

# More than a “Good Back”: Looking for Integration in Refugee Resettlement

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## **Abstract**

*This paper describes the experiences of twenty-four Bosnian refugees resettled in the US and explores how achieving integration relates to the US policy contexts and programs. Juxtaposing refugee perspectives and policies, “lived experience” was compared with policies on paper. Central themes included participants’ language and employment struggles, social support networks that included Americans, congregational sponsorship, and participants’ faith in their belief that they could fully belong in American society. Implications included a reevaluation of American resettlement policy regarding language and employment, formal support for sponsorship, and an inclusion of refugee voices in planning and implementing resettlement programs.*

## **Résumé**

*Cet article décrit l’expérience de 24 réfugiés bosniaques réinstallés aux États-Unis, et examine comment la réalisation de l’intégration se rapporte au contexte et aux programmes de la politique des États-Unis en la matière. Juxtaposant les points de vue des réfugiés et la politique officielle, le “vécu” a été comparé à la politique telle qu’annoncée dans les textes. Les thèmes centraux abordés comprennent les difficultés qu’ont connues les participants avec la langue et l’emploi, les réseaux de soutien social qui incluaient aussi des Américains-le parrainage par les congrégations, et la foi des participants dans leurs croyance qu’ils pouvaient faire partie intégrante de la société américaine. Les implications comprennent une réévaluation de la politique américaine de réinstallation*

*des réfugiés ayant trait à la langue et à l’emploi, le soutien formel au parrainage, et l’apport des réfugiés dans la planification et la mise en application des programmes de réinstallation.*

## **Background**

Approaches to refugee<sup>1</sup> resettlement are shaped by national policy contexts and ideological traditions. Resettlement is conceptualized at the federal level as economic self-sufficiency consisting of short-term assistance implemented locally. With a singular focus on refugees’ economic participation, there is little understanding of the complexities of long-term economic stability. Restrictive government policies regarding foreign qualifications and language instruction in resettlement contribute to refugees being funnelled into low-wage jobs or the public welfare system. This article examines Bosnian refugee integration taking into account the American residual approach to resettlement. For this study, integration is defined as a refugee’s social, economic, cultural, and political participation in a host country while maintaining a relationship with the country of origin.<sup>2</sup>

The study focused specifically on refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereafter referred to as Bosnia). As the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia disintegrated in the early 1990s, civil war in Bosnia produced more than one million refugees. Refugees from Bosnia were chosen as a case study group because they were one of the largest groups recently resettled. Their memories of home were relatively recent yet they had had at least three years of resettlement experience. Issues central to all resettling refugees, such as language proficiency, employment, education, health, and acculturation have been found to be central to Bosnian refugees as well.<sup>3</sup> This article draws on

qualitative data to explore Bosnian refugees' experiences with resettlement. Data from twenty-four refugees from Bosnia were drawn from data collected from a larger comparative study of resettlement in Denmark and the US in 2003. The purpose of the larger study was to explore Bosnian refugees' resettlement experiences in Denmark and the US and how these experiences fused with structural factors to shape integration.

There has been limited exploration of the ways in which a state's social protection and welfare systems shape resettlement policies and how those policies in turn affect refugee integration. Recent studies have provided insight into resettlement challenges, including the examination of cross-ethnic networks and their roles in refugees' economic and educational integration.<sup>4</sup> Eastmond explored the ways in which practice and discourse contribute to the formation and illumination of refugees' lived experience and identity.<sup>5</sup> The trend, however, has not been to link resettlement challenges to specific resettlement policies and programs together with targeted recommendations for improvement. Moreover, traditional examinations of refugee resettlement have focused on single areas, such as employment, through a quantitative lens,<sup>6</sup> producing a fractured picture of resettlement.<sup>7</sup> Valuable monographs have recounted Bosnian refugees' experiences<sup>8</sup> although there has been modest research on the resettlement challenges Bosnian refugees face with refugee-voice-grounded policy recommendations. This study addresses this gap by focusing specifically on the resettlement challenges that refugees confront with policy recommendations grounded in the voices of those most affected.

The first section of the paper describes the resettlement context and conceptual framework for analyzing resettlement. In the second section, methods and the study's qualitative approach are discussed. The third section presents the findings that illustrate challenges found in resettlement. The final section includes a discussion of resettlement policy and programming and an identification of implications for policy and practice.

### **Resettlement Context**

American social welfare policies tend to be evaluated and supported based on their ability to enhance personal independence in the form of individual economic self-sufficiency and to reduce dependence on public assistance. Assistance provided by the state for people in need, aside from being thought of as the last resort (after family and the local community), is believed to encourage dependency and be detrimental to both recipients and society. State-provided assistance must be kept less than market wages to ensure a greater attachment to the workforce than to aid receipt.<sup>9</sup>

Social welfare critics contend that support to refugees discourages long-term self-sufficiency and will only serve to smooth their transition from resettlement program benefits to public assistance.<sup>10</sup> A host country's social values greatly influence public and private attitudes toward the receipt of public assistance needed by refugees, particularly during the period of transition into the host country.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Recent analyses highlight the inadequacy of traditional conceptualizations of migrant adaptation and acculturation processes.<sup>11</sup> Traditional adaptation research is based on the assumption that increased participation in the host culture requires detachment from the culture of origin.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Berry's acculturation model addressed this host country-centric flaw by placing the refugee in an active role in the acculturation process. He delineated four acculturation modes: marginalization, separation, assimilation, and integration, two of which—separation and integration—incorporate the culture of origin. Valtonen adapted Berry's model to create a framework for refugee integration in resettlement. Reshaping resettlement to incorporate structural as well as individual factors, Valtonen transformed Berry's acculturation modes into refugees' resettlement outcomes. Based on her resettlement studies, Valtonen conceptualized integration as refugees' participation in all host society areas while preserving a sense of "ethnocultural integrity."<sup>13</sup>

A holistic approach addresses the person in context as well as the strengths and stressors in the refugee experience. Two theoretical frameworks that may best exemplify this holistic approach are Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory<sup>14</sup> and Garmezy's<sup>15</sup> and Rutter's<sup>16</sup> theories of resiliency and risk. Ecological systems theory calls for an examination of how the relationship between an individual and the immediate environment is mediated by forces originating from greater physical and social surroundings.<sup>17</sup> Garmezy's and Rutter's resilience theories provide a framework for understanding how risk factors endanger and protective factors safeguard physical and mental health and other related aspects of resettlement. Adopted for use in refugee research,<sup>18</sup> the resilience model involves "the evaluative awareness of a difficult reality combined with a commitment to struggle, to conquer the obstacle, and to achieve one's goals despite the negative circumstances to which one has been exposed, which were and remain evocative of sadness."<sup>19</sup> Rutter has provided a functional model for understanding the impact of stressful events on people's life course. In his model, protective factors transform negative life trajectories into positive ones while risk factors transform positive life trajectories into negative ones. The transformation happens at turning points in people's lives where

the occurrence of an event triggers a trajectory change, in either the negative or positive direction.

Refugee research has uncovered micro, meso, and macro factors that shape refugees' experiences in resettlement and, thus, integration.<sup>20</sup> When refugees face challenges brought on by these factors during resettlement, their lives can evolve according to situational and human agency factors. These challenges could hinder or facilitate refugees' participation in economic, social, cultural, and political domains, that is, integration.

Micro factors shaping integration include acculturation and culture (including language and religion), employment, social support, and political perspectives. On the meso level, institutional settings such as resettlement and public welfare agencies, ethnic community organizations, religious congregations, and private for-profit entities provide formal resettlement assistance and resources.<sup>21</sup> On a macro level, inherent in the refugee experience are systemic issues of discrimination and host-country context. Examining the ways in which these factors affect resettlement has implications for understanding how refugees are affected at the micro and meso levels and subsequent programmatic responses.

Becoming a part of a host country is a transformative process that requires space for the fusion of selves. The self from the country of origin does not disappear but is a durable strand together with the refugee self and the self in the host country in the helix of a new existence. Holding on to the self from the country of origin requires a strong relationship with the country of origin. The present study contributes to the field of refugee resettlement by extending Valtonen's adaptation of Berry's acculturation framework through greater attention to multi-level factors affecting integration and more meaningful incorporation of involvement with the country of origin. The extension focuses on the integral qualities of micro, meso, and macro factors that facilitate or hinder integration (*i.e.*, how they function as protective or risk factors), how they function together to influence participation in the formal and informal life of the host country, and how that influence shapes integration. In order for a refugee to achieve integration, he or she must fully participate in the life of the host country, meaning participation in each ecological domain, while maintaining a relationship with the country of origin. Micro factors are the purview of the refugee in that he or she must work through or address each factor, such as language proficiency issues, employment challenges, and so forth. As meso and macro factors are outside of individual control, in order to achieve integration, the refugee must deal with the ramifications of these factors, such as discrimination

and host country context. This process shapes a refugee's participation in the four ecological domains of societal life.

### Methods

This qualitative exploration of refugee resettlement is a case study "[exploring] in depth a program, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals."<sup>22</sup> Bosnian resettlement was time and activity-bounded, providing opportunities for gathering in-depth information using various data collection methods.<sup>23</sup> Case study methods included interviewing, participant observation, and document analysis. Qualitative methods were chosen to allow interviewees to give voice to their own thoughts, providing insight into how they saw their lives and the complex process of refugee resettlement and allowing for creation of new categories to emerge from the data.<sup>24</sup>

### Sample

The sample consisted of twenty-four Bosnian refugees (eleven men and thirteen women) resettled in two north-eastern states (see Table 1 for demographic data). Participants in the study were purposively chosen in partnership with two Bosnians working in resettlement to ensure the distribution of key demographic and theoretical variables in terms of gender, age, language ability, length of time since completion of the resettlement program, and employment status, characteristics found to be salient in resettlement.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, snowball sampling was used to access three participants who were in the 50-59 age category. These sampling procedures enable transferability of findings to other spheres of refugee resettlement.<sup>26</sup>

### Data Sources

To situate cases in context, data sources included: (a) interviews with Bosnian refugees, (b) interviews with key informants from local resettlement agencies (including caseworkers) and government refugee agencies, (c) participant observation of sites and events (*e.g.*, agency intake sessions, English language classes, refugee employment orientations, home visits), and (d) review and analysis of historical, contextual, and statistical documents, including American refugee and resettlement policies, resettlement program materials, statistical information, and materials generated by Bosnian refugees. Utilizing multiple methods of data collection and multiple data sources enabled the comparison of findings from one method or source with others. Triangulating the methods and data sources in this way provided an opportunity for a more comprehensive understanding and interpretation of the data, thus enhancing the credibility of the data collected.<sup>27</sup>

*Interview procedures.* The primary data source was the in-depth, individual refugee interview guided by a semi-structured, open-ended interview schedule with explanatory, interpretative, and evaluative questions focused on refugees' lives prior to resettling and their resettlement experiences. The researcher conducted a face-to-face interview (two to three hours) and a second member checking interview (one to two hours). Interview questions were translated into Bosnian (using back translation and then pilot-tested) for interviews conducted in Bosnian with an interpreter. The interpreter was a Bosnian asylee (of mixed ethnoreligious background) with extensive professional experience interpreting for refugees. Interviews were conducted in English by the researcher unless participants requested the interpreter based on preference or limited English proficiency. Interviews were audiotaped with participants' permission.

#### *Data Management and Analysis*

After transcribing the interviews, the researcher wrote analytic memos for each as well as for developing themes and categories from key informant interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, and notes from document analysis. Memos were used to think about resettlement holistically, looking for patterns across all data sources as well as categorically.

Using categorical-content analysis, text was broken into small coded units of content and interpreted either descriptively or statistically. Units were then assigned to thematic categories that emerged from the text, following grounded theory.<sup>28</sup> Although categories emerged, the study goal of evaluating refugee integration influenced the scope of the categories' definitions.<sup>29</sup> Thus, content units were assigned to categories relating to varying resettlement outcomes (ranging from marginalization to integration) as conceptualized by Berry and adapted by Valtonen. NVivo, a qualitative software program, was used for organizational, coding, and theory building purposes.

#### *Study Strengths and Limitations*

The sample of twenty-four participants was chosen in consultation with Bosnian community members to ensure a diversity of experiences was obtained. Utilizing purposive and snowball sampling strategies related directly to study purposes: eliciting refugee voices to produce findings demonstrative of resettlement experiences of other Bosnian refugees and refugees from other ethnic backgrounds.<sup>30</sup> Case data were also confirmed in key informant interviews and through participant observation. Documents related to resettlement also provided information which, combined with the key informant data and participant observation,

contributed to a triangulation of findings. Although the sample was relatively small, a saturation point was reached where similar subjects and themes were heard repeatedly during the interviews. However, purposive sampling limits the transferability of findings. It may be that the attributed resettlement outcomes were more illustrative of the impact of individual factors than of refugee policies and programs. With varying levels of English proficiency, participants may not have been able to express complex ideas. The researcher hoped to decrease the effect of language barriers by member checking as well as giving participants an opportunity to use an interpreter regardless of proficiency level.

#### *Results*

Study participants' achievements were inadvertently supported by the American resettlement program's stringent self-sufficiency requirements. Their experiences were marked by confusion, poverty, exhaustion, and regret. A firm belief in "the American dream" and in the US as a land of immigrants distinguished them from refugees resettling in western Europe. However, participants felt that there was much more involved in the achievement of integration in the US than hard work, much more than "a good back."

More than 100,000 Bosnians were resettled in America as a result of the war in former Yugoslavia. While resettlement in the US guarantees safety from armed conflict in the country of origin, it does not guarantee a stress-free passage to integration. The goal for the Bosnian refugee participants was to regain some measure of what they had lost materially without becoming dependent on welfare. This led them to work long hours, often in multiple jobs. Many were successfully integrated into their own communities and able to buy a house within three to five years. Many successes were attributed to having "a good back," a Bosnian saying describing a hard worker. Other participants felt detached from American society, and were seen as separated or marginalized as per the study's resettlement outcome categorization.

Participants delineated four key areas in which one needed to actively participate in order to achieve integration: (a) acculturation and culture, including language and religion, (b) employment (and education), (c) social support, and (d) citizenship and advocacy.

#### *Acculturation and Culture*

Participants had a strong desire to regain what had been lost in Bosnia, both materially and psychologically. This entailed creating space for themselves in their new culture—a new identity formed in the juncture of the self in Bosnia and the self in the US. Participants missed the Bosnian identity as it had existed before the war—"a synthesis of the historical and

cultural experiences of all three *nacije* living on common territory where the different sources of people's identities were acknowledged and even emphasized."<sup>31</sup> "Nacije" refers to the ethnoreligious groups in Bosnia affiliated with one of three religious doctrines: Roman Catholic, Serbian Orthodox, or Sunni Islam. One participant, Senad,<sup>32</sup> noted that "everybody here in America came from somewhere...not [necessarily] as refugees, but from somewhere, looking for something." This was a common refrain when asked whether participants felt a part of American culture. Participants felt at times that they stood out, mainly due to language, but they still held on to the idea of America as an inclusive country. Moreover, at their workplaces, many had daily contact with people who had not been born in the US but were now citizens, shaping their conceptualization of "American."

All participants agreed on the importance of learning English on arrival and the necessity of knowing English for long-term economic and social well-being. Although not a single participant knew more than a few words on arrival, fifteen of the twenty-four participants spoke English fluently at the time of the interviews. "Fluent" was defined as being able to communicate clearly in English and not needing an interpreter. With the exception of participants in their twenties, however, participants categorized as "fluent" voiced their need to improve their English, spoke negatively about their accents, struggled with written English, and felt that their level of proficiency inhibited job mobility.

Resettlement programs offered sporadic English classes that lumped together those with varying ages, abilities, and purposes due to a lack of resources (e.g., employment-focused vs. conversational). As a result, some participants dropped out, complaining that material was repetitious as different cohorts of newcomers entered the class. No intensive programs were offered by the resettlement programs to provide English language skills that could enable them to move from manual labor (i.e., assembly work in factories or in warehouses) to better paying jobs more in line with their skill sets obtained in Bosnia. Whereas some participants were most focused on the economic implications of limited language, others felt its social and political constraints, noting feelings of social isolation from Americans due to a lack of English skills. Of the three participants who did not speak English at all, two were in their fifties, highlighting the language-learning challenges faced by older refugees.

What it meant to be Muslim in the US at the time of the participants' interviews in 2003 was inextricably linked what it meant to be Muslim in light of September 11, 2001, and the Iraq War. Participants were primarily Muslim, reflective of the ethnoreligious composition of refugees who fled Bosnia. Participants voiced frustrations with American perspectives of Muslims as a monolithic group

and described various ways one could be Muslim, illustrated by one participant's comment: "I'm not like the Muslims in Iraq or Afghanistan. There's a big difference in Muslims from Bosnia and Muslims from Iraq or Afghanistan...the Arab countries. Muslims in Bosnia, Muslims in Turkey, Muslims in West Europe...very different."

Muslim participants felt themselves under fire and felt that they were made to feel defensive about their faith. Many participants described feelings of otherness, as illustrated by Sabira's comment:

I say at my job I'm not for war. People know I'm Muslim, and people talking like I'm on Saddam Hussein's side. I'm not! But I'm not on Bush side. I was in war 3 years. No food, many people killed. But people is thinking that I'm Muslim, that I like Saddam Hussein.

#### *Employment and Education*

The most influential directive in the resettlement program affecting adult refugees is "self-sufficiency within ninety days." Of the seventeen participants with higher educational credentials and qualifications in their backgrounds, only one was able to use hers shortly after arrival because of help she received from a Bosnian friend working in the same field. Two participants were able to continue the jobs they had held in Bosnia: One owned a cleaning business, not requiring recertification, and another resumed driving a truck after passing the Commercial Driver's License (CDL) exam within three months of arrival. The latter was sponsored by a religious congregation whose members helped him navigate the Department of Motor Vehicles and learn English specifically geared toward the CDL exam.

Twenty out of twenty-four participants were employed or employed and studying. Over half of employed participants were working in low- or no-skill jobs in the private for-profit or nonprofit sectors. Although such jobs are the most widely available to refugees, in economic downturns, those positions are the most vulnerable to layoffs. Of the twenty employed participants, four owned their own business. In response to the challenge of restricted access to economic opportunities, ethnic small businesses are one of the few ways a refugee can achieve economic and occupational mobility.<sup>33</sup>

Participants' dissatisfaction with employment included complaints of: long hours at low-wage, low-skill jobs; multiple jobs to maintain "a normal life" financially; jobs unrelated to their educational credentials; and lack of health insurance for themselves and other family members. Those who had health insurance were motivated to stay in unsatisfactory positions (usually manual labor) rather than try to obtain a job more suitable to their prior skills and

experience. All married participants indicated that both were working, as two incomes were needed for survival.

#### *Social Support*

A central process of survival in resettlement is recreating social networks that were damaged or lost as well as reconciling to that loss.<sup>34</sup> Participants acknowledged the centrality of the help that they had received during their first several years. Major support came from the Bosnian family, the wider Bosnian community, and congregational sponsorship.

All participants resettled with at least one family member, and twenty participants came with children. For those who were parents, their children's welfare provided the primary motivation to persevere. Family members who had fled Bosnia a short time before helped some participants. Participants were aware that their relatives had had a difficult time, and that their own relatively easier adaptation was in large part due to the struggles of the others. Participants described reciprocal assistance from the Bosnian community in the US. Many participants noted that they were continuing the Bosnian tradition of helping family, friends, and neighbours, not expecting financial compensation, but anticipating future assistance from them. They were disappointed by what they felt was an emphasis on monetary compensation in American culture, which seemed to eclipse the intention of reciprocity.

Eleven participants were sponsored by a religious congregation. Sponsorship refers to formal assistance by an entity for a limited time after a resettlement agency's initial reception and placement. Congregations replace social networks refugees are forced to abandon. Social capital (*i.e.*, support and help from family and community) that had been lost was regained through sponsorship. Congregations facilitated integration by removing barriers, teaching English, and contributing financially. Ten of the eleven participants were of a different religious faith than their sponsors. No participant voiced discomfort with that. Nine of the eleven participants had better outcomes in terms of employment (jobs requiring skills, paying above minimum wage), language (better communication skills, comfort level with English), and social support (sponsors provided practical and emotional support, advocacy, and ongoing friendship after initial assistance) than those who were not sponsored by a religious entity. Thus, the sponsored refugees had better overall experiences of resettlement, particularly in their initial years.

#### *Citizenship and Advocacy*

Among nearly all participants, there was a general reluctance to get actively involved in politics relating to American or Bosnian issues. Conceptualizations of political participation

consisted primarily of citizenship, a belief in the importance of advocacy, and staying apprised of (but not necessarily actively participating in) politics and current events in Bosnia. Five participants were citizens, twelve were planning to apply, and seven participants had no plans to apply. The most common reason for relinquishing Bosnian citizenship was pragmatic: the ease with which one could travel with an American passport, including travelling back to Bosnia at some future point. One participant receiving Supplemental Security Insurance benefits felt that his benefits would be safeguarded if he were an American citizen. Whereas one participant felt that obtaining American citizenship would move her further away from Bosnia in a psychological sense, for another participant, the decision *not* to seek or consider applying for citizenship would be a loss. Sandra was the only participant who explicitly included political involvement in her conceptualization of integration. She felt that political involvement increased one's connection to the host country, critical to integration.

#### *Discussion*

Language and employment, moulded by resettlement policy, were the critical factors that shaped resettlement and provided participants with the tools to achieve integration. Resettlement policy and welfare ideology created the types of resettlement programs and benefits offered to participants. Religious congregations made a significant impact on resettlement outcomes of sponsored participants by mediating policy and ideology's impact.

Newcomers coming from countries where English is taught as a second language or having English-language backgrounds have an easier time starting off in the US. For example, refugees from countries in Africa<sup>35</sup> as well as immigrants from some Asian countries<sup>36</sup> which were formal colonies or had strong, historical Anglo ties have high levels of English proficiency. In September 2003, the author attended an initial home visit with a Sudanese family with a resettlement caseworker at the home of the family's congregational sponsors. No interpreter was needed for the home visit as the caseworker explained all complex resettlement program benefits and requirements entirely in English. English was one of four languages the refugee couple spoke fluently. Bosnians did not have this built-in familiarity with English and therefore did not have this advantage.

Studying Bosnian refugees in Chicago, Miller *et al.* found that an inability to speak English resulted in a lack of environmental mastery, underscoring "the importance of linguistic competence in effectively negotiating the environment and particularly in gaining access to important educational and employment-related resources."<sup>37</sup> In this

study, when asked, "What was your greatest challenge when you arrived," every participant gave some variation of "learning the language." Not one had functional English proficiency upon arrival, and those who knew a few words had acquired them in childhood. For participants who had limited or no English-language proficiency, this lack of environmental mastery created substantial barriers to integration.

Participants characterized English classes offered by resettlement agencies as ineffective due to varying proficiency levels in the same class and/or not offering classes frequently enough. An agency's ability to offer courses on a consistent basis is limited by federal funding. Tollefson asserted that language policy shaping American resettlement English courses for refugees was "designed to channel them into jobs in the peripheral economy."<sup>38</sup> More than a decade later, refugees continue to be employed in low-wage jobs because of either no involvement in English courses due to immediate job obligations or involvement in courses that are geared toward minimum-wage work. The limited benefits from resettlement programs necessitated finding employment as soon as possible after arrival, which meant jobs that did not require English proficiency.

Employment was an economic and a social imperative for participants, consistent with other studies focused on refugee resettlement,<sup>39</sup> including refugees from the former Yugoslavia.<sup>40</sup> Although the majority were employed, only a small number of participants were satisfied with the nature of their employment. Regardless of educational background or area of expertise, refugees most often found work in the lowest paying sectors, consistent with other studies examining refugee employment in Canada,<sup>41</sup> Italy,<sup>42</sup> the UK,<sup>43</sup> and the US.<sup>44</sup> Unless there is some mediation, such as occurred with congregational sponsors, most refugees who arrive with little to no English proficiency will end up in low-skill, low-wage labour from which there is limited opportunity for upward mobility.

Organized sponsorship programs, including those of religious congregations, made an extraordinary contribution to the resettlement of the refugees in the study, particularly in the initial period. Sponsors provided critical material, informational, and emotional support to refugees beginning on or soon after their arrival. American congregational sponsors connected participants to jobs that paid more than the minimum wage and from which there were opportunities for advancement. Differences in outcome based on whether or not a participant had been sponsored by a religious congregation were profound. Its impact directly supported the achievement of integration. Sponsorship offering material and emotional support is vital to the outcome of resettlement for resettling refugees.<sup>45</sup>

Contrary to these findings, Canadian studies of private sponsorship found that sponsorship did not bestow any employment advantage to resettling refugees.<sup>46</sup> Canada has a large, organized national refugee sponsorship program, where Canadian sponsors assist with initial costs, help refugees find employment and adequate housing, assist in school enrolment for children, and encourage refugees to enrol in English-language courses.<sup>47</sup> Further study would be needed to explore the disparate findings from the American and Canadian studies.

### ***Implications for Policy and Advocacy***

Structural factors of resettlement policy, shaped by welfare ideology, impacted participants' integration as well as long-term self-sufficiency. First, resettlement involves services from different sectors, which can lead to shifting responsibility, confusion, and a lack of enforcement of standards. Funding is provided by the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) in the Department of State for basic resettlement needs; public agencies oversee cash and medical assistance; and state and local voluntary agencies provide specific resettlement services under guidance by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. As Franz also found, there was a general lack of knowledge of resettlement and social welfare benefits, and as a result, many participants did not apply for benefits for which they were eligible.<sup>48</sup> Although minimum standards set out in resettlement policy govern basic needs, other services, such as language courses, are dependent upon the capabilities of local resettlement agencies, community resources, and knowledge of refugees' specific needs. As a result, refugees resettling in one area may not have access to the same opportunities as those resettling in other areas.

Second, the funding source for resettlement services and programs is not continuous. This hinders service continuity throughout the year. Because funding that is used for current refugees is often per capita funding given for those previously resettled, a large, sudden increase in resettling refugees can easily overwhelm agency resources. With the priority of employment over language proficiency, initial pressure is not on learning English but getting immediate employment regardless of type of job or opportunities for advancement. Language acts as a gatekeeper for employment,<sup>49</sup> miring refugees in low-paying employment with little job security or opportunities for advancement, threatening the goal of long-term self-sufficiency. Research findings highlight the demand for a policy provision that reflects a government commitment to equal opportunity for refugees, if not equal outcome.

Third, to facilitate stable employment and thus long-term self-sufficiency, a credible national body is needed to evaluate refugee credentials upon arrival. Valuable human

capital resources are wasted when refugees are forced to take jobs unrelated to their professional or vocational expertise. Valtonen also found that refugees' skills were being under- or nonutilized.<sup>50</sup> Societal losses are due to structural deficiencies regarding the utilization of human capital that would otherwise be counted as a resettlement advantage.<sup>51</sup> Credential evaluation need not interfere with the government goal of self-sufficiency in the short term. Short-term jobs in areas unrelated to skill/educational background might be more tolerable if credentials are being evaluated simultaneously.

Lastly, a policy mindshift is required. Refugees must be removed from the traditional position as policy objects to a place where they are integral, active agents in resettlement. Resettlement itself must also be transformed from a one-way procedure into a two-way process, with space for adjustment and social inclusion. Without some semblance of mutual accommodation, refugees will continue to believe that assimilation is the desired resettlement outcome of the government and the public. Federal funding at the local level could support cultural exchange activities that reflect this process of mutual adaptation. There also must be a concerted effort to solicit refugee perspectives and bring refugees themselves to the table. Without seeking and incorporating refugee input into policy, subsequent interventions will continue to be ineffective and ignore refugees' potential contributions.

Social relationships cannot be dictated by policy. Aspects of American cultures and ways of life strongly influence the extent to which a refugee can achieve what can be considered a satisfactory level of social integration.<sup>52</sup> Only participants who had been sponsored by a religious congregation described genuine friendships with Americans. This underscores the need for increased advocacy for funding to support social connections between refugees and American citizens to increase social inclusion. Findings demonstrated the importance of interactions between refugees and host country citizens not only because they facilitate social inclusion but also because they facilitate employment, which contributes to long-term self sufficiency.

**Possibilities for Further Research**

Further exploration of refugee sponsorship is critical. Exploratory research examining the prevalence of congregational sponsorship, the types of support provided by congregations, and the extent to which other community organizations are formally and informally involved in sponsorship is needed. A formal sponsorship system (e.g., the Canadian system) should be examined to assess its transferability to the US. As congregational sponsorship is a voluntary activity in the US that takes place without governmental

oversight, a key question would be whether formal governmental organization of sponsorship detracts from the quality of the relationships formed and thus their impact on resettlement and integration.

**Table 1. Sample Characteristics for Bosnian Refugee Participants**

Sample Characteristics	Participants
<i>Gender:</i>	
Male	11
Female	13
<i>Age range:</i>	
21–29	4
30–39	6
40–49	11
50–59	3
<i>Marital status:</i>	
Married	20
Single	3
Widowed	0
Separated	1
<i>Family status:</i>	
Has children	20
<i>Years in the host country:</i>	
3–5 years	9
5+ years	15
<i>Language proficiency:</i>	
Fluent	15
Limited	6
None	3
<i>Employment status:</i>	
Employed	18
Unemployed	3
Full time students	0
Part time students/working	2
Supplemental Security Income	1
<i>Ethnoreligious background:</i>	
Bosnian Muslim	16
Bosnian Croat (Catholic)	4
Bosnian Serb (Serbian Orthodox)	2
Mixed background (Catholic-Muslim)	2



## Notes

1. According to the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention), a refugee is an individual who flees one's country of origin based on a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, social affiliation, or political opinion. Most adherents to the Refugee Convention also recognize the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Refugee Convention definition (1969) of a refugee as a "person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order [seeks] refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality." United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *The State of the World's Refugees: A Humanitarian Agenda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 52.
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