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Explaining refugee employment declines: Structural shortcomings in federal resettlement support

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Abstract

In the United States, the integration experiences of immigrants depend in part on whether they are recognized as refugees or as economic migrants. Unlike economic migrants, refugees receive federal resources to help find employment, and this distinction raises important questions about the role such government support plays in migrants' labor market integration. First, drawing on nationally representative data from the New Immigrant Survey, we find that despite their early access to government-funded employment services, refugees actually experience employment declines the longer they live in the United States. Next, drawing on interviews with sixty-one refugee-serving organizations across the country, we highlight three structural weaknesses in the federal refugee resettlement process that help account for these employment declines: (1) retrenched resettlement funding, (2) a logic of self-sufficiency prioritizing rapid employment in generally undesirable jobs, and (3) siloed networks of refugee-serving organizations. Our findings have important implications for immigrant integration, the welfare state, and how nonprofit organizations shape inequality.

Introduction

Amid global, political, and environmental unrest, international migration has become a primary strategy for individuals seeking physical and economic security (Sassen 2014). However, receiving societies treat immigrants differently depending on their legal classification. In the United States, economic migrants are often left to fend for themselves, while refugees have historically been able to tap into federal resources for their resettlement (Bloemraad 2006; Hamlin 2021). Local resettlement agencies, often in conjunction with other community partners, help refugees meet their basic needs, become linguistically and culturally incorporated into their new environment, and find a job. Self-sufficiency and the timely securing of employment are central tenets of refugee resettlement in the United States, with strict time limits placed on how long refugees can draw on government support. We examine how these government mandates affect not only access to the labor market but also employment over time, specifically through the lens of refugee resettlement.

While the U.S. refugee resettlement regime has recently been threatened with severe cuts, the program has long provided significant support to refugees. Typically, as soon as refugees arrive in the United States, they receive support from both the U.S. Department of State and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). This includes housing and cash assistance, food assistance, physical and mental health services, as well as English-language training and employment services. Federally-funded job placement services strive for refugees to realize self-sufficiency between four and eight months after arriving in the United States. This means that refugees should have secured a job and stopped drawing government welfare.[1] Unlike many other migrants, refugees receive immediate work authorization, and they can apply for lawful permanent resident (LPR) status after one year in the United States.

Existing research has generally concluded that this initial federal support is critical for refugees' labor market integration, and that a ready pathway to LPR status helps to compensate for the disadvantages faced by refugees, such as past trauma and a lack of social networks. Indeed, over time, refugees catch up to—and sometimes surpass—their non-refugee counterparts on key work indicators (Akresh 2008; Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen 2014; Chin and Cortes 2015). However, these findings are frequently based on cross-sectional data for employed individuals that often imputes legal status to the entire sample. Given that few administrative datasets track the foreign born over time, and that few economic surveys disaggregate different legal categories of foreign-born respondents, we know less about the on-the-ground challenges that refugees face in finding and maintaining employment longitudinally.

This paper addresses this gap through a mixed method research design that pairs an innovative, nationally representative longitudinal survey of new immigrants with interviews, conducted over the last sixteen years, with a national sample of service providers that work directly with refugees to secure employment. Findings from the New Immigrant Survey reveal that, despite receiving government support upon arriving to the United States, refugees do *not* experience employment gains over time. Quite the contrary, five years after gaining LPR status, refugees are the only migrant group to have their employment rate *decline*. What accounts for these losses? Interviews with refugee resettlement experts across the country highlight how decreased federal funding for refugee resettlement and siloed organizational support networks increase pressure on refugee-serving organizations to prioritize rapid job placement in often undesirable positions, making it difficult for refugees to secure more stable employment over time.

In the first half of the paper, we demonstrate refugees' employment prospects over time. In the second half, we focus on three mechanisms that likely drive the longitudinal employment

challenges that refugees face. First, we discuss how federal funding for refugee resettlement limits the timeframe for receiving employment support. Second, we show how a logic of rapid self-sufficiency has become embedded in the organizational cultures of nonprofits receiving this federal funding. Third, we examine how federal funding for refugee resettlement shapes the networks formed to support refugees, such that resettlement agencies are often siloed from other civil society organizations that serve both refugee and non-refugee populations. Ultimately, we argue that an organizational lens is important to illustrate how structural shortcomings in federal refugee resettlement support affect nonprofit organizations' ability to establish a strong foundation for refugees' continued employment. In doing so, we propose a research agenda that considers the organizational drivers of persistent inequality.

Revisiting the Refugee Advantage

In many ways, the category of "refugee" is a legal construct that provides privileged resources and protections to those afforded the label (Hamlin 2021). In the United States, for example, "refugees" enjoy considerable (though waning) government support to jumpstart their societal integration, while "economic migrants" are subject either to a laissez-faire integration system (Bloemraad 2006) or to active antagonism from governmental institutions that surveil and target them (Varsanyi 2010). This is not to say that refugees are necessarily better positioned than economic migrants. Refugees have often experienced traumas, have lower levels of human capital than migrants who arrive voluntarily, and lack the pre-existing social networks in their destination context that otherwise draw economic migrants to a chosen destination (Connor 2010). The resettlement process in the United States aims to ameliorate these disadvantages by providing work authorization upon arrival, facilitating community connections, and aiding with job placement

(Bansak et al. 2018; Eby et al. 2011). The goal of this early support is for refugees to attain self-sufficiency quickly so that they will be minimally (or not at all) reliant on government support in the long term (Bernstein and DuBois 2018).

Economic integration research has found that this initial resettlement support helps mitigate initial refugee disadvantages (Capps et al. 2015; Connor 2010). The longer refugees stay in the United States, the more likely they are to achieve parity with other immigrants in terms of earnings and occupational prestige, in some cases even surpassing them (Akresh 2008; Chin and Cortes 2015; Connor 2010). This optimistic version of refugee resettlement is typically based on data from *employed* individuals. When evaluating *all* refugees, however, findings are more mixed: some research points to the likelihood of employment increases with time in the United States (Beaman 2012; Capps et al. 2015; Donato and Ferris 2020), while other work finds that underemployment or low-wage service work are the norm (Fix, Hooper, and Zong 2017; Tran and Lara-Garcia 2020).

Being employed is a crucial initial indicator of ultimate economic mobility, yet most studies emphasizing employment rely on cross-sectional data, are forced to impute refugee status using national data, or rely on data from only one refugee resettlement agency (Tran and Lara-Garcia 2020). This paper builds on the prior research and seeks to overcome its data limitations. We critically revisit the longer-term dynamics of refugee resettlement with two waves of the New Immigrant Survey (NIS), a nationally representative and longitudinal survey that tracks the same cohort of new immigrants (including refugees) after they receive LPR status. Similar to prior studies, we find that LPR status immediately advantages refugees' employment. After five years, however, their employment actually *declines,* while other migrants' employment increases.

This paper helps explain why and where the U.S. refugee resettlement system breaks down for longer-term refugee employment by drawing on interviews with refugee-serving civil society organizations across the United States. We focus on the process of shepherding refugees through the resettlement experience, as well as on the organizational challenges that arise when complex networks of service providers must prioritize securing funding and following mandates from federal agencies. In particular, we assess the impacts of decreased federal funding over time, the funding mandates around refugees quickly attaining a job and becoming self-sufficient, and the networks of civil society organizations that refugees rely on. In doing so, we respond to Donato and Ferris's (2020: 7) call for research that helps us better understand "the long-term consequences of the ever-growing number of displaced persons seeking refuge." We also heed FitzGerald and Arar's (2018) call to adapt existing theories of integration to the macro-level forces shaping resettlement patterns. We argue that these findings are relevant for migration scholars, law and society scholars interested in how federal policies shape organizational responses to socioeconomic integration, and sociologists with a vested interest in understanding the federal and organizational drivers of persistent inequality.

Structural Weaknesses in Federal Resettlement Support

A rich literature illuminates several key features of the resettlement process that help explain refugees' employment declines over time. We focus on three: (1) decreased funding, (2) ubiquitous mandates to obtain employment and self-sufficiency quickly, and (3) disjointed organizational networks.

Funding Decreases

Federal refugee resettlement funding has decreased significantly over time (Capps at al. 2015), leaving state and local governments and private philanthropy to pick up the slack in refugee integration. This waning government support for immigrant integration in the United States is not unique to refugees. The literature on citizenship and social policy has documented a long-standing retrenchment in social welfare since at least the early 1990s, casting the burden of economic security onto individuals themselves (Brown 2011; Esping-Anderson 1990; Miller and Rose 1990; Somers 2008).

Given that government investments have been critical to building immigrant civil society in the United States (Bloemraad 2006), declines in federal funding have notably hurt organizations that serve refugees (Mento 2018; Rhayn 2019). Following years of funding cuts, which only deepened after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations concluded in 2010 that "resettlement efforts in many U.S. cities are underfunded, overstretched, and failing to meet the basic needs of the refugee populations" (cited in Brown and Scribner 2014: 110). As levels of federal investments have failed to keep up with the actual costs of resettlement, it has fallen more and more to philanthropy and other sources—often with competing directives—to provide crucial funding (Capps et al. 2015). The precarious financial structure of U.S. refugee resettlement has therefore put tremendous strain on refugee-serving organizations, which have had to serve the same numbers of refugees on significantly tighter budgets. The Trump administration's massive cutbacks raise further concerns about the lasting repercussions on the refugee resettlement apparatus, which has been so affected that it may not recover once federal support rebounds.

Quick Employment and Rapid Self-Sufficiency Mandates

The federal resettlement system is imbued with the neoliberal logic of "market citizenship" that emphasizes the central value of work (Brodie 1997; Grace, Nawyn, and Okwako 2018). This is not specific to the refugee resettlement arena. Indeed, scholars have long suggested that the neoliberal logic of "self-sufficiency" is embedded in all U.S. economic and social policy (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011), often disadvantaging communities of color (Brown 2013; Fox 2012; Watkins-Hayes 2009). For refugees, immediate employment is directly inscribed in the 1980 Refugee Act or Public Law 96-212 (Capps et al. 2015), and over time, refugee policies have consistently reduced the amount of time refugees are granted to become self-sufficient. The mandates of federal refugee resettlement reverberate widely, leading even philanthropies and other nonprofits that serve refugees to focus on narratives of market citizenship and immediate deliverables (Christensen and Ebrahim 2006; Nawyn 2011).

This focus on a rapid path to self-sufficiency comes at a cost. Emphasizing quick employment risks negatively affecting other aspects of refugees' integration and quality of life: English-language acquisition, long-term health, education, as well as economic stability (Digilove and Sharim 2018; GAO 2012). In light of this self-sufficiency mandate, resettlement staff tend to steer immigrants toward low-wage jobs that are attainable without educational credentials or English proficiency. Given this pattern of limited occupational mobility and low wages, scholars have challenged the narrative that any job is a good job. Lumley-Sapanski (2019), for one, has characterized it as the "survival job trap."

Disparate Organizational Networks

Beyond funding decreases and a myopic focus on rapid employment and self-sufficiency, fractured organizational networks also affect refugees' employment. While a growing number of nonprofit organizations address the needs of refugees and other immigrants (Bloemraad 2006; XXXX; Hung 2007), this support structure is diverse rather than monolithic. There are service providers and advocacy groups, as well as organizations that focus on issues related to health, education, work, child care, and cultural expression. There is also notable diversity in funding sources: a network of large resettlement agencies relies heavily on funding from the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, while other smaller organizations are supported by diverse government and philanthropic funding for refugees, other immigrant populations, and the native-born poor.

Funding sources shape how organizations interact with and provide services to refugees. Program goals and deliverables differ by funder, which can in turn create conflicting incentives that prevent the emergence of robust referral systems across service arenas (Young, Wilsker, and Grinsfelder 2010). The competing directives of large, government-funded resettlement agencies and smaller, alternatively funded refugee-serving organizations often means that these two groups of organizations do not coordinate well with one another. Refugees, in turn, struggle to navigate the splintered agencies and organizations that could support them in finding, and keeping, a job.

Our study leverages an organizational lens to illuminate these fissures in the federal refugee resettlement and employment process. We argue that the federal constraints placed on organizations is a salient social problem that complicates organizations' ability to help refugees find stable employment. We also argue that greater attention must be paid to how the neoliberal state, and its ubiquitous focus on self-sufficiency at all costs, shape organizational practices and ultimately individual well-being.

A Mixed Methods Approach

This research marries a nationally representative survey that captures the longitudinal employment patterns of refugees and other immigrants with interviews with refugee-serving organizations that reveal the mechanisms driving refugee employment declines. The New Immigrant Survey includes immigrants who received LPR status at some point in 2003 and are re-interviewed from 2007 to 2009, and our interviews represent a heterogenous sample of service providers across the United States from 2005 to 2020. Pairing survey and interview data both widens and deepens the scope of our findings.

Quantitative Data and Methods

The New Immigrant Survey (NIS) is a publicly available, nationally representative, longitudinal survey of immigrants aged 18 and older who received LPR status as a new arrival or adjustee in 2003. In addition to answering questions about their employment upon receiving LPR status in 2003, respondents were re-asked employment questions from 2007 to 2009.[2] These data capture employment indicators upon immediately receiving LPR status as well as a median time of five years later, allowing us to evaluate employment trends over time. Unlike other studies that are cross-sectional, must impute refugee status, or that focus on longitudinal trends in earnings or occupations, our data capture both the likelihood and retention of employment for a cohort of refugees over time (Akresh 2008; Chin and Cortes 2015; Connor 2010; XXXX).

There was substantial attrition between the two survey waves (49 percent). From the original 8,573 respondents, we restrict the sample to those present in both waves (n=4,363). However, a comparison of variables displayed even distributions across waves, and sensitivity analyses with attrition corrected using weights show consistent results. We imputed missing values on items with non-response using multiple imputation techniques (Allison 2002), which

incorporate theoretically relevant predictor variables to statistically fill in missing values on both independent and dependent variables. Once imputed, we further restrict the sample to those presumably in the labor market, aged 21 to 64, yielding a final analytic sample of 3,993. This sample is undoubtedly selective: it can only be generalized to labor market-aged immigrants who received LPR status in 2003. However, considering all refugees must apply for LPR status as a condition of their visa, these data are ideal for evaluating a nationally representative sample of refugees' employment over time.

To measure employment, we take the log odds of being employed (relative to being unemployed and out of the labor market). Our focal independent variable, refugee status, is measured by those whose administrative records note they entered with that status. Within one year of entering the United States, refugees must apply for LPR status. In the NIS, as soon as immigrants receive LPR status, they were surveyed for wave 1 (between May-November 2003). At wave 1, therefore, all individuals will have adjusted from refugee to LPR status, meaning they will have all lived in the United States for at least one year and will have thus received resettlement services. The average time in the United States (for both refugees and non-refugees) as of wave 1 is five years, likely reflecting delays between applying and receiving LPR status. Nonetheless, this time lapse implies that all refugees will have received all the resources to which they are entitled by wave 1. They were then surveyed a median time of five years later at wave 2 (between 2007-2009).

The NIS also captures rich measures of pre- and post-migration human, financial, and social capital—important for indicating the likelihood of employment (Borjas 1987; Chiswick 1978). These measures include pre-migration employment and occupational prestige, English-language fluency and educational attainment both in and outside the United States, and other

demographic characteristics. Prior research has shown that accounting for these measures helps explain the disadvantages refugees experience in other labor market outcomes (Connor 2010). The exact measures for these covariates, as well as their means and standard deviations, are presented in Table 1.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

We estimate two logistic regression models (stratified by wave) to predict the log odds of employment (in either 2003 or 2009) as a function of an immigrant's legal status upon entry (whether refugee or other legal category); individual-level human, financial, and social capital covariates; and several demographic characteristics. Previous empirical work confirms that collapsing all other non-refugee legal categories into one would obscure significant heterogeneity (XXXX). Therefore, in a sensitivity analysis, we also run logistic regression models with legal status in five, rather than two, categories. The results, available upon request, are consistent to those presented here. Finally, the 2009 model also includes a lagged dependent variable, whether the individual was already employed in 2003, as well as what year respondents were interviewed at wave 2 (i.e., in 2007, 2008, or 2009).

Qualitative Data and Methods

To understand the mechanisms driving refugee employment declines, we draw on sixty-one interviews—conducted between 2005 and 2020—with refugee-serving organizations in seventeen cities across the United States. Our sample includes both large, ORR-funded refugee resettlement agencies and smaller community organizations—funded by government and philanthropic sources—that serve refugees, immigrants, and other needy populations. The interviews have a wider time span than the NIS data (2005-2020 vs. 2003-2009), though both cover the 2008 financial crisis and a period more generally characterized by a retrenchment in federal refugee

support. On-the-ground service providers who have worked across various administrations and policies provide a critical longitudinal perspective on refugee employment trends.

We interviewed leaders from refugee-serving organizations mostly in large cities, including Houston, New York City, San Francisco, Detroit, Philadelphia, San Jose, Boston, Atlanta, Nashville, Baltimore, Salt Lake City, and Washington, D.C. These cities offer what might be thought of as best-case scenarios in terms of having robust infrastructures for working with immigrant and refugee communities, offering a range of funding options for immigrant- and refugee-serving organizations, and having diverse economic markets with job opportunities for new immigrants and refugees. Specifically, we interviewed organizational leaders with direct knowledge of the refugee resettlement process, including the challenges of funding refugee services and the refugee job-placement process. While these interviews were initiated during the course of different research endeavors, they all speak to organizations' refugee services, funding dynamics, and collaborations with government and other refugee- and immigrant-serving organizations in the area. We transcribed and systematically coded all interviews to elucidate the factors that help drive the refugee employment declines found in our analysis of the NIS data.

Quantitative Results: Demonstrating Declines in Refugee Employment over Time

Table 2 shows the relationship between refugee status and employment upon receiving LPR status in 2003, as well as five years later between 2007-2009. Both the 2003 and 2009 models include all covariates in Table 1.

[TABLE 2 HERE]

The results in Table 2 show that upon receiving LPR status in 2003, refugees have a *higher* propensity to be employed compared to non-refugees. This refugee advantage in employment

likelihood (.460, significant at p<.05) holds even after accounting for individual human capital, social capital, and demographic characteristics. However, by 2007-2009, refugees experience a *decline* in their likelihood of employment. In other words, their employment advantage becomes a disadvantage (-.445, significant at p<.05). Unlike in prior research (Connor 2010), this disadvantage holds with and without accounting for the robust NIS measures of human, financial, and social capital. Results demonstrating the model building are available upon request.

The changes between the two waves are illustrated in the predictive margins bar graphs in Figure 1, which are generated from models 1 and 2 of Table 2. All variables other than legal status are held at their means. Although refugees start out with a statistically significant advantage in their likelihood of employment compared to non-refugees, Figure 1 shows that advantage becomes negative by 2007-2009. Migrants in all other legal categories, by contrast, increase their employment over time. It is expected that immigrants without state resources see increased employment after five years with LPR status. Economic migrants, for example, will rely on social networks developed in the United States to help find longer-term employment (e.g., Munshi 2003). However, considering that refugees begin with an abundance of state-sponsored support, and that their employment is measured well after receiving such support, it is surprising that they experience a *decline* in employment over time.

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

These results describe refugees' employment trajectories over time. Of course, refugees have lived in precarious conditions across the globe prior to migrating, and these experiences could explain some decline in employment over time. Our model, however, does not capture these unobserved factors. Nonetheless, and counter to previous studies, the results find that refugees do not retain their employment the longer they live in the United States. This is so even when

accounting for rich measures of individual-level capital and the fact that refugees have received relatively substantial federal support geared at finding employment.

Qualitative Results: Explaining Declines in Refugee Employment over Time

What might explain refugees' employment decline? Our interview data with refugee-serving organizations across the country point to several facets of the U.S. refugee resettlement system as contributing factors. Specifically, we highlight how the structure of and decline in federal refugee resettlement funding, the resettlement program's emphasis on quick employment and rapid self-sufficiency, and the different organizational structures of federally- and non-federally-funded refugee employment services help explain why refugees' employment might *decrease* the longer they stay in the United States.

Inadequate Funding

Decreased refugee resettlement funding has had deleterious effects on both the quantity and quality of refugee support. Respondents from both big resettlement agencies funded by ORR and smaller community organizations with other funding sources consistently noted the insufficient financial support for refugees to find and maintain employment. Funding was especially precarious in the early 2000s, according to an employee of a large immigrant- and refugee-serving organization in San Francisco. "After 9/11," she said, "there were very few refugee grants available from the government, which made it hard to continue service provision to refugees."[3] These cutbacks have continued apace since then. During an interview, one employee of a small refugee-serving organization in Houston explained, "Vietnamese refugees […] used to get thirty-six months of financial assistance, and now it's down to eight—even less, four to six."[4] He stressed that both the

"period and amount of assistance" offered were "not enough,"[5] a sentiment also shared by representatives of the large resettlement agencies we interviewed in Baltimore and Washington, D.C.[6]

Over time, support has not only decreased but also become less reliable. Funding often fluctuates from year to year depending on the anticipated refugee flow, making it challenging to maintain staff. Reflecting on the impact of this unstable model, one employee of a large ORR-funded organization in Detroit expressed her frustration at managing staffing and budgeting: "If the refugees don't arrive, you don't get reimbursed, so that's one of the challenges where it really prevents you from having a healthy [refugee] program."[7] This lack of continuity causes organizational disruption, which in turn limits the supports individual refugees have at their disposal to weather employment disruptions.

ORR funding is not only insufficient and uneven but also expects grantees to help refugees find initial employment quickly, within six months if they participated in the Matching Grant Program (a direct collaboration between ORR and resettlement agencies) or eight months if they participated in the Refugee Support Services program (a state-administered resettlement program funded by ORR). Respondents from big and small agencies alike complained that not enough funding focused on employment retention, overcoming job loss, upward economic mobility, or other types of extended case management. For example, an employee of a small health-focused organization in Houston commented how challenging it was for refugees to find and retain employment. "Case management down here [in Houston] only lasts for six months," she said, "and then you're out, you're done."[8] Employees from large and small refugee-serving organizations from Boston to San Francisco added that finding and retaining employment is not easy for refugees given the challenges of learning English and navigating the American job market.[9] Even for

refugees who have "been in the country for years," an employee of a small San Francisco-based organization noted, "the task of finding a new or better job often requires assistance."[10] However, many refugee-serving organizations are not funded to provide this support, the overwhelming focus being on initial placement, regardless of fit and long-term potential.

While big ORR-funded resettlement agencies provide the bulk of employment services to refugees upon their arrival to the United States, smaller community organizations provide most of the long-term employment support needs of refugees. Unfortunately, there are far fewer of these organizations, they tend to have niche service foci, and they, too, have trouble funding their programs. For example, a small San Francisco-based organization that offers long-term, in-home ESL and academic preparedness services mostly to refugee women receives the bulk of its funding from federal Workforce Investment Act dollars that are passed through the California Department of Education. However, their annual government funding was slashed from $150,000 to $40,000 between 2001 and 2005.[11] Other smaller organizations in Detroit and San Francisco have tried to secure foundation funding, but they struggled to do so either because of mismatches in political ideology or because they lacked a competitive track record.[12] One staff member from a very small refugee-serving organization in San Francisco explained that they could not afford a grant writer to pursue time-consuming federal funding or foundation grants, forcing them instead to rely on occasional, and less complicated, contracts with city government.[13] In all, the ORR funding structure is inadequate, but so is the support for other civil society organizations that step in where ORR aid ends.

Our interviews confirm the lack of funding for refugee employment services more generally, and the lack of long-term employment assistance in particular. Together, this resource gap helps explain the decline in refugee employment revealed by our NIS findings. Given

declining and inadequate funding, which has shortened the required employment window for new refugees and deprioritized long-term employment retention, it is especially hard to place refugees in appropriate jobs that fit their skills, talents, and prior expertise. Instead, refugees are often funneled into precarious employment situations, and they have few opportunities to access long-term employment counseling that could help them to find stable employment.

Problematic Focus on Rapid Employment and Quick Self-Sufficiency

Beyond the challenges posed by declines and compressed time-frames, federal resettlement funding has an overarching mandate: for refugees to achieve self-sufficiency as quickly as possible. Refugees are expected to accept the first suitable job that an ORR-funded organization offers them, even if that job does not match their prior skills, does not offer long-term sustainable employment, and offers few opportunities for upward mobility. For example, an employee of a small San Francisco-based organization serving mostly Bosnian refugees explained how ORR funding has a stated goal of immediate immersion into the workforce. Many refugees must therefore forego the opportunity to learn English or get recertified to pursue other careers. While many refugees had degrees and prior skills, the local ORR-funded resettlement agency counseled them to take minimum wage and "low-level manual positions, where their limited ability to speak English was not so much a barrier."[14] This approach to refugee employment, he complained, amounted to "a cardinal waste of human capital."[15] Similarly critical was the Houston leader we quoted earlier, who lamented that the resettlement system is marred by insufficient funding and personnel: "Case managers are just so busy moving onto case by case," so that refugees' "potential is being lost."[16] By forgoing these human capital investments early on, the refugees funneled into unstable jobs have few chances to transition to better employment later.

Several respondents described the types of jobs that ORR-funded organizations ask refugees to take. They are often manual, low-wage labor jobs with poor working conditions and located far away from where refugees are assigned housing. An employee of an Atlanta-based organization seeking to address the service gaps in ORR-funded resettlement agencies explained the pernicious effects of this approach. "During the recession," she said, "the biggest employer of refugees was the poultry industry," which would offer jobs suitable for refugees "who just don't have a lot of experience in the working world" and "who aren't even literate in their own language."[17] These poultry plants were located in the middle of Georgia, about two hours away from where refugees had been housed. "It's a pretty long commute," she added, "so it's not the best option."[18] Respondents with refugee-serving organizations in Houston and Boston similarly commented that many refugees secured their first employment as housekeepers in large hotels or as front-line food service workers or cleaners in chain restaurants. These jobs, too, are often far away from where refugees live, and they are not always accessible by bus, train, or subway.[19] Furthermore, given the inconvenient location of these jobs, it is very challenging for refugees to stay in these jobs, whether in large cities with more public transportation options like Boston or in sprawling cities with a public transportation deficit like Houston.

ORR-funded organizations targeting quick self-sufficiency often develop relationships with large employers who place refugees into low-wage positions in far-away locations, thereby decreasing the chances of long-term employment retention. For instance, ORR-funded organizations often rely on large employers such as poultry plants, hotel and restaurant chains, and assembly factories to find refugees their first jobs. From these organizations' perspective, this is an efficient exchange: they can accommodate many refugees, thus helping under-funded and under-staffed refugee-serving organizations to efficiently meet ORR employment and self-

sufficiency mandates. These positions, however, were far from ideal; our interview respondents referred to them as "survival jobs,"[20] "low-skill jobs,"[21] "low-paying jobs,"[22] "manual labor jobs,"[23] and generally "hard jobs."[24] As one resettlement leader in Houston explained, "[Refugees] don't last very long" in these undesirable jobs.[25] Moreover, despite securing initial employment for refugees, this high-pressure job placement strategy often forces ORR-funded organizations to neglect refugees' many other pressing needs, such as learning English, pursuing an education, and addressing their mental and physical health, all of which help explain why refugees may not stay in these initial jobs long and why their prospects for better jobs are dim.

In all, the ORR-imposed mandates for rapid employment and self-sufficiency—along with the funding constraints of refugee-serving organizations—can explain declines in refugee employment. While ORR-funded organizations help refugees secure high employment rates early on after arriving in the United States, they often take low-wage survival jobs that are easy to lose or that are undesirable in the long term. Once refugees quit or lose these jobs, though, it is hard for them to find other, better jobs. This is in large part because there are so few organizations offering employment services to refugees after the employment support of ORR-funded organizations comes to an end, a dynamic we turn to next.

Siloed Organizational Networks

In addition to funding declines and self-sufficiency mandates, another factor also affects longer-term refugee employment: the federal funding for refugee-serving organizations creates siloed referral networks. We identify two broad types of refugee-serving organizations that, though they provide complementary services, typically do not interact much. One network consists of ORR-funded organizations, which focus on offering employment and other services to refugees in their

first several months in the United States. The other network consists of smaller community organizations that have emerged to address the service gaps of these ORR-funded organizations, including long-term employment services. These other refugee-focused organizations tend to have a narrower focus and draw support from non-ORR government funding and, at times, philanthropic grants. They also include more mainstream social service organizations that aid refugees as well as other needy populations, such as the native-born poor.

These two networks of organizations exist in parallel, but they do not have an incentive to coordinate. ORR-funded organizations form a tight, smooth-running network, facilitated by ORR-mandated quarterly meetings run by the respective state refugee coordinators. This network helps ORR-funded organizations to discuss service strategy and make cross-referrals to help specific refugees.[26] Refugee-serving organizations that are not funded by ORR—which also happen to focus more on long-term employment support—are not typically part of these meetings. Additionally, there were few spaces where ORR-funded entities could connect with these other refugee-serving organizations, even in cities with an active immigrant rights community. Coalitions of immigrant- and refugee-serving organizations, for example, often did not include many—if any—ORR-funded organizations.[27] In Houston, the city-hosted Mayor's Advisory Council on Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (MACIRA) did include these organizations but failed to facilitate critical connections between organizational networks by being too broad in scope. "Everyone is kind of discussing everything," one respondent said.[28] In Atlanta, one respondent noted the challenges posed by urban geography, as the city's expressways separated ORR-funded organizations from other immigrant- and refugee-serving organizations located in another part of town. Over time, the respondent said, this physical divide created organizational divides "we never cross."[29] Such coalitional failures are worrisome: as with many social service arenas, resource and

referral networks are key to making support systems work for refugees and other precarious individuals, especially in the wake of reforms that have both devolved and privatized welfare supports to state and local government and philanthropic funders.

These siloed organizational networks make it challenging for refugees to get employment assistance after their ORR-funded job placement support ends. Referrals to additional or follow-up employment services become tenuous and can vary across the country.[30] We found little evidence of referrals to other refugee-serving organizations that specialize in long-term job counseling. That is, once a refugee loses a job after their access to ORR-funded employment services has ended, they are not easily connected to the smaller number of organizations that could provide long-term case management. This lack of support is particularly significant for refugees who, compared to family reunification or "high-skilled" economic migrants, are less able to rely on family, friends, or professional networks for job advice and referrals.

Conclusion

In an era of retrenchment in refugee and immigrant support programs, when social services of all sorts are under attack, it is important to take a step back and consider what the previous period of stronger refugee resettlement support has produced. Our findings reveal a far less optimistic tradition of U.S. refugee resettlement, one marked by a decline in employment the longer refugees live in the United States. This is consequential for refugee well-being, especially given the fraying social safety net in the United States. We argue that structural shortcomings in federal refugee resettlement support and ancillary social services—and not simply individual failings—help explain this trend.

Building on prior sociological literature that outlines both the descriptive trends of refugees' employment, as well as the tenets of federal support for refugee and other disadvantaged individuals (Akresh 2008; Bloemraad 2006; Brodie 1997; Connor 2010; Donato and Ferris 2020; Grace et al. 2018; Hamlin 2021; Somers 2008), we use an organizational lens to explain why refugees may become and stay unemployed, despite receiving resources dedicated to them securing initial employment. We find that declines in federal funding support, market-based mandates emphasizing rapid employment and quickly achieved self-sufficiency, and a patchwork of disparately funded and poorly networked support organizations all help explain why federal resettlement resources fall short in aiding the long-term employment prospects of refugees. Ultimately, a federal structure for refugee resettlement that is not designed to boost long-term socioeconomic integration—paired with a precarious low-wage job market—is to blame. These results have important implications for studies of immigrant integration, state support for social welfare, and organizational sociology.

Using longitudinal, nationally representative survey data, we find that not all refugees are able to remain employed, as previous studies might assume. Initial placements are likely to be in undesirable, low-wage, short-term jobs (Tran and Lara-Garcia 2020). Although prior quantitative research often notes that refugees catch up to and often surpass other migrants in terms of occupational prestige and earnings (Akresh 2008; Connor 2010), those studies often focus exclusively on those who remain employed over time. By selecting only employed individuals, prior refugee integration research misses an important segment of the population that might be more precariously attached to the labor market than previously expected. Future studies of long-term integration, both intra-generationally and across cohorts, ought to consider whether and for how long groups maintain access to the labor market and resources that help facilitate job access.

Rather than simply theorize the mechanisms driving these relationships, we draw on interviews with refugee-serving organizations across the country to interrogate the role of government support in aiding refugees' socioeconomic integration. The challenges faced by refugees have been widely discussed. They must navigate the self-sufficiency-oriented welfare state while relying on underfunded organizations (Brown 2011), and government support is often dependent on work requirements (Miller and Rose 1990; Somers 2008). But previous social welfare research has not yet fleshed out the organizational mechanisms through which this accumulation of employment disadvantage plays out. Specifically, we emphasize that a logic of funding retrenchment and self-sufficiency is not enough to understand this accumulation of employment disadvantage over time. Rather, the ways in which this neoliberal logic and funding directives structure organizational networks place the burden squarely on refugees—and other insecure individuals—to find employment once federally-funded services end.

Finally, this study emphasizes the importance of an organizational lens for understanding individual inequality, in this case the labor market integration of refugees. Nonprofits and government agencies have long played a pivotal role in shaping the fates of underserved individuals in the United States, including immigrants (Bloemraad 2006). This research emphasizes that nonprofit organizations also play a key role in brokering government resources for immigrants seeking employment. Indeed, the migration literature often focuses on pre-migration human capital or individual networks as large assets for finding employment (Borjas 1987; Chiswick 1978). Our research shows that it is equally important to examine how government policies constrain the potential for collaboration and service delivery among nonprofit organizations, with ultimate impacts on individual well-being.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. New Immigrant Survey Covariates

Variable	Measure	Refugee Mean (Std.)	Non-Refugee Mean (Std.)
Employment	Log odds of being employed relative to being unemployed and out of the labor market.		
	Wave 1	0.78	0.63
	Wave 2	0.74	0.77
Refugee Status	Survey questions and administrative records were used to construct a variable with two categories: refugee and all other starting points (family reunification, diversity visa, employment visa, and undocumented experience).	0.05	0.95
Education Outside U.S.	Number of years of education, at any level, received outside the U.S.	12.43 (3.99)	12.36 (5.04)
Pre-Migration Occupational Prestige	Measured on a scale of 0-100 using the SEI score.	25.14 (22.95)	25.38 (23.56)
Childhood Income	Whether the family's income was below average, average, or above average compared to other households when the respondent was 16.		
	Below Average	0.23	0.28
	Average	0.60	0.53
	Above Average	0.16	0.19
Childhood Rural Environment	Whether the respondent lived in a rural area at the age of 10.	0.34	0.39
Gave to Social Groups before U.S.	Whether the respondent gave time or money to any social group prior to migrating.	0.34	0.38
Education Inside U.S.	Share of respondents who received any education, at any level, while living in the U.S. as of wave 1.	0.33	0.19
English Fluency	Whether the respondent speaks English very well, well, not well, or not at all as of wave 1.		
	Not at all	0.07	0.17
	Not well	0.41	0.32
	Well	0.34	0.27
	Very well	0.17	0.24
Years in the U.S.	Number of years respondent has lived in the U.S. as of wave 1.	5.95 (4.34)	5.42 (6.59)
Adjusted Status	Share of respondents who received LPR after having some other legal status (such as refugees), as opposed to receiving LPR as a "new arrival" (such as diversity visa holders) as of wave 1. All refugees by definition adjust status.	1.00	0.51

Region Born	Whether the respondent was born in Latin America, Africa, South and East Asia, Europe and Central Asia, or the Middle East.		
	Latin America	0.19	0.40
	Africa	0.18	0.09
	South and East Asia	0.13	0.31
	Europe and Central Asia	0.41	0.17
	Middle East	0.09	0.04
Gender	Share of respondents who self-identify as male (as opposed to female) as of wave 1.	0.48	0.48
Marital Status	Share of respondents married as of wave 1.	0.77	0.75
Children	Share of respondent reporting having any children as of wave 1.	0.73	0.67
Age	Age of respondent in years as of wave 1.	39.57 (9.99)	37.93 (10.21)
Region in the U.S.	Region the respondent lives inside the U.S. as of wave 1, Northeast, Midwest, South, or West.		
	Northeast	0.23	0.26
	Midwest	0.16	0.14
	South	0.29	0.25
	West	0.31	0.35

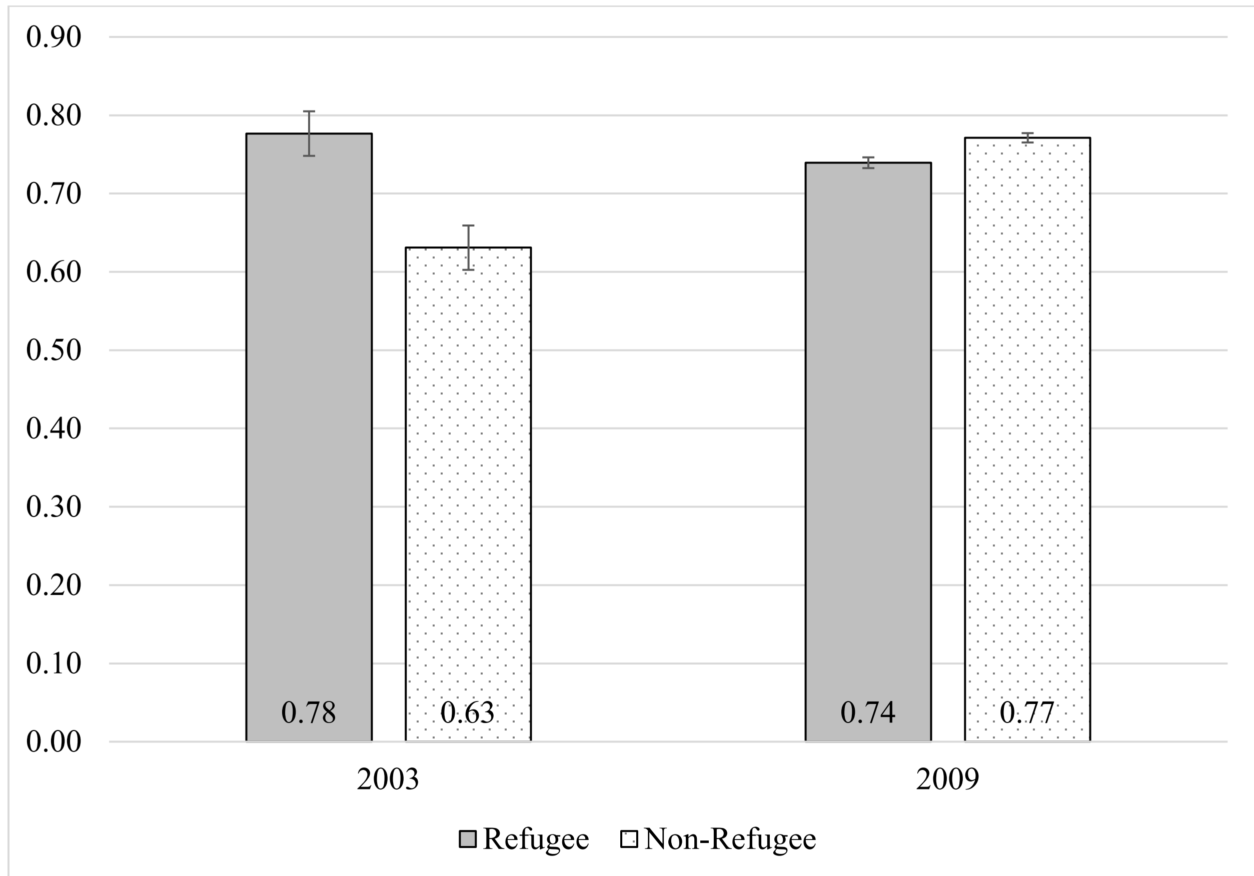
Table 2. Logistic Regression Predicting Likelihood of Employment Among Refugees and Non-Refugees

	Model 1 2003	**Model 2 2009**
Refugee	0.460*	-0.445*
	(0.204)	(0.210)
Individual-Level Capital Characteristics		
Years of Education Outside the U.S.	0.034**	0.024*
	(0.011)	(0.012)
Pre-Migration Occupational Prestige	0.003	0.005*
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Childhood Income (Below Average Omitted)		
Average Childhood Income	-0.093	0.026
	(0.094)	(0.107)
Above Average Childhood Income	-0.041	-0.026
	(0.126)	(0.144)
Lived in Rural Environment as Child	0.073	0.012
	(0.082)	(0.093)
Gave to Social Groups Before U.S.	0.017	0.087
	(0.082)	(0.096)
Any Education Inside the U.S.	-0.075	0.078
	(0.120)	(0.138)
English Fluency (Not at All Omitted)		
Not Well	0.297*	0.080
	(0.118)	(0.127)
Well	0.516***	0.277+
	(0.140)	(0.154)
Very Well	0.864***	0.317+
	(0.156)	(0.183)
Years in the U.S.	0.092***	0.042*
	(0.018)	(0.019)
Years in the U.S. Squared	-0.002**	-0.001+
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Demographic Characteristics		
Adjusted Status (vs. New Arrival)	0.445***	0.615***
	(0.116)	(0.135)
Region of Origin (Latin America Omitted)		
Africa	-0.728***	0.626**
	(0.156)	(0.205)
South and East Asia	-0.020	0.158
	(0.112)	(0.127)
Europe and Central Asia	0.023	0.076
	(0.130)	(0.151)
Middle East	-0.384+	-0.034
	(0.207)	(0.240)
Male	1.334***	0.809***
	(0.080)	(0.097)
Married	-0.380***	-0.301**
	(0.097)	(0.114)

Has Any Children	-0.285**	-0.165
	(0.102)	(0.120)
Age	0.185***	0.189***
	(0.028)	(0.031)
Age Squared	-0.002***	-0.003***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Region in the U.S. (Northeast Omitted)		
Midwest	0.064	0.107
	(0.141)	(0.161)
South	-0.112	0.114
	(0.113)	(0.135)
West	-0.273*	0.071
	(0.109)	(0.123)
Employed at Wave 1		1.455***
		(0.095)
Interview Year at Wave 2 (2007 Omitted)		
2008		-0.220+
		(0.125)
2009		-0.137
		(0.110)
Constant	-4.222***	-3.277***
	(0.551)	(0.618)
Observations	3993	3993

+ p<.10; * p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001

Figure 1. Predicted Likelihood of Employment among Refugee versus Non-Refugee Migrants in 2003 and 2009



Notes: Error bars are plus/minus the standard error. Predictions generated from Models 1 and 2, respectively, of table 2.

Notes

[1] Federally-funded employment services for refugees are offered through the Matching Grant Program, where the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) has cooperative agreements with nine private "voluntary agencies" that typically subcontract with several large organizations to provide job placement services for up to six months after refugees' arrival to the United States. ORR also allocates funding, as part of the Refugee Support Services program, to states that then subcontract to community organizations, which can offer job placement services also for a limited amount of time, typically not exceeding eight months.

[2] We account for the recession with a dummy variable of when respondents were interviewed in the second wave, whether 2007, 2008, 2009.

[3] Interview, 3/9/2005.

[4] Interview, 6/25/2012.

[5] Interview, 6/25/2012.

[6] Interviews, 3/30/2016 and 5/5/2016.

[7] Interview, 8/1/2016.

[8] Interview, 7/13/2012.

[9] Interviews, 2/9/2005, 3/8/2018, 2/9/2019, and 2/19/2019.

[10] Interview, 2/9/2005.

[11] Interview, 11/22/2005.

[12] Interviews, 8/2/2016 and 6/10/2016.

[13] Interview, 3/9/2006.

[14] Interview, 5/13/2005.

[15] Interview, 5/13/2005.

[16] Interview, 6/25/2012.

[17] Interview, 2/23/2016.

[18] Interview, 2/23/2016.

[19] Interviews, 6/15/2012, 7/2/2012, 3/8/2018, 2/9/2019, and 2/19/2019.

[20] Interview, 8/2/2016.

[21] Interview, 2/9/2005.

[22] Interview, 5/13/2005.

[23] Interview, 7/12/2012.

[24] Interview, 2/23/2016.

[25] TEDxRice talk by Ghulam Kehar, "Beyond Refugee Resettlement," 2/28/2018. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIe0PwaxRVc.

[26] Interviews, 6/25/2012, 7/3/2012, and 8/1/2016.

[27] Interviews, 1/13/2006 and 2/23/2016.

[28] Interview, 6/25/2012.

[29] Interview, 2/23/2016.

[30] Interviews, 4/26/2005, 1/13/2006, 3/15/2006, and 2/18/2016.