refugee situation, whereas others received the entirety of their education in Bhutan prior to expulsion. In either case, individuals received a relatively high-quality and comparable style of education. Bhutan's education system is generally recognized as adequate, having undertaken a series of reforms to modernize the country's schools in 1961. Since that time, the primary language of instruction has been English. The Bhutanese Refugee Education Program, organized throughout the seven Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal by CARITAS-Nepal, is praised for its success in providing adequate education to the camp's students. It is formally recognized by the Nepalese government and has been highlighted by UNHCR as a model to improve refugee camp education programs elsewhere in the world (Brown 2001). This program combines elements of the Bhutanese and Nepalese education systems, and like Bhutan, uses English as its primary language of instruction (Brown 2001, 131). Regardless of the education system under which they studied, the participants interviewed from this category possess basic capabilities such as literacy in their native language and English as well as general knowledge of Mathematics, Humanities, and Social Studies.

The category of highly-educated participants includes those who completed at least several years of higher education prior to resettlement in the US. Within this category, participants possessed a range of education from a minimum of one year of schooling aimed at obtaining a Bachelor's Degree, to a maximum of completion of a two year Master's Degree. While not all participants obtained a degree due to personal and political circumstances, their enrolment and successful completion of a portion of their studies demonstrates both the initiative and ability to pursue highly-skilled and/or academic occupations.

**Table 1: Subject Backgrounds**

Subject	Origin Country	Sex	Working Adult	Camp Stay (yrs)	Arrival Year	English Ability	Level of Education
1	Bhutan	M	Y	17	2009	Fair/Good	Highly Educated
2	Bhutan	M	Y	17	2009	Fair/Good	Highly Educated
3	Bhutan	M	Y	20	2012	Fair/Good	Highly Educated
4	Bhutan	M	Y	17	2009	Fair/Good	Highly Educated
5	Bhutan	M	Y	18	2012	Fair/Good	Generally Educated
6	Bhutan	M	Y	18	2010	Fair/Good	Generally Educated
7	Bhutan	M	Y	19	2011	Fair/Good	Generally Educated
8	Bhutan	M	Y	17	2009	Fair/Good	Generally Educated

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis

### 4.1 General Trends

*It was difficult for the employers as well because then the employers did not know us. The employers did not know what I could do. And on my part I did not know what I was fit for. So it was both challenging for the employers and the employee in that case.*

– Highly-educated Bhutanese refugee

Despite variation in the educational and work backgrounds of participants interviewed, a number of themes are present across the board. Fear associated with not being able to find a job upon arrival in the US or after leaving one's original placement was widespread throughout the stories of this project's participants. Interviewees explained the difficulties arising from receiving only small amounts of monetary assistance during their first months in the US. Some, who were unable to obtain employment before these funds ran out, explained the panic they experienced when they were unable to make rent payments and contemplated the possibility of homelessness. Some individuals relied on CBOs and charitable organizations such as churches to help supplement or replace the financial assistance they were receiving from R&Ps whereas others remained unaware of these organizations and the services they render. The insecurity experienced by these individuals in their first days after arrival led to increased stress in addition to the trauma and other setbacks already undergone.

The language barrier and culture shock remain the most commonly cited challenges to integration upon arrival. While many Bhutanese refugees possess some working knowledge of English due to its use as the primary language of instruction in Bhutan as well as in Nepal's refugee camp schools, the American dialect and appropriate grammar usage proved difficult. Due to these obstacles in communication, participants noted extreme difficulty in obtaining employment of their own initiative. While highly-educated participants were more

active in seeking employment on their own upon arrival when compared to generally-educated participants, all interviewees obtained their first jobs in the US with the help of their respective resettlement agencies' employment assistance services. Participants described this assistance as very helpful in facilitating understanding between employers and employees, since incoming refugees understood little of the application process and expectations of firms and employers tended to take a default skeptical position on hiring individuals from foreign countries with refugee status. Because Charlotte's R&Ps were able to meet this crucial need in the lives of individuals tossed into a situation of heavy uncertainty, all participants held a generally positive impression of the employment services rendered for which they were greatly thankful. That being said, the project's research finds a number of interesting factors, including an individual's level of education, which may account for variation in satisfaction levels.

***From here I can learn a lot and then I can make better money. And so from that work I got ideas; ideas that I should be very punctual. I should be very hard working. I should be very, very consistent in the work and very productive. And so I learned those things and I got those skills. And so, with that skill, though I didn't earn money, but I learned the ways how to make money.***

—Highly-educated Bhutanese refugee

On the whole, the data generated from this research confirms claims within the resettlement community that employment of any kind serves as an empowering force in the lives of refugees. During their interviews, the majority of refugees regardless of educational background highlighted the freedom to work as a positive development in their lives upon arrival in the US. Individuals cited the ability to provide for their families as a vitally important aspect of life. One highly-skilled participant explained that whereas he felt that he had gained little in terms of usable skills or financial compensation at his low-skilled labor jobs, he gained a better understanding of the expectations of American employers and the qualities of a good employee. This individual explained that whereas his initial salary was



barely enough to meet monthly expenses, he found himself more confident knowing that he was beginning his life, and he began to explore ways to further develop himself professionally.

## 4.2 Level of Education

*What I strongly feel is that—not only for the Bhutanese—for every refugee who comes to this country, they may have some potentiality which is not known, which is still hidden. We have to explore that. And then if we divert their talent to that direction, that person can be very, very resourceful.*

– Highly-educated Bhutanese refugee

When dividing participants into two groups based on the variable “Level of Education,” the data reveals a tendency toward frustration with initial employment after arrival in the US within the highly-educated group. Of the four individuals falling under this category, three expressed dissatisfaction with their initial job placements, often explaining that they found the physically strenuous and sometimes dangerous nature of the work disheartening. All three of these individuals expressed a desire for the US government to offer more services in terms of money, training, or recertification programs, in order to better integrate incoming refugees into the US economy. While one of these three individuals explained that his pragmatic approach to life allowed him to proceed with his low-skilled, entry level work out of necessity while maintaining a reasonable degree of happiness in his life, the other two either revealed or alluded to their struggle with depression during this time. Both of these individuals went on to discuss the problem of suicide within the Bhutanese refugee community in the US that is caused by economic and other forms of desperation.

One highly-educated participant, who arrived in 2012, had no critique of USRAP’s current system to offer. When viewed in light of the variable “Level of Education,” one may point out the fact that this individual possessed the lowest amount of additional schooling out of all participants in this group with only one year of post-secondary education working

toward a Bachelor's degree. Due to this individual's relatively small amount of undergraduate education, his job prospects would likely not differ significantly from the general population. Another explanation for this divergence comes when examining the variable "Arrival Year," as this individual arrived to the US three years later than other highly-educated participants. This project will explore the impact of this variable on refugees' satisfaction levels in the subsequent section.

On the other hand, participants falling under the generally-educated category tended to report almost exclusively positive impressions of USRAP's employment services. Individuals from this group emphasized aspects of the US's refugee policy such as full rights to employment and the ability to make enough money to support one's family through their own efforts. Participants contrasted their situations in the US with that of their situations prior to resettlement in which their career and economic prospects were severely limited by laws limiting the work of refugees in their countries of asylum. While not all participants from this group were satisfied with their initial job placements upon arrival, critiques from three of these individuals addressed exclusively financial concerns. In those cases where individuals from this group chose to pursue employment elsewhere, such decisions were usually motivated by a comparatively smaller paycheck or sporadic work hours at their initial placement which made it difficult to pay bills and meet living expenses.

While the three participants from this group mentioned above expressed finances as paramount in their job search, one generally-educated participant expressed dissatisfaction with the labor-intensive entry level job in which he was placed upon arrival. In his interview he stated that he prefers instead to engage in work that requires mental rather than physical efforts, and eventually obtained employment of this nature. This result highlights the inherent difficulty in basing assumptions on the variable "Level of Education" in refugee populations. While the participant being discussed had not obtained any sort of post-

secondary education in Nepal prior to resettlement in the US, he revealed that this decision was circumstantially motivated. He disclosed that if he had not undergone third country resettlement, he would have chosen to pursue higher education. In this way, this individual possesses a combination of attributes from each category. Whereby his credentials match that of the other generally-educated participants and he therefore has no claim to frustration with the lack of utilization of his education, his ambition matches that of the highly-educated participants which may color his perception of job placement. While this project selected only adult males of working age at the time of arrival in the US in order to produce a most-similar study, it could have better controlled for this problematic outcome by being more rigorous in case selection and thereby interviewing only individuals above a certain age who had already served a minimum number of years in their career fields.

***In order to be a teacher, it's very tough again. You have to have Master's Degree. You have to start over again from GED, I think. I don't think they recognize here...I don't think they recognize what we've gained.***

– Highly-educated Bhutanese refugee

When discussing efforts to obtain employment more fitting of their educational backgrounds, three of the four highly-educated participants revealed their struggles in possessing advanced education not recognized in the US. For this group, resettlement to the US meant not only forfeiting cultural familiarity and challenging traditional lifestyles, but it also meant a shift in social status, since individuals serving in roles such as teachers and community leaders in South Asia typically receive high levels of respect in their communities. For the highly-educated individual, this situation may lead to a sort of double culture shock in which he must not only discover his place in the receiving society, but also reinterpret his role in his own community. When explaining their dissatisfaction with initial job placements, participants frequently cited financial compensation and respect as problems upon arrival. One individual explained that he found his mind constantly returning to his life

in Nepal and the social status he held there during his first months in the US. While one individual was in fact able to gain recertification of his degrees as the equivalent of a lesser American degree, the others were unable to accomplish this feat. Participants expressed great confusion and a lack of direction in beginning this process.

Several participants from each group chose to pursue additional education upon arrival in the US after establishing a degree financial security. When asked why they chose to pursue additional education, individuals commonly cited respect in addition to other factors such as a desire to help their community, obtaining work that they find personally fulfilling, and higher monetary compensation. Others within both groups expressed interest in continuing their education through college attendance or other training programs at a later date, although many were undecided regarding their fields of study or when they expected to pursue this goal. Two participants, one from each category of education level, explained that their age and family circumstances prevent them from pursuing additional training. According to one highly-educated participant, his dreams of working in his field of study had passed, and though he hoped to gain some vocational training at some undetermined point in the future, he had decided to invest the majority of his efforts into assisting his children to achieve their career goals.

### 4.3 Arrival Year

*When I came here in 2012, a lot of people from our community were already been resettled, so when I need some help...I used to seek my help to the other people, so they were ready to help me...I heard that some people...they say that when they were resettled like 2008...there is no other people from the community. They don't have the car, everything else, and so they have a lot of problems. But when I came here I don't face those problems comparing to those people who came earlier than me.*

– Highly-educated Bhutanese refugee

In addition to education level prior to resettlement, the variable “Arrival Year” also had influence on participants’ satisfaction with USRAP’s employment policy. While the

arrival years of participants selected for this research differed by a maximum of only three years, their experiences differed significantly. Such variation may be explained by the different forces in play when each wave of Bhutanese refugees arrived. According to the data, it appears that those who arrived at a later date were able to integrate more quickly into the economy as well as the community. Speed of integration will have an impact on an individual's satisfaction level since quicker attainment of employment will decrease financial stress and increase one's sense of belonging.

As mentioned previously, the US did not begin accepting Nepal's Bhutanese refugees until 2008, when it became the major resettlement destination for this group. Because Charlotte possessed no Bhutanese refugees prior to this time, those individuals resettled to the city among the first from their group had little to no Bhutanese community to serve as a support network during their integration. Those participants from this study who arrived in 2009 reported confusion with employment procedures and the navigation of daily life more frequently than those who arrived between the years of 2010 and 2012. In each of the stories of those who arrived after 2009, participants described the roles of community members who had arrived prior to themselves as helpful in their integration. Individuals recounted numerous times in which preexisting community members assisted them with registration for public services, transportation to and from various facilities, and providing information regarding employment opportunities. Furthermore, those individuals who arrived after 2009 tended to have close relatives on which they could rely for support while attempting to establish their lives in the US. These participants reported less anxiety associated with financial concerns than those who did not have family in the US prior to arrival. These individuals were able to find temporary if not permanent residence with their relatives, and furthermore, these families often chose to pool their resources to allow finances to stretch further.

In terms of organizational ability, those individuals undergoing resettlement amongst the first from their group found themselves thrust into a situation where volags and R&Ps were still largely unaware of the specific needs and abilities of the Bhutanese refugee population. Both the perceptions of this group and the services rendered to them upon arrival were likely colored by R&Ps' experience with their previous refugee clients. In Charlotte, the two largest Asian refugee communities in recent years come from Vietnam and Burma. Those from Vietnam belong almost exclusively to hill tribe groups with fairly dismal education backgrounds. While Charlotte's Burmese refugee community possesses a degree of variation in terms of education, many of its members too come from less educated backgrounds. Those individuals arriving several years after Bhutanese refugee resettlement had already been set into motion in the US found better understandings of and more established services for their community.

R&Ps have since been able to employ Bhutanese individuals as interpreters and translators as well as offer them administrative positions to serve as liaisons between the agencies and the community. In this regard, the roles of a preexisting Bhutanese community and Charlotte's R&Ps in the integration process have blended together, as Bhutanese individuals assist in both informal as well as formal settings. With several community members facilitating employment acquisition formally for Charlotte's resettlement agencies, there seems to have been a stronger bond forged between the Bhutanese community and those agencies. Individuals also appear more satisfied with the services provided to them. Those participants who arrived after 2009 frequently cited the ease which they feel accompanies working with Charlotte's R&Ps to obtain employment.

Finally, a refugee's year of arrival likely has an impact on that individual's satisfaction with USRAP's employment services due to the inherent ease of economic integration that year provides. In this case, the ease of economic integration is influenced by

a country's economic outlook and employment prospects. Those individuals who arrived in the first few years after the US's decision to resettle Nepal's Bhutanese refugee population faced a period of economic recession, which heavily impacted the willingness of firms to take on new employees. In the case of this study, those participants who arrived in 2009 did not obtain employment until between three and five months after arrival, whereas those arriving between the years of 2010 and 2012, when the US began to make an economic recovery, obtained employment between one and two months after arrival. Financial concerns characterized the employment stories of this project's participants who arrived in the midst of high unemployment, with low wages, low numbers of working hours offered by employers, and long periods of time before finding employment or in between jobs all cited as problems.

When understood in light of the fact that refugees' economic assistance packages run out after only several months in the US, the gravity of the situation becomes glaring. With funding for ORR also being hit by the recession, the US's economic situation made the provision of adequate services for refugees more difficult for R&Ps. One participant recalls a community meeting between refugees and his resettlement agency in which the two parties held different perspectives on the issue. According to this participant, the refugees in attendance continued to bring to the floor their concerns over the lack of support received from R&Ps while the agency asserted the lack of funding available to them at the national level. Such accounts demonstrate how economic outlook can color refugee perceptions of USRAP.

#### **4.4 Additional Insights**

*They do a small orientation in Nepal—three days orientation—but we don't remember everything they said. Coming from Nepal to here is a life-changing thing and our mind is not in a stable position. And then we started thinking about finding a job, but we don't know what to do, where to go, and we were not sure what we had to do.*

– Generally-educated Bhutanese refugee

In addition to insights regarding the effects of education level and arrival year on refugees' satisfaction with USRAP's employment policy, the data generated from this research reveals some additional noteworthy information. First, on numerous accounts participants noted confusion or held false information regarding their resettlement agencies' employment policies and services. For example, one participant explained that while the International Organization for Migration (IOM) may have explained the full resettlement process to him and the other incoming refugees prior to departure, the process involved so much information in such a short period of time that it became difficult to retain everything one would need upon arrival. This individual went on to explain that concerns regarding obtaining employment remained at the forefront of his mind, and that these concerns were not addressed until around two weeks after arrival. Furthermore, while some participants explained that they would not return to their R&Ps when seeking secondary employment due to an interest in not diverting attention away from those in their community who more desperately require assistance, others were unaware of the fact that this post-resettlement employment assistance remains an option up to five years after arrival in the country. Charlotte's R&Ps have recently added certain programs in the past couple years such as financial assistance packages for refugees interested in pursuing additional skills training after securing economic self-sufficiency in the US. When asked if he would consider utilizing this program when he decided to pursue his vocational training, one participant explained that he was unaware of its existence.

The importance of information works both ways in the case of relationships between resettlement agencies and their clients. On numerous occasions, refugee agency and CBO representatives explained the problem of refugees obtaining seasonal work due to higher paychecks while being unaware of the fact that these firms tend to lay off large portions of their workforces when business slows. After recognizing this trend, agencies were able to



inform their clients of the dangers of engaging in such work without planning for a new job after its completion. Many Bhutanese refugees in Charlotte also pursue training in nursing and homecare out of a desire to assist the elderly in their communities and sometimes in search of employment. Data revealed that for the first several years of Bhutanese resettlement, many refugees received training and certification from organizations that charge relatively high enrolment fees. After several years resettlement agencies were able to obtain information on this organization from their clients and suggest alternative programs with relatively inexpensive fees.

## Chapter 5: Policy Recommendations

USRAP arose out of the US's recognition of the fundamental human right for an individual to seek refuge from violence and oppression, and since 1948 Congress has sought to facilitate that journey for millions of refugees. As with the provision of any public service, refugee integration policy must remain responsive to the interests of its service recipients. At the same time, increasing expenditures on a program which directs resources toward primarily non-citizens is frequently met with a degree of skepticism if not opposition. Any improvement of USRAP must therefore meet both the criteria of responsiveness and cost-efficiency if it hopes to find its way into usage. Recently, critics of USRAP's current approach such as Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana have asserted full reform of the system due to its inadequacies in providing services to diverse groups of incoming refugees (U.S. Senate 2010). While policymakers should consider the benefits of such large-scale reform, the following paragraphs will seek to offer some smaller suggestions which volags and R&Ps may implement in order to address the concerns of their clients in cost-efficient ways at the local level.

As detailed in the data analysis presented above, contact between R&Ps and their clients has led to the identification and resolution of problems for members of Charlotte's Bhutanese refugee community on numerous occasions. While R&Ps formally offer services to their clients for up to five years, the constant flow of incoming refugees and an increasing amount of administrative duties has made it difficult for these agencies to forge long-term relationships with those individuals who have already been resettled unless they themselves take the initiative to maintain contact. Despite these developments, community support remains a vitally important factor in refugee integration. By encouraging long-term contact between clients and the broader community, R&Ps can respond to problems more rapidly and in some cases preempt them before they occur.

While ORR's budget constraints mean that R&Ps must target their services to those most in need, CBOs operating within local communities often possess the ability to leverage volunteers to perform a wide range of services with little to no cost. In Charlotte, for example, one non-profit organization matches refugees with American citizens who are willing to assist the city's newcomers navigate bureaucratic institutions and understand American culture all while serving as a family friend. Another CBO provides numerous services such as employment assistance, English and computer classes, and skills training. Despite the fact that resettlement agency representatives are aware of these organizations and somewhat familiar with the work they do, there remains little contact between them. By simply informing themselves and their clients of these services, R&Ps can facilitate contact between refugees and community members that will offer refugees the assistance and information they need to better integrate into the US economy and society. Furthermore, with new services added to the repertoire of R&Ps, representatives should place a greater emphasis on the dissemination of information in refugee communities. Again, the solution to this problem may lie in contact between R&Ps and CBOs, as these organizations have deep roots in many of the city's refugee communities and frequently liaise with community leaders.

In seeking to address the employment concerns of highly-educated refugees, one may turn to a community which possesses a large population of refugees, asylum seekers, and Cuban/Haitian entrants with high level degrees for guidance. One such community is that of Miami, Florida, in which 30 percent of the city's refugees reported holding a college or other professional degree in 2008 (Pindus et al. 2008, 2). These individuals, like many of Charlotte's Bhutanese refugees, possess skills which are in short supply, such as accounting, engineering, and health care. Therefore, allowing them to practice their professions in the US by channeling them into these positions can benefit not only the incoming refugee, but the

economy of their receiving communities as well. The state of Florida offers one such program known as the Career Laddering initiative, which assists refugee professionals in obtaining and translating their diplomas from their home countries, offering career guidance, and ultimately directing these individuals to the locations where their skill sets are in demand. In order to qualify for this service, the client must pass a certain threshold for English ability. He or she is then granted a subsidy to be used to obtain degrees from abroad and receive necessary additional training (Pindus et al. 2008, 5).

While the implementation of programs such as this one does require a degree of additional financial support, the gains that it produces in the long run help it meet the criterion of cost-efficiency. By allocating individuals to the professions for which they are most qualified rather than nudging them into low-skilled labor, the result is the most efficient outcome for the receiving state's economy. Beyond this, R&Ps might consider working with employers of highly-skilled workers much as they currently work with employers of low-skilled workers to sponsor highly-educated refugees' recertification and training. Under such a system, R&Ps could identify firms in the industries that possess shortages of highly-skilled workers, and direct refugee professionals to these companies. In exchange, the firms would offer entry-level positions to these refugees with the understanding that they should receive an offer for full-time employment in a position similar to that of their profession prior to resettlement upon receipt of their diplomas from abroad and the successful completion of any necessary additional training. These firms would co-finance any expenses related to this process alongside the refugee's R&P.

## Conclusion

Because the US resettles more refugees annually than all other nations combined, USRAP has almost out of necessity taken a streamlined approach to the process. While this has enabled the country to receive and host large numbers of refugees, it has not necessarily produced the most effective outcomes in terms of integration. Refugees come from a variety of contexts, both across as well as within people groups, and therefore require different services to assist them in beginning life anew in their resettlement communities. While many generally-educated individuals find satisfaction in the right to work as they please and the opportunity to earn a paycheck and thereby support their families, many highly-educated individuals hold desires to use their education to contribute to their new societies. When these individuals are placed into low-skilled labor without the opportunity for advancement, they may experience depression or disillusionment with the resettlement process. By offering services such as recertification programs and career counseling for individuals from these groups, resettlement agencies may facilitate more meaningful employment for their clients while helping firms hire for hard-to-fill positions.

This project has sought to counter one-sided, externally imposed measures of integration by exploring the experiences of individuals who have undergone resettlement through USRAP. By engaging in in-depth, semi-structured interviews, participants had the opportunity to discuss those aspects of resettlement that they felt were most important in their own experiences. These interviews were not limited to short responses as with survey questions, and additionally interviews were conducted in fully confidential settings free from the social pressures that could skew responses that one might face in settings such as focus groups. In asking individuals to assess USRAP's employment assistance programs, this research enters into dialogue with those closest to the program and encourages participants to take an active role in shaping the system that brought them to the US. Participants freely

offered not only their own accounts of struggles and appreciation for the help they received, but they also provided recommendations of their own for USRAP.

While the data generated from this research reveals trends among participants that lend credibility to the project's hypotheses, as qualitative research with a relatively small N, one cannot generalize this data to the larger population. Rather, the aim of this research is to supplement preexisting research on refugee attitudes toward USRAP by allowing for the stories of these individuals to reveal information that quantitative and other forms of qualitative research cannot express. The researcher has undertaken an explanation of those experiences that do not confirm the hypotheses by discussing the salience of other factors such as the variable "Arrival Year," the interruption of life projects due to forced displacement, and individual personalities.

As hypothesized, an individual's level of education does in fact seem to have some impact on that person's satisfaction level with USRAP. Those participants who had pursued higher education after the completion of their secondary schooling tended to express dissatisfaction with their initial job placements in the US and openly offered suggestions on how to improve the system. However, while the data suggests that education does impact satisfaction levels, this variable does not account for everything. Rather, as demonstrated in this research, one's year of arrival may also influence an individual's perception of R&Ps' services. Those participants who came into the US among the first waves of Bhutanese in 2008 and 2009 arrived at a time both when R&Ps were unfamiliar with this new refugee population as well as during the depths of the recession in the US. As a result, these individuals experienced longer waiting periods prior to obtaining employment and experienced lay-offs and cut-backs on working hours, all of which likely colored their perceptions of the employment services rendered by their resettlement agencies. Because of the imperfect knowledge and lack of adequate funding of R&Ps during this time as well as

the economic hardships refugees experienced upon arrival, those individuals who arrived in 2009 tended to hold more critical views of USRAP's employment services.

The data also reinforces the need for researchers to exercise great caution when delineating categories. For example, while those participants deemed "highly-educated" possessed a number of similarities in the sense that they all had intentions to pursue higher education, and therefore likely possessed higher levels of ambition, value of education, self-identity as a community leader, etc., not all of these individuals completed their degrees. Without such certification, there is little distinguishing these individuals in terms of employability from those who received only the equivalent of a high school diploma. In this sense, problems such as degree recertification served as serious issues of frustration for several of these individuals, but did not affect others. Additionally, whereas this project presented a dichotomy between those individuals having obtained some degree of higher education and those who did not, it did not anticipate the fact that because of displacement, resettlement, and other hardships associated with refugee life, individuals must often delay their life projects. For this reason, one individual from the generally-educated group possessed qualities similar to those participants belonging to the highly-educated group, in the sense that he was dissatisfied with his initial low-skilled job placement and took serious initiative once arriving in the US to pursue higher education. In this way, one's own personality and sense of being comes into play. While researchers may not be able to control for this, by taking individuals above a certain threshold in their profession, one may safely assume that individual to be set in his career.

While some policymakers continue to push for a complete overhaul of USRAP, migration policy reform in the US tends to fall by the wayside in favor of more pressing or exciting national issues. In the meantime, resettlement agencies should consider small improvements that are both responsive to the interests of refugees as well as cost-efficient for

the taxpayer. By doing so, R&Ps can help their clients better access services offered to them. Many of Charlotte's CBOs that work with refugees have large constituencies of volunteers who are eager to assist in a variety of ways. By working closely with these organizations that have the ability to forge long-term relationships with refugees, R&Ps can ensure that individuals receive assistance throughout their integration process while also more easily disseminating information regarding available assistance programs to refugee communities. Furthermore, R&Ps may turn to the programs of other states which already attempt to address the concerns of their diverse refugee populations when looking for programmatic improvements. By following the example of R&Ps in the state of Florida, resettlement agencies can offer services such as Career Laddering which empower highly-educated refugees to continue their careers in their country of resettlement.



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