

# Bureaucratic Birthdates: Chronometric Old Age as Resource and Liability in U.S. Refugee Resettlement

KIMBERLY SEIBEL

## Abstract

*This article examines age in refugee resettlement by connecting it to the bureaucratic contexts in which refugees acquire and become categorized by birthdates found in their documents. Frequently used as an objective metric, chronometric age takes on new meaning in migration and determines access to work and welfare. This article traces the trajectory of age documents of refugees in a program for “seniors” (sixty and up) in Chicago, Illinois. Drawing upon anthropology and critical gerontology scholarship, I resituate chronometric age in the dynamic relationship between institutions and definitions of old age in the United States. My purpose is to call attention to the consequences of applying U.S. concepts of age to refugees with limited resources.*

## Résumé

*Cet article étudie la question de l'âge dans la réinstallation des réfugiés en la reliant aux contextes bureaucratiques à travers lesquels les réfugiés sont identifiés et classifiés selon la date de naissance qui se trouve sur leurs documents. L'âge chronométrique, d'usage fréquent comme mesure objective, acquiert une signification nouvelle dans le contexte de la migration et détermine l'accès à l'emploi et à l'assistance publique. Cet article retrace le parcours des documents portant sur l'âge des clients d'un programme pour « personnes âgées » (60 ans et plus) qui sont réfugiés à Chicago (Illinois). En faisant appel aux recherches en anthropologie ainsi qu'en gérontologie critique, je recontextualise le concept de*

*l'âge chronométrique dans la relation dynamique entre les institutions et les définitions de la vieillesse aux États-Unis. Mon objectif est d'attirer l'attention aux conséquences qui en résultent si les concepts de vieillesse aux États-Unis sont appliqués à des réfugiés disposant de ressources limitées.*

## Introduction

“Do you know how old you are?” I asked at the very opening of an interview with a couple from Burma/Myanmar. My interpreter translated my questions into Karen as we sat at a small table in the living room of their one-bedroom apartment. Saw Ker Por<sup>1</sup> received Supplemental Security Income (SSI) because his documents established his age as seventy-two. Naw Nee Ah, who took care of their disabled daughter, was fifty-nine according to her documents and, therefore, not eligible. Looking at them both, I found it hard to believe that she was not the same age as her husband, but neither seemed to care as much as I about their numerical ages.

“My age is sixty,” Saw Ker Por said initially, laughing before calling to his wife, “Where has she gone to?”

“I don't know how old you are,” Naw Nee Ah answered.

“Sixty,” he said, “It is in the papers.” In interviews with refugees like Saw Ker Por, I learned that the date in one's documents created a potential gap between refugees' and the U.S. resettlement program's understandings of age.

Carried through airports often in plastic IOM<sup>2</sup> bags, the documents of newly arrived refugees sometimes contain generic birthdates—1 January for many, 1 July for some Iraqis. Whatever their significance in home countries

or displacement contexts, these birthdates take on new meanings in the United States. Chronometric age enables U.S. resettlement bureaucracies to process refugees from diverse backgrounds and displacement experiences primarily through mainstream social services. The goal of refugee resettlement is economic self-sufficiency through employment as soon as possible. According to federal policies, refugees eighteen to sixty-four years old are “working age,” and sixty-five and older are “non-employable” and “retirement age.”<sup>3</sup> The characteristic “work or welfare”<sup>4</sup> approach of U.S. resettlement relies upon categorizing refugees by age.

Documents with chronometric age enable newly arrived refugees to apply for mainstream programs like ssi, but this approach creates some problems. Refugees under sixty-five who did not fit disability standards were expected to work or rely on family members. As “older” workers, they struggled to find and keep appropriate jobs. Case managers had little incentive to help refugees eligible for ssi who still wanted to work. Those who received ssi were vulnerable to losing benefits after seven years unless they were able to pass the citizenship exam. To get around this problem, resettlement programs and refugees sought medical exemptions for this exam with varying success. This tactic reinforced the tendency to limit efforts to integrate refugees deemed non-employable by age, rather than address underlying issues, such as a lack of English language or other skills or unrecognized education credentials or work histories. These are increasingly issues for current incoming groups<sup>5</sup> and pose a problem to address under current ways of organizing resettlement.

Exploring how bureaucracies provide and process refugees according to birthdates in their documents brings attention to how U.S. constructions of age and aging become transposed onto refugees. I explored the role of age in bureaucratic processes while conducting research at a program serving refugee “seniors” (sixty years and up) in Chicago.

Bureaucratic processes ascribe certain ideas of old age in the U.S. context to refugees. Birthdates provide a means of calculating chronometric age whose significance arises from the assumption that it “will give the most precise and objective information about persons.”<sup>6</sup> The term *chronometric age* best describes my observations of the resettlement process as it functioned as “a pseudo-exact labelling device” by which in “a single tick of the clock, one finds oneself in another category.”<sup>7</sup> In the United States, age is used to assign people status, presenting similarities or differences where there often are none.<sup>8</sup> I view this approach as a sort of mistranslation that raises the need to examine the cultural ideologies in which chronometric age is embedded.

Anthropology can provide cross-cultural and critical perspectives to make visible the influence of age ideologies

in refugee and migration policies. Research has countered the idea of aging as universally chronological.<sup>9</sup> Collapsing age into chronometric age is a problem, because ultimately “chronometric time is just one, quite limited, way to conceive time” that is “important because of its instrumental and calculative qualities.”<sup>10</sup> Categories such as “youth” or “elderly” are also not stable, neutral, or objective but linked to political-economic changes and interactions with the state.<sup>11</sup> To address such issues, age should be considered as an explicit analytic—on the level of gender, race, and class—for examining power dynamics in migration and globalization processes.<sup>12</sup>

Research on the categorization of refugees is important, because “these attempts to figure out who refugees are reveal a great deal about the categories that Americans use to assign people to their proper place.”<sup>13</sup> Scholars have linked the “productive citizenship” emphasis in resettlement<sup>14</sup> with employment as the basis of social citizenship to processes of inequality based on gender, race/ethnicity, and class, “categories and mechanisms that daily produce the norms of differential belonging.”<sup>15</sup> Age and aging belong among these considerations. My approach is to trace the actual processes of ascribing age to refugees and the ideas and resources attached to it.

### **Research Context: The Senior Program**

Midwest Migration Services (MMS) was one of two Senior Programs in all of Illinois after a reduction in the state’s Services to Older Refugees discretionary grant in 2012. The goal of these programs was to provide refugees<sup>16</sup> with case management services to facilitate their access to a shifting cast of targeted and mainstream social services subject to funding changes and cuts. In addition to case managers, the program relied on volunteers, family members, friends, and clients themselves to perform the paperwork and advocacy needed to achieve access to such programs.

From 2013 to 2015<sup>17</sup> I took on an active participant-observer role at the Senior Program at MMS. I accompanied clients to appointments at local Social Security and Illinois Department of Human Services offices, assisted with monthly senior workshops and field trips, and attended relevant meetings. I also interviewed staff members and volunteers at Midwest Migration Services and other local resettlement agencies, community-based organizations, advocacy organizations, and relevant government resettlement and social services agencies.

I conducted life history interviews of refugees enrolled in the Senior Program and reviewed their case files and identification documents. My participants were thirty refugees from twenty-three households: ten (five men, five women) from Iraq,<sup>18</sup> eleven (five men, six women) from Bhutan,<sup>19</sup>

and nine (seven men, two women) from Burma/Myanmar.<sup>20</sup> These three groups were the largest nationalities in the Senior Program and also accounted for more than half of refugee admissions in recent years.<sup>21</sup> I hired community members to interpret, transcribe, and translate interviews conducted in the refugees' homes, often with family members present. All of the participants were in their sixties to eighties according to their documents and had been in the country for seven or fewer years. In formal, semi-structured interviews, I asked about their work and education histories, migration trajectories, English language learning, and feelings of in/dependence in the United States. I also asked them to compare ideas of age and later life support systems in their countries of origin with those in the United States.

My research participants would have been difficult to locate outside of a context such as the Senior Program, which faced difficulties reaching out to seniors not resettled by their agency. It is unclear whether refugees not included in the program would have been different from those in my study. Like many refugee programs and researchers, I also relied on interpreters working in many different languages (Karen, Burmese, Assyrian, Arabic, and Nepalese) to reach my non-English-speaking participants. Still I was able to interact with my participants and their family members outside of the program in greater depth. My combination of active participant observation and interviews enabled me to gain access to a diverse group of refugees and their encounters with U.S. resettlement bureaucracy.

### *Chronometric Markers of Old Age in the United States*

Divorced from the political, economic, and social contexts, chronometric age distinctions in refugee resettlement raise questions about the basis upon which the U.S. government and associated agencies grant assistance to refugees and U.S. citizens. Preconceived categories are a problem in attempts to understand and assist refugees.<sup>22</sup> Labelling refugees as "youth," often according to Western criteria and norms, can obscure their engagement in political and economic activities.<sup>23</sup> In terms of aging, the supposed precision of chronometric age "obstructs the acknowledgment of constitutive narratives about aging and reproduces them without any critical reflection."<sup>24</sup> The hidden assumptions of chronometric age are essential to understanding how refugee resettlement programs "read" the birthdates on refugees' documents.

Perspectives from recent critical gerontology scholarship show how understandings of old age take on meaning in relation to the historical and institutional contexts of working and retirement in the United States. Through the development of the welfare state, age became a basis upon

which governments managed the productivity of a population as well as identified and addressed social problems arising from the risks of industrial capitalism.<sup>25</sup> Bismarck first instituted retirement age—seventy years—in Germany in 1889.<sup>26</sup> Later than European countries, the United States established Social Security in 1935, followed by the Older Americans Act (OAA) in 1965, and these policies greatly reduced the poverty of older Americans.<sup>27</sup>

Over time these retirement policies became the markers of old age itself<sup>28</sup> and contributed to negative characterizations of the elderly.<sup>29</sup> The transfer of social welfare from the family to public institutions,<sup>30</sup> processes that were related to a growing middle class,<sup>31</sup> helped produce age grades or norms and contributed to the greater uniformity of the life course in segments of U.S. society in the post-Second World War era.

Concepts of old age continue to reflect shifting relationships between individuals and the labour market. The linking of old age to employability can reinforce government practices that use retirement age as a means of managing surplus labour.<sup>32</sup> In many Western countries, a fixed age of retirement "encouraged the view that, past a certain age, an individual's economic and social worth is diminished."<sup>33</sup> A cultural legacy of these policies was to transform the social meaning of aging to labour market criteria such as employability and open the doors to the devaluation of older people in the labour market.<sup>34</sup> The United States has legislated against age discrimination, beginning with the 1967 Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) and banned mandatory retirement at any age altogether in 1986.<sup>35</sup>

Chronometric age is an example of governmentality implicating self-knowledge and personal conduct<sup>36</sup> in its new social and personal meanings.<sup>37</sup> Expressions such as "looking good for your age" or "aging badly" express disjuncture between aging and chronometric age but still reinforce the use of age as a guidepost in the United States.<sup>38</sup> Chronometric age continues to be used as an indicator of health, productivity, vulnerability, and, of course, aging, despite the fact that it is not a determinant of any of these.<sup>39</sup>

Chronometric definitions implicate social inequalities, even as they treat old age as genderless and stripped of class and race/ethnicity, rendering forms of privilege, such as retirement, invisible.<sup>40</sup> Race and class inequalities in the labour market contribute to differences in later life resources, such as African Americans having to rely on disability rather than retirement.<sup>41</sup> Gender-based discrimination, including lifelong income inequality and retirement policies based on the male breadwinner, disadvantage women in later life.<sup>42</sup>

Concepts of old age can enforce normative ideas of aging, despite the fact that the prosperity and consumer lifestyles

associated with retirement are often limited to a privileged segment of the population. For example, middle-class prosperity and the mass consumer youth culture of the baby boomer generation contributed to “third age,” meaning “life after the responsibilities of paid employment and child rearing are over,”<sup>43</sup> defined in contrast to “fourth age” or “dependence, decrepitude and death.”<sup>44</sup> In the 1990s and 2000s, neo-liberal policies and changes in the labour market have eroded the income pillars of retirement security—welfare, employers, and personal savings.<sup>45</sup> Lifelong employment is more rare, and employers take less responsibility for the old age of their employees.<sup>46</sup> Recent “anti-aging” and “successful aging” discourses suggest that that “fourth age” is within one’s power to avoid or delay and reinforce aging as a personal responsibility whose risks are to be managed individually rather than collectively.<sup>47</sup>

Conducting life history interviews with refugees serves as a reminder that retirement is not a universal life stage but a privilege based on resources. Labelling refugees dependent upon ssi and family members as “retirement age” masks such differences in later life circumstances.

### *Establishing Age in Refugee Settings*

Retirement can often evoke a fixed age or life stage, but Mr. Karim Hussain had moved in and out of retirement in his lifetime. A divorced musician from Iraq, he was unique among my research participants in having had one lifelong career. When this livelihood put him at risk of violence in Iraq, he moved to Syria, where he spent eight years living on retirement money from Iraq while still practising his profession. After being resettled to the United States, he supported himself with ssi based on age (seventy), which he referred to as his “retirement money.”

Sitting in the living room with Mr. Hussain and his son, I talked to the elder about age and retirement in the United States and Iraq, with the help of my interpreter. When I asked him what age he thought people should retire at, he said fifty or fifty-five. When I said that in the United States it was sixty-five, he responded, “Well, I come from Iraq. So I feel that I am retired.” I asked him about his birthdate, and he said that he knew his birth year but not the day. He explained that many Iraqis have 1 July birthdates through some process that happened a long time ago for some people in his generation. The date of one’s birth was not important. “They forget about it actually,” Mr. Hussain said.

Using chronometric age in refugee resettlement presumes that everyone knows his or her birthdate. Given that refugees are by definition people who have fled their countries under fear of persecution,<sup>48</sup> the dates in their documents can reflect complicated, exclusionary, or absent relationships to bureaucracies.

When refugees do not have these documents, UNHCR and its affiliate NGOs must provide them with one before they can refer cases for resettlement to the United States. Some refugees never knew their birthdates, and they can provide only a year or a best guess. A staff member or translator might make an error during processing, or refugees might purposefully disguise their birthdate during different points in their displacement trajectories.<sup>49</sup> The de facto generic birthdate provided by UNHCR or affiliates is 1 January. But as in the example of Mr. Hussain, even generic birthdates vary culturally, and registration before and during displacement can affect subsequent processes.

As universal as it might seem at times, documenting age varies with culture as well as a country’s resources, politics, and bureaucratic organization. The UN statistics department in its annual Demographic Yearbook raises some of the difficulties involved in documenting age and forming comparisons between countries. These include “differences in the method of reckoning age,” such as in the Chinese system, in which “a child is considered one year old at birth and advances an additional year at each Chinese New Year,”<sup>50</sup> and “a general tendency to state age in figures ending in certain digits (such as zero, two, five and eight).”<sup>51</sup> Different traditional calendars<sup>52</sup> and conversions between them can also create problems.

Having statistics on age, birth, and death in a country requires a functioning government with a good relationship to its people—something that is by definition a problem for a country whose members are violently excluded. As in Bhutan and Burma/Myanmar, governments can exclude by denying or revoking documentation.<sup>53</sup> In Iraq, conflicts from the 1990s onward have limited civil registration activities and shaped the birthdates encoded through them. A report by the UN in 2007 noted incompetence as well as deliberate actions by the population:

The system is unreliable—sometimes people intentionally give out inaccurate information to avoid compulsory military services or for certain financial benefits. Administratively, there are not enough registration offices around the country. There is one headquarter office located in Baghdad and 11 suboffices in the city. For the rest of the country, only 1 office exists in each province to cover the registration. The registrars are lack of [*sic*] qualifications and experiences and most of them are just barely literate. The registration of vital events is not complete, nor does it cover all areas in the country. From the most recent studies on fertility and mortality, the coverage of birth and registration in Iraq is 68% and 34%, respectively.<sup>54</sup>

Whether one is from a rural or urban area, born in a hospital or at home can affect birth registration. UNICEF notes a

concern that “only half of the children under five years old in the developing world have their births registered.”<sup>55</sup> Some Iraqis were never given nor sought out documentation of their births. Even the former dictator of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, did not know his birthdate, which is listed in one official biography as 1 July 1939. He later established it officially as 28 April 1937 to appear more authentic and to make himself appear older.<sup>56</sup> The connection between birth and date is not always so clear-cut.

Because refugees often move through different contexts, a birthdate given in one setting for skirting labour laws or conscription into military service could become a problem for accessing government benefits immediately or decades later. Ages cannot be objectively assessed,<sup>57</sup> but bureaucratic processes create a basis for certainty and precision. Many refugee, asylum, and other migration processes hinge on determining age and categorizing people based on it, creating opportunities or disadvantage in different places and life stages.

### ***Entry to the United States: Age Categorization in Refugee Resettlement***

Refugees carry their ages in physical documents into the U.S. system, usually in the form of a passport or travel document and an I-94.<sup>58</sup> The last is a small white card that documents the entry of non-citizens by the Department of Homeland Security and includes birthdate, first and last name, country of origin, date of arrival, and an A or “alien” number on the back. This number serves as an important identifier in resettlement until refugees can apply for and receive a Social Security number. The stamp on an I-94 indicates that the person is a refugee and authorized to work. Such documents prove that a refugee is an “eligible non-citizen” and can receive public benefits.

Chronometric age is important because of U.S. resettlement policies and the larger structure of the welfare state. To help “older refugees” (sixty and over), the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) provides discretionary grants to individual states to help refugees access mainstream OAA and other local aging services. The result is that age becomes a means by which refugees and their families gain income and other resources that can serve as an important element of “self-sufficiency” plans.

Once in the United States, refugees and their family members face short timelines for becoming self-sufficient. Every refugee has a primary case manager, who works with families to establish a self-sufficiency plan, as well as apply for a Social Security card and basic benefits, such as Refugee Cash Assistance (for eight months), Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (or Food Stamps), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. At Midwest

Migration Services, primary case managers referred clients to two in-house age-based programs: the Senior Program (refugees sixty and older) to apply for OAA and other benefits, and the Youth Program (refugees under eighteen) to enrol in school, day care, or other activities. Case managers refer “employable” or “working age” refugees to the Employment Program, and if enrolled, the staff and the refugee client are held to assessments based on finding and keeping employment.

At every intake to the Senior Program, staff asked refugees for all of their documents, photocopied them, and then placed them in paper case files to be used to apply for mainstream OAA and other government benefits. These case files as well as the number of clients served and the number of referrals to outside programs were the focus of evaluations of the Senior Program. Caseworkers must refer all refugees who are sixty-five and older to apply for Supplemental Security Income, and they may also help refugees under sixty-five apply on the basis of disability. Applying for SSI on the basis of age is considerably easier. It requires less documentation and takes only a few months, compared to the six months to several years to apply for disability, sometimes with the help of an attorney. Age parameters also define eligibility for other OAA benefits in Illinois: senior subsidized housing (sixty-two or disabled, or fifty-five and over for “Reduced Age” Senior buildings), Free Ride transportation pass (sixty-five and more or disabled), Meals on Wheels (sixty and more), and the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (priority application period for sixty and more or disabled).

OAA benefits helped caseworkers as they negotiated limited timelines and self-sufficiency standards. In Illinois, the Community Care Program (CCP) enables family members (other than spouses) to work as caregivers for their older relatives or friends. Eligibility was based on age (sixty and more) and an in-depth assessment whose translation posed a problem for migrants.<sup>59</sup> Caseworkers at Midwest Migration Services regularly made use of CCP, which, along with SSI, formed part of a strategy of “patchworking”<sup>60</sup> a variety of resources for resettlement. Budget issues continue to affect Illinois social services, including CCP, and such resources have grown increasingly scarce under the current governor and his pro-business agenda.<sup>61</sup>

The Senior Program relied on mainstream and targeted programs vulnerable to budget cuts, which affected services clients received. In general, funding for programs for refugees other than employment services was not consistent. For example, a neighbourhood English Language Training program served clients that MMS staff described as “not likely to be employed.” It began as a Women’s Empowerment Program (that admitted men) until MMS received funding to

implement a program designed specifically for “older” refugee learners. After this program was cut in 2012, the class remained through the efforts of a volunteer, still teaching some of the same students for the last ten years. Her unpaid work provided consistency in the English-learning efforts of these refugees.

Without programs to support their pathways to citizenship, refugees cannot depend on government benefits as a means of self-sufficiency. Maintaining benefits, like SSI, requires knowledge of English and bureaucratic processes to avoid reduction or cancellation of benefits. Refugees can lose SSI in seven years if they do not receive citizenship, which requires passing a citizenship test. More than half of refugees arriving in the past several years are not literate in their native language and thus face considerable challenges to learning English.<sup>62</sup> Another option is to have a doctor fill out a medical waiver describing why a refugee is physically or mentally incapable of learning English. To receive approval requires very thorough descriptions, and I learned that doctors were sometimes unwilling to fill out this form, especially for patients whom they hardly knew. In 2008, Congress approved a temporary extension of the time limit to nine years,<sup>63</sup> a stopgap measure that did little to address the root problems underlying the challenges to gaining citizenship. The extension expired in 2011 affecting an estimated 11,000 people.<sup>64</sup> In my research, I encountered several refugees beyond the seven-year limit, and the Senior Program helped them apply for Aid to the Aged Blind and Disabled (AABD), a state program that provides an even lower income than SSI. In 2014, Illinois had just over 100 refugee/asylees on AABD.

Refugees face additional problems that mainstream OAA and other programs do not address, such as the loss of traditional status or role reversals.<sup>65</sup> Refugees arrive with physical and mental health issues linked to displacement, poor nutrition and health care in refugee camps and third countries. They are often more isolated in the United States than they were in their home countries.<sup>66</sup> Resettlement and the experience of undergoing aging in the United States can be a source of stress for refugees.<sup>67</sup> Clearly policies for mainstream Americans are not set up to address these issues.

### ***Non-Employable by Age***

Despite the resources available to refugees, the use of chronometric age reinforces an uncritical treatment of older persons in the United States as unproductive. Case managers apply for SSI for all refugees over sixty-five, regardless of their ambitions to work. Researchers of U.S. refugee resettlement have noted the strategic use of the “non-employable” category in resettlement agencies as a way to manage limited resources and performance outcomes.<sup>68</sup> Over twenty-five

years ago, Gozdzia reported this problem for older refugees in the United States: “Since it is easier to reach performance goals when working with younger, better educated clients, the agencies may be reluctant to serve more difficult clients.”<sup>69</sup> It reflects the idea that in resettlement, “any ‘difficult’ new case, whether because of age, health, education, or socioeconomic background, is a potential threat to the success of the resettlement program.”<sup>70</sup> Making use of a non-working, “retirement” role is certainly easier.

Resettlement staff often pointed to the fifty-to-sixty-four age group as the most difficult to help. Staff at Midwest Migration Services told me that refugees in their sixties who sought assistance in finding employment were rare. Members of the Employment team talked about holding easier positions, such as cleaning up at a local theatre, for people who would otherwise have trouble finding work. I learned from my interviews with refugees that sometimes caseworkers told them that they could not work. For example, Dhanraj Thapa, a man from Bhutan, told me, “I was expecting to work, but my caseworker ... said to me that I would not be able to work.” Entering the labour market can be difficult, even for Americans perceived as “older.”<sup>71</sup> Refugees who wanted to or had to work faced challenges, from getting hired, to the physical demands of a job that was inflexible to fluctuations in health.

The sharp distinction between working and retirement was also new for refugees from rural backgrounds that would have transitioned to easier tasks before stopping work, if at all. Not having a job can make it difficult for refugees to feel integrated.<sup>72</sup> The standard of sixty-five years as “retirement age” was higher than Mr. Hussain and some others expected. Many of my participants felt that better health care and other conditions made aging happen more slowly in the United States than it had for them. Still others expected to work their whole lives. As a form of later life support, getting SSI was more reliable than relying on family members, but it also limited my refugee participants’ overall integration.

### ***Generic Age in the Social Security System: What Does “Aged” Mean?***

Getting a Social Security Card was an important initial step in resettlement and an entry point into an enormous government program and bureaucracy that currently provides benefits for 61 million Americans.<sup>73</sup> These include retired and disabled workers, their dependents, and survivors.<sup>74</sup> A generic redbrick building with small, square windows and glass front doors was the preferred local office for Midwest Migration Services. It housed two programs: employment-based Social Security, and means-tested SSI. Both programs employ chronometric age distinctions, but only people with

a recognized employment history have access to Social Security. The ssi program defines “aged” as precisely sixty-five years and older.<sup>75</sup>

On an early January morning, I accompanied a Congolese man to apply for ssi. He had just turned sixty-five, according to his documents. He, an interpreter from Midwest Migration Services, and I were seated on grey metal chairs clustered around the desk of a Social Security case-worker. As we passed over the documents for him and his family members, I noticed that his entire family had 1 January birthdays. When I asked him about it, with the help of the interpreter, he explained that he had told the interpreter at the refugee camp his birthdate, but the UNHCR representative wrote 1/1 anyway. Despite this discrepancy, his documents had now indicated his status as eligible for ssi, a moment that Midwest Migration Services had been eagerly anticipating. With ssi, the family would no longer need rent assistance, but they could only schedule an appointment to apply after his bureaucratic birthdate.

Social Security is a form of social insurance. Workers in the United States earn points towards their retirement, and they need at least ten years of work in the United States (or in countries with agreements with the United States) to qualify for these benefits. Supplemental Security Income is a means-tested program funded through general government revenue. Established under the Nixon administration, ssi federalized state programs for people who are blind, disabled, or “aged,” and have limited income or assets. Since 1974, ssi has provided income at three-quarters of the poverty level: currently \$733 for an individual and \$1100 for a married couple. Rates of accessing ssi are lower than those for Social Security, as “means-tested programs such as ssi have generally had difficulty in achieving high rates of participation among those eligible.”<sup>76</sup> Programs like ssi are always made through “a claim based on a socially produced understanding of what is fair treatment.”<sup>77</sup> Managing program constraints, resettlement caseworkers use refugees’ ages to access ssi, reinforcing an arbitrary definition of “aged” applied to refugee newcomers. Without recognized work histories, refugees have no access to Social Security, and as a result, their future incomes and conditions of aging are pinned to their families or this federal program.

### Conclusion

U.S. resettlement programs use chronometric age to integrate and assign status to newly arrived refugees with a self-sufficiency focus that clearly implicates age. The “work or welfare” paradigm in U.S. resettlement supports the narrow scope of the program, and age categorization obscures a host of challenges to integration. The refugees I studied struggled to find meaningful roles and to learn English

in order to get citizenship and maintain benefits that supported them and their families. Chronometric age was the basis for securing access to mainstream OAA and other services, but the age guidelines created an arbitrary division between refugees worthy of assistance and those who were not. Such guidelines create problems for refugees who rely on family or finding appropriate work as a newcomer and “older” worker.

Chronometric ages can appear neutral but are inherently linked to the moral and political economy of the welfare state. Governments have used the institutional life course and chronometric age parameters to manage the risks and relationships to the market, and one result is that concepts of age, including chronometric age, are laden with normative ideas. By assigning characteristics to individuals, ideas of age can obscure hidden forms of privilege and inequality in later life, such as retirement. Refugees lack the place-based work histories that form the basis of Social Security claims, but they are still considered “retirement age” if they receive a meagre income through ssi. U.S. resettlement and associated programs gloss over these issues when they use refugees’ bureaucratic birthdates as the basis of categorization and assistance.

This article has focused primarily on “older” refugees, but its findings highlight the need for critical analysis of the underlying assumptions and ideological framings of age and aging in refugee policies and practices and what these patterns indicate about structural inequalities in the United States. Examining the bureaucratic basis of ages in refugees’ documents is the approach I have taken. Birthdates and chronometric ages make refugees “legible”<sup>78</sup> to different bureaucracies. This process, however, assumes that refugees have an age, divorced from context that is true and consistent as they move through different migration contexts. Refugees are in flux, crafting new identities, and adapting to new social and economic conditions; therefore, a more useful approach is to consider how concepts of age might limit or enable refugees in accessing rights and resources for meaningful integration.

### NOTES

- 1 Following standard ethnographic practices, I have given a pseudonym to the research organization and all of my research participants.
- 2 The International Organization of Migration (IOM) is responsible for coordinating all travel for resettled refugees.
- 3 Refugees are also exempt from employment if they are pregnant, disabled, or a primary caretaker of someone at home, such as a child under the age of one. At sixteen, refugees are technically able to work but are usually in school. Office of Refugee Settlement, “Report to the Congress: Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2016”

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Kimberly Seibel is a postdoctoral researcher at Wayne State University. The author may be contacted at [kaseibel@gmail.com](mailto:kaseibel@gmail.com).