



The Time Politics of Refugee Resettlement and Higher Education in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on experiences within systems of US resettlement and its structures of (un)welcome. There is considerable evidence that the policy framework of these systems complicates the possibilities of higher education for refugees. Drawing on interview and surveys with residents with refugee background (RBBs) and resettlement service providers (SPs), we explore how US refugee resettlement policy creates obstacles for refugees in pursuing higher education and professional work by imposing a particular regimentation of time on refugees' lives that impels them to rapidly integrate into low-income employment markets. We argue that such a **time politics of speed** hastens the resettlement process to advance the goal that residents with refugee background obtain rapid economic self-sufficiency, and we discuss the policy implications.

KEYWORDS

higher education for refugees; refugee resettlement; time politics; United States

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article met en lumière les expériences vécues dans le cadre des systèmes de réinstallation aux États-Unis et de leurs structures d'accueil et de non-accueil. Il est largement démontré que le cadre politique de ces systèmes complique l'accès à l'éducation supérieure pour les réfugiés. En s'appuyant sur des entretiens avec des résidents d'origine réfugiée et des prestataires de services de réinstallation, nous explorons la manière dont la politique américaine de réinstallation des réfugiés crée des obstacles à la poursuite d'études supérieures et à l'exercice d'une activité professionnelle en imposant aux réfugiés un régime temporel particulier qui les oblige à s'intégrer rapidement dans les marchés de l'emploi à faible revenu. Nous soutenons qu'une **politique temporelle de la vitesse** accélère le processus de réinstallation afin que les résidents arrivés en tant que réfugiés (*Residents with Refugee Background*) atteignent une autosuffisance économique rapide et discutons de ce que cela implique au niveau des politiques publiques.


INTRODUCTION: IS HIGHER EDUCATION FOR REFUGEES?

College education for adult refugees in the United States is, as one resettlement provider explained, "really hard. There are a lot of challenges. So I would say that for adults the reality is, you need to work." This statement reflects an assumption—or, as we explore, an approach dictated by the structures of resettlement—that exists among

refugee resettlement service providers that the socio-economic barriers faced by refugees are so high, and the need for emergency services (food, health, and housing) and basic employment services so great, that college and professional employment for adult refugees seems an overly optimistic goal, even utopian. Scholars, as well, have tended to accept this assumption. And in consequence, while ample and rigorous

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research exists to inform refugee education in the K–12 setting in the United States (McBrien, 2005), there is only nascent—but growing—literature on higher education for refugees (Dryden-Peterson, 2012; Hailu, 2020; Luu & Blanco, 2021; Unangst et al., 2022; Yi & Kiyama, 2018).

Adult refugees face systematic barriers to higher education and careers (Wolfgram et al., 2018; Yi & Kiyama, 2018), including the financial barriers of tuition and other costs of college in the US, which are prohibitive for many immigrants and working class citizens alike (Lindsey, 2014); the challenges of English-language acquisition, especially academic English (Hirano, 2014); challenges in obtaining accurate information about how to access higher education, especially in a transnational context (Dahya & Dryden-Peterson, 2017); problems with discrimination on US college campuses (Campbell, 2017); and the struggle to obtain official copies of educational documents required to apply for college to continue education after resettlement (Wolfgram, 2020).

Yet, numerous refugees relocate to the US with an aim to study in college, and some accomplish that aim regardless of the barriers they encounter (Yi & Kiyama, 2018). It is also the case that the barriers to higher education and careers are not a natural or inherent feature of displacement and resettlement in the US, but rather, such barriers are amplified—or at least not diminished—by refugee resettlement policy. Federal and state resettlement policy prioritizes “rapid self-sufficiency” as the paramount goal and measure of resettlement success, which pressures refugees to rapidly integrate into the low-wage labour market rather than pursue career-enhancing education (Wolfgram & Vang, 2019; Wolfgram et al., 2018). As a consequence of this ideological pressure and policy priority for adult refugees to

obtain rapid employment, refugees (including highly skilled and educated refugees) are often placed or directed towards the low-wage and low-skill secondary labour market (Anderson, 2010), constraining future employment possibilities in more stable and remunerative employment (Cain, 1976; Taubman & Wachter, 1986).

There is evidence, however, that access to robust resettlement and social services can facilitate access to higher education. For example, research contrasting Eastern European and Southeast Asian refugees in Chicago found that Eastern European refugees were able to employ the networks from their co-ethnic organizations to access longer-term support—which they utilized to support themselves while accessing higher education and transitioning into middle-class employment—whereas the Southeast Asian refugees faced discrimination and were unable to access the longer-term social services needed to pursue education after resettlement. The study indicates that co-ethnic organizations and discrimination can impact refugees’ access to longer-term supports, but when those supports are accessed and utilized (as was the case for the Eastern Europeans refugees), they can provide needed resources for refugees to pursue education and middle-class status employment. In contrast with the Eastern Europeans, the Southeast Asian refugees experienced discrimination as a barrier to accessing needed resources for education and were thus directed to the low-wage labour market (Majka & Mullan, 2002). Thus, the literature reveals the substantial obstacles to higher education and careers for refugees, but also that resettlement and educational supports can facilitate refugees’ higher educational attainment.

Overall, though, there is a lack of systematic study of these various barriers and

pathways of higher education and careers for refugees (Dryden-Peterson, 2012). Our research will contribute to a systematic study of these various barriers and pathways to higher education and career success for refugees. The analysis presented here draws data from two complementary studies on the experiences of refugee resettlement in Wisconsin. The first is a broad, multi-site study of the resettlement process (Study 1; Van Auken et al., 2019); the other is a more focused study of higher education for refugees in the state (Study 2; Wolfgram et al., 2018). We draw on interviews with refugee resettlement and service providers (SPs) and educators who support refugee resettlement in the state (Study 1, n = 34; Study 2, n = 12). We also interviewed (Study 1, n = 42; Study 2, n = 13) and surveyed residents with refugee background (RRBs) (Study 1, n = 75) while collecting and analyzing refugee resettlement policy documents. The data include rich narrative accounts of the practical work of providing refugee resettlement and other services to refugees and of the policy discourses that inform their work to support refugees. We analyzed these data using analytic theme identification (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) and discourse analytic methods (Fairclough, 2001) to address our research questions:

RQ1: What are the policy discourses and conditions that impact and constrain the work of refugee resettlement providers and others to support the goals and flourishing newcomers?

RQ2: How might these policy conditions entail a structure of (un)welcome that directs newcomers away from higher education and professional opportunities, and into the low-wage labour market?

Our goal is to shed light on experiences within resettlement systems from the perspective of the SPs and RRBs themselves in a particular geographical setting within the broader terrain of US resettlement and its

structures of (un)welcome. Considerable evidence indicates that the US Refugee Resettlement Program's policy framework, as well as the way time is regulated and systematized within it, makes it challenging for refugees to pursue higher education (Wolfgram & Vang, 2019). We explore how US refugee resettlement policy—its ideology and bureaucratic practices—operates to establish obstacles for refugees in pursuing higher education and professional work by imposing a particular regimentation of time on refugees' lives, impelling them to forgo college and rapidly integrate into the low-income employment market. We argue that a **time politics of speed** accelerates the resettlement process to advance the goal that RRBs obtain "rapid economic self-sufficiency."

Below, we develop a conceptual framework that integrates the anthropology of policy (Levinson et al., 2009; Shore & Wright, 2003) and the anthropology of time (Cwerner, 2004; Munn, 1992). This conceptual framework clarifies how time political processes operate as mechanisms of control of the immigration and resettlement process.¹

TIME POLITICS AS A POLICY STRUCTURE OF (UN)WELCOME

Anthropologists of education (Levinson et al., 2009; Shore & Wright, 2003) have argued that **policy** is a historically recent form of power—particular to late liberal capitalist societies and institutions—that is increasingly replacing coercive and legal power with policy discourses about social problems, arguments, and goals (Fairclough, 2013). Policy as power is backed by contracts, budgets, bureaucratic norms and rhythms, and an "audit culture" that impels the fastidious measurement and documentation of outcomes

¹A portion of the analysis and conceptual framework presented in this article draws upon work developed and published in a research report (Wolfgram et al., 2018) and elsewhere (Wolfgram & Vang, 2019).

(Shore, 2008; Shore & Wright, 2003). Refugee resettlement policy is a framework for the control of immigration and resettlement, which operates as a particular mechanism of power that imposes a **time politics**—an ideology about time and its rhythms. Time political policy regimentation of refugee resettlement involves the regimentation of the rate of relocation by accelerating and decelerating the various aspects of the process (Cwerner, 2004), and the bureaucratic structuring of the rhythms of resettlement by setting goals, time benchmarks, limits, and sequences (Shore, 2008). The time political control of resettlement is thus structured through policies, contracts, programs, and budgets with time-delimited outcome measures, which pressurize SPs to accelerate the integration of RBBs into the labour market (Darrow, 2015).

Anti-immigration sentiments in the US and Europe are typically framed in terms of security and national sovereignty, with racial dimensions often (though not always, as the Trump era made clear) subtle or obscured (Bandhauer, 2014). Policy, particularly with time politics behind it, is an especially impactful and efficient mechanism of immigration control because it can rely on objective and rational bureaucratic processes (which embody values of “efficiency” and “transparency”) (Levinson et al., 2009) rather than curtailing or halting immigration and refugee resettlement through an outspoken politics of anti-immigrant nationalism. For example, Cwerner (2004) reported how immigration policy-makers in the United Kingdom utilized a time politics of speed to regulate entry of refugees at the border by hastening the asylum determination process, which caused bureaucratic and legal challenges for asylum seekers that led applications to be denied at historically high levels. This acceleration of asylum review, implemented as a mat-

ter of policy to eliminate “backlog,” caused the widespread rejection of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom while maintaining the appearance of a system motivated by values of bureaucratic “efficiency” and “humanitarianism.” The bureaucratic rationality of the time politics functions as a mechanism of immigration control without (explicit or transparent) deployment of anti-immigrant nationalist rhetoric.

Time politics as a policy mechanism for the control of immigration and management of refugee resettlement establishes another structure of (un)welcome for refugees, by tying movement through the resettlement process primarily to the time political needs of the system rather than the human needs of the displaced people. The time political needs of the system coincide with ideas about who is deserving of state assistance—generally citizens, with **others** represented as undeserving—that proliferate in many Western nations and create a “spectrum of wantedness” (Strang & Ager, 2010, p. 594). Students and immigrants with desired skills are treated as the most wanted others, while refugees are represented both as worthy of humanitarian support but at the same time as members of the “unworthy poor whose deservingness is contingent upon rapid entry into the labor market and staying off cash assistance” (Darrow, 2018, p. 97). The philosopher Elizabeth Cohen (2011) documented the legal history and philosophical underpinnings of the concept of **jus temporis** in Western jurisprudence, which is the identification of political rights based on duration of residence, combined with particular attributes such as physical presence, education, or law-abiding behaviour. A key feature of the values associated with **jus temporis** for refugees in the United States includes both the length of the duration of residence (as a sign of political “loyalty”) but

also the brevity of their receipt of public assistance (as a sign of “independence”). Within this context, refugee resettlement policy is organized by a narrow and singular ideological framing of the goal of refugee resettlement: that refugees “obtain rapid self-sufficiency,” as indicated by employment, and by quickly transitioning from resettlement and social services (Wolfgram et al., 2018). Refugees are systemically funnelled towards the most accessible jobs, which, when combined with extensive barriers to entering and completing higher education, helps to convert many refugees—displaced people already facing innumerable challenges—into particularly “precarious workers” (Anderson, 2010). Precarious workers are very attractive to economic systems with segmented labour markets (Harrison & Lloyd, 2012); resettlement policy may therefore contribute to refugees joining the overrepresentation of immigrants in so-called secondary labour markets, or even tertiary, informal labour markets, particularly if they remain in ethnic enclaves (Portes & Stepick, 1985). This labor market includes food processing, factory, and agricultural labour, as well as non-credentialed care work. Contrary to the relatively high pay, provision of benefits, status, predictability, opportunities for advancement, and the like associated with the so-called primary labour market, the secondary labour market is typified by “non-standard” work with low pay, unpredictable schedules, low status, poor and unsafe working conditions, and little training or job mobility. Workers mired in situations like these have limited ability to enhance their skills and social networks and can end up even more deskilled and further removed from the primary sector (Cain, 1976; Taubman & Wachter, 1986), limiting their economic opportunities and life chances in ways consistent with the patterns of racial capitalism.

This time politics of speed to accelerate the resettlement process and direct refugees into segmented labour markets resonates both with long-term patterns in the history of capitalism and the more recent neoliberalization of the US economy that leads to coordination between public institutions and market imperatives. This system, which utilizes immigrant labour in sectors that require the rapid or regular deployment of contingent, deskilled, or unorganized labour (Barber & Lem, 2018), reached its apex in the late twentieth century but has continued into the present. Debate about immigration policy in the US, which (among other important factors such as US geopolitics and nativist nationalism) has focused on the tight coordination of immigration and the changing labour demands of capitalism in the United States (Ngai, 2014), has likewise persisted, as this paper and special issue attest.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

This paper reports together data and research findings from two separate research studies to address our research questions.

Study 1—Finding Their Place: Resettlement Experiences in Wisconsin

The study (Van Auken et al., 2019) took place between 2014 and 2018. With a research team based at University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, the project eventually expanded to include the entire Fox Valley region of Wisconsin (primarily the mid-sized cities of Oshkosh and Appleton), as well as Milwaukee and Madison, the state’s largest cities and the first and third (behind Oshkosh) most common sites for resettlement over the last two decades, respectively. Our main research experts included three scholars who immigrated to the United States and several

other members of minoritized groups, including one with significant working experience as a resettlement services provider and a devout Muslim, and another with proficiency in Arabic. Specific goals and survey/interview questions were developed with collaborators representing area SPs. We began with surveys of RRBs ($n = 75$) to gather background information and quantitative data about their health, livelihoods, and well-being, and conducted in-depth interviews with a portion ($n = 42$) to gather more in-depth stories to better understand resettlement experiences. RRBs were born in 20 different nations, including the US. Congolese, Hmong, South Sudanese, Syrian, and Burmese backgrounds were most common among participants. We also interviewed SPs ($n = 34$)—people who provide services to RRBs—about their work. A small number of SPs were themselves RRBs and/or people of colour, but the majority were white women. As with RRBs, the largest portion of SPs were from the Fox Valley ($n = 20$), while 12 were from Madison, and the final 2 were from Milwaukee.

Study 2—Higher Education for Refugees in Wisconsin

This study (Wolfgram & Vang, 2019; Wolfgram et al., 2018) was conducted in 2018–2019 and involved the collection of interviews with SPs who support refugee resettlement and higher education for refugees in Wisconsin ($n = 12$) about their work. These individuals were recruited by phone and email, by being contacted directly through the resettlement offices in the state, and through snowball sampling referrals. The study also involved more lengthy and detailed life history interviews with RRBs who had chosen Wisconsin for resettlement as adults ($n = 13$) about their experiences with resettlement, education, and careers. These interviewees were recruited through the SPs

interviewed for the study; the RRBs were from different ethnic backgrounds (Hmong, Somali, Congolese, Iraqi, and others), who either had resettled with higher education credentials, were getting ready for college enrollment, were currently enrolled in college, or had completed their degrees and were pursuing or engaged in post-college professions. Policy documents regarding higher education for refugees and refugee resettlement were also collected and analyzed in this study.

Analytical Strategies

The survey data from Study 1 was analyzed using SPSS to examine correlations and statistical significance of variances. In this paper, these data are mostly utilized for descriptive statistics and qualitative responses to open-ended questions, which were added to the thematic analysis. The interview data from both studies were transcribed. The researchers then performed a round of open coding to determine themes across the full corpus of interviews (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), followed by a second iteration of coding to identify conceptual overlaps between and among themes (often referred to as axial coding; Saldaña, 2021), which helped in recognizing extensive patterns of the resettlement process. Following a critical discourse analysis approach (Fairclough, 2001; Gee, 2014), the researchers identified how discourse elements both connect and construct the social context throughout the coding process by annotating recurrent words, themes, and concepts. The same coding and discourse analysis process was also done with the policy documents collected for Study 2. Last, the primary research findings constitute a collection of analytical memos from the integration of first- and second-order coding and discourse analytic annotations of inter-

view and documentary materials from both studies (Birks et al., 2008).

THE TIME POLITICS OF SPEED: THE ACCELERATION TO “RAPID SELF-SUFFICIENCY”

The Refugee Act of 1980 established the current refugee resettlement policy regime. To support refugees during the resettlement process, a procedure was established for providing medical, financial, and social services to refugees. The US Department of State’s Population, Refugees and Migration division coordinates with UNHCR in the placement of refugees and contracts with religious and charitable “voluntary agencies” (often called VOLAGs) that handle the resettlement into US communities. The State Department provides resettlement funds for housing, food, and other resettlement costs, while the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR)—under the US Department of Health and Human Services—oversees domestic resettlement services and provides medical, cash, and social assistance through local resettlement coordinators during the refugee’s first 30–90 days in the country (Brown & Scribner, 2014).

The key ideological sign in resettlement policy discourse that organizes the rhythms and time frames of the work of resettlement in the US is the policy framing (Fairclough, 2013) of the ultimate goal of refugee resettlement as “economic self-sufficiency” for the refugee. Thus, the role of this concept in refugee resettlement policy discourse is teleological—it sets the ultimate goal and direction of refugee resettlement and provides benchmarks by which the activities, budgets, discourses, and measures of success of the resettlement process are regimented. For example, the concept of self-sufficiency is measured by ORR through two key indicators (and their various proxies): (a) data

that measure refugees’ entrance into the employment market and (b) duration of reliance on resettlement and other social services. One ORR report summarizes the measure of resettlement policy success in terms of the telos of “self-sufficiency”; as reported to Congress, “even with the barriers that they face, refugees are entering the workforce at a fairly high rate, and there is no evidence of long-term cash assistance dependency developing among those who recently arrived” (Halpern, 2008, p. 5).

The Refugee Act of 1980 focused on the support of refugees from Southeast Asia and recognized and made some provision for both short- and longer-term resettlement resources to support the goal of “self-sufficiency” (Kennedy, 1981). Following the welfare reform of the later 1990s (Gonzalez Benson, 2016; Zimmermann & Tumlin, 1999), subsequent reauthorizations of the Refugee Act added that ORR was responsible to Congress to implement policies that would rapidly remove refugees from the “public charge.” New language also increased pressure on the time-delimited nature of the resettlement process—funded programs are to provide “**early** employment [emphasis added]” and English training to promote “**economic self-sufficiency among refugees as quickly as possible** [emphasis added]” so that services can be focused on supporting refugees in “**becoming self-sufficient and free from long-term dependence** [emphasis added] on public assistance” in order to “**reduce welfare dependency**” (ORR, 2012, s. 411 [8 U.S.C. 1521]).

This time politics discourages and impedes the opportunities of higher education for refugees by steering them towards immediate—and often precarious—employment after resettlement, even though a key predictor of a child’s long-term socio-economic success in the US is their parents’ educational

attainment (Dubow et al., 2009). This narrow target and definition of **self-sufficiency**, organized by a time politics of speed, is common throughout refugee resettlement policy discourse (Gonzalez Benson, 2016). For example, a policy report sent to former Wisconsin governor Jim Doyle to prepare for the final batch of Hmong refugees about to arrive in the state in 2004–2005, included the charge to “tell the story of the Hmong in Wisconsin as a **success story** [emphasis added] in the history of Wisconsin” and defined that “success story” in terms of the rapidity of meeting benchmarks of “self-sufficiency” (Hmong Resettlement Task Force, 2005, p. 2). The members of the state task force argued:

Wisconsin has a strong system of national, state and local partnerships. Its spirit of community and high quality, culturally competent services that help Hmong who currently live here to **rapidly achieve success**. We insist that these new families will **soon join the relatives in enriching Wisconsin cultural and economic fabric** [emphasis added]. (p. 7)

These Hmong refugees and former refugees have **become very successful** [emphasis added]. They have a median household income of \$36,000, less than 1% of households receive W-2 assistance [Wisconsin’s “welfare to work” program], and more than 55% of families own their own homes. (p. 7)

The Hmong refugees have **successfully obtained jobs** [emphasis added] and become productive citizens in their new communities. (“Executive Summary”)

Implementing the following recommendations will help these new refugees **obtain rapid self-sufficiency** [emphasis added]. (p. 10)

Despite this ideological focus on rapid self-sufficiency, SPs appreciate the nuanced, multi-faceted nature of resettlement. For example, one SP in our study explained that their organization follows Ager and Strang’s (2008) reference to the concept of integration, described as a “process that takes place when refugees are empowered to achieve

their full potential as members of society, to contribute to the community, and become fully able to exercise the **rights and responsibilities that they share with other residents**” (p. 175). For them, this translates to a variety of indicators—from housing, to employment, to English ability, to legal status, to connections in the community—that help them follow progress to integration. Ager and Strang, however, caution against using means of achieving integration as markers of success in this regard and argue that the process starts with lower-level foundations and facilitators of integration.

With the time political acceleration of the resettlement, RRBs reported feeling as though they may have skipped over some key elements of integration in the push to achieve employment and self-sufficiency. One study participant noted,

They explained to us certain things but didn’t have people show you where to go or how stuff works. ...They gave basic information, but I wish they would give information about the American culture, like basic behaviours and expectations. If you don’t understand the culture you don’t know how to act.

Further, RRBs’ notions of integration or successful resettlement are typically not incorporated into such processes and evaluations thereof.

Despite the funnelling of RRBs towards work being one of the primary thrusts of their resettlement efforts, SPs decried the negative perceptions of refugees, which they blamed on media portrayals and stereotypes. While RRBs and SPs alike may have been focused on finding decent-paying jobs as quickly as possible, they also faced friction from some residents who, according to one SP, echoed anti-immigration and welfare reform sentiments,

things like, “they are just going to utilize our resources and not give anything back.” Some people

think they are only here to take away jobs from Americans, or that they don't want to work and just want to receive welfare.

According to one RRB,

People should know that we didn't just jump into this country. We came through legal process. We're not bad people, as the world believes today that people with refugee background are causing problem in this country. People should know that we want this place to be our home and we're ready to contribute to the thriving of our communities.

Building community connections, including those that could increase bridging social capital and help RRBs learn about and secure higher-quality employment, was made more difficult by such racialized misunderstandings, stereotypes, and outright targeted verbal aggression.

A similar nuance in the time politics of speed in resettlement hinges on English-language acquisition and proficiency. It was common for RRBs to express frustration at being torn between the need to improve their language skills—a foundation and facilitator of integration—and the imperative to work and serve their family. Such conundrums can be further complicated by transportation limitations. Another SP explained about a particular RRB, “If she could get a car, she could get a better job. But she can't get a better job until she gets better English. It's a cycle.” Because of such mismatches, only slightly more than half of RRB respondents to our survey indicated that their standard of living was higher in Wisconsin than the places they lived prior to resettlement, and about the same proportion answered that they were spending everything they earned each month.

RRBs with professional skills also reported being underemployed, including a Middle Eastern RRB who had previously been a lawyer, but the best he could do in terms of white-collar employment was work as

a translator, despite completing additional education in Wisconsin. Some of the explanation for stories like these seemed to reside in the aforementioned barriers, while discrimination was also implicated. Another RRB, a former “Lost Boy” of Sudan who came to the US as a teenager, completed his secondary, undergraduate, and graduate education in the US and was in the midst of a fruitful career in management, despite the racism he faced in the workplace. His relatively successful resettlement and integration may reflect his circumstances, including being placed to live with a family from a Midwestern city who took care of his basic needs and helped him navigate the transition to American life, and who encouraged his success in school. This situation allowed him to largely avoid the time politics of speed. The experience of other RRBs, who came to the US as adults, suggest that this system may hamper resettlement success for some time; several reported that after more than five years, they continued to struggle in “meeting expectations” of “having a good-paying job.”

The time rhythms of refugee resettlement are structured by a highly regimented bureaucratic system of benchmarks and time frames called the Reception and Placement Program (R&P), which is funded by the US State Department and administered by local resettlement VOLAGs. VOLAGs provide essential “case management” for the first 30 days after resettlement in the United States, which includes the delivery of basic needs such as housing, food, clothing, and medical care. The core goal of the US R&P program is for refugees to be economically self-sufficient after 90 days (Bruno, 2017). One RRB argued,

[VOLAGs] need to help for at least a year so that we can learn the language and get better jobs instead of having to quit learning to work and make ends meet because they cut the stipend at three months. ... Think of it this way: when a refugee

family comes here and they are super scared of the uncertainty and all of the sudden they want them to start working and whatnot. They should definitely focus on having the refugees studying the language first before working.

Yet, the system does not allow it. Further, the R&P program is badly under-resourced, with one study finding that only 39% of R&P services provided by VOLAGs were covered by federal contracts and the remainder had to be covered by other grants and charitable donations (LIRS, 2009). Further, the [US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations](#) released a report (2010) aptly titled *Abandoned on Arrival* indicating that the level of refugee support provided by the program decreased by 50% due to the grant not having been adjusted for inflation in its decades-long history. Anti-immigration politics in the United States have caused further diminishment of federal resources for refugee resettlement. After running an anti-immigration campaign and taking power in 2017, the Trump administration cut the federal refugee resettlement budget and proceeded to institute “extreme vetting” and a “travel ban” via executive order that restricted immigration from particular Middle Eastern and African countries (Guild, 2017) while slashing the cap to its historic low of 30,000 refugees for fiscal year 2018 (Davis, 2018). This diminution of the budget and scale of the resettlement program caused several resettlement agencies to shutter across the United States (Rosenberg, 2018) and undercut the potential of the sector to serve new refugees and their communities (Darrow & Scholl, 2020).

Given the diminution of the resources needed to conduct effective resettlement, one SP described how the definition of the goal of resettlement delimits the likelihood of higher education for refugees by enforcing a particular regimentation of the time benchmarks and the rhythms of refugee resettlement:

And the goal of resettlement is always, as the government would say, self-sufficiency. So, when people say, “I want to study,” that’s not what the expectation of resettlement is. If you get W-2 [Wisconsin’s “welfare to work” program] because you have dependent children, that’s a 60-month program. The goal is always employment and self-sufficiency. But if you are—if you don’t have dependent children, you’re under something called Refugee Cash Assistance. That only lasts eight months after you arrive. So, you are expected to get a job as soon as possible and after eight months you—the government is no longer helping you. So, people say, “Well, I want to study,” and it’s like you have to say, “It’s my job to inform you that you have to get a job because the government’s only going to help you for a small amount of time until you get a job.” And that sometimes is very demoralizing for people, that they had a lot of hopes and dreams of opportunity here, and the first thing you have to tell them is, “Sorry, the goal of you being here is to get a job first thing. It’s not to go to school, it’s not to get a degree.”

Refugee resettlement timelines are based upon a highly structured and time-delimited linear progression, with many and various meetings, applications, and procedures that must be completed within the first 90 days after resettlement. After this time, refugees transition to public service programs that diminish over time and are often contingent upon the refugee pursuing full-time employment. Such benefits end upon employment and the determination of “self-sufficiency.”

In this resettlement framework, “success” is characterized by the speed in which refugees transition away from social services—“you are expected to get a job as soon as possible”; “to get a job first thing”—which prohibits serious consideration of higher education for refugees. As described by one SP, disclosure of college attainment goals can be managed by redirecting the refugee towards work, which is a policy imperative of the US Resettlement Program. Thus, it is necessary to explain to the refugee, “Sorry, the goal of you being here is to get a job

first thing. It's not to go to school, it's not to get a degree." Another SP described how the focus of rapid employment discourages consideration of higher education: "We never talked about education [with refugees], you know, furthering their education. It was, okay, you've got to get a job because you have to support your family." As discussed, without higher education or the bridging social capital needed for lower-income people to make socio-economic progress, the quick jobs tend to be lower paying, secondary, or tertiary.

The bureaucratic time pressures placed on resettlement providers and refugees to rapidly advance to employment and "economic self-sufficiency" greatly frustrate the education and career goals of adult refugees. SPs often frame the barriers to such goals within a discourse of "the reality" of being a refugee. For example, one SP shared the following:

So I would say that for adults **the reality is**, you need to work. And so **we really don't talk a lot about what are your goals in terms of education**. It's what kind of job are you going to do, what are your skills, try and make that match, about how we can help them become self-sufficient, because that's a goal. It's heartbreaking because ... I've had some really educated, especially Iranians were coming very educated, and I feel like **they had to go through a grieving process** of, wow, I'm not going to be able to get the job that I had over there or that I think I'm qualified for. Again, **we never talked about education, furthering their education**. It was, okay, you've got to get a job because you have to support your family. And, again, I had some pretty highly educated people, and it just, that match doesn't occur. So, I would say, again, I think **the hope for the parents is that their children would be able to go on to school**, and that's where that, that's where the high schools and the schools that they're attending come in [emphasis added].

This SP recognized the loss of education and career goals as requiring a "grieving process" and avoided even discussing the

topic with refugees, focusing instead on placing them in jobs to "help them become self-sufficient"—"the reality is, you need to work." This "reality" of being an adult refugee, and the policy time pressures that impose a bureaucratic stopwatch on the transition to "self-sufficiency" entail a generational temporal logic on the refugee resettlement process, as "the hope for the parents is that their children would be able to go to school." Higher education and careers for refugees must advance over multiple generations.

College takes time. For refugees who persist towards college, it often takes several years of hard work to even start the process. The language used by SPs reflects this extended time framework. Some SPs help RRBs develop protracted timelines to accommodate college and career goals, including "longer-term, 5-year, 10-year plans in some cases." During a discussion of a "success story" of one Iraqi refugee, who was able to acquire proficiency in English, complete high school, and commence studies at the local technical college, his resettlement service provider explained, "It takes time and a lot of work. That family has been here for three or four years now. But he's doing pretty good now. He just started going to school; he is doing pretty good."

Furthermore, on account of the challenges that refugees encounter, and the complexities of their lives in their new communities, refugees rarely succeed in adhering to the aspirational model, common in the US for white, middle-class people, of a linear, full-time progression through college: transitioning directly from application, to enrollment, to years of study, to graduation, to professional employment (Buzzanell & Goldzwig, 1991). This aspirational model is not often accessible to RRB and other minoritized students, who may lack the consider-

able financial resources needed to sustain full-time, long-term college engagement and career preparation. Even when they achieve the goal of finishing college, they may remain stuck; of the small number of RRBs surveyed in Study 1 who had completed a bachelor's degree after arriving in the US ($n = 9$), almost half ($n = 4$) were earning less than \$2,000 per month.

SPs sometimes work with refugees to manage their higher education goals in the context of the policy goals and constraints of the refugee resettlement policy regime by "break[ing] it down into manageable chunks." This process involves segmenting an educational goal—for example, studying to become a doctor or nurse, an accountant, a teacher, or an engineer—into short-term, college-oriented goals. Such goals may include gaining more English skills, obtaining a high school equivalency diploma, and meeting manageable employment goals such as "starting a job, then maintaining a job, then taking on more responsibility." If, after a year or two, the refugee has met these goals, the SP revisits the discussion of pursuing college, often first at a community college but perhaps later at a university.

Another strategy that SPs employ with refugees who have college goals is providing them with information to encourage them to modify their goals of going to college. One SP explains this strategy:

Now, another young woman who is working on her high school equivalency has a little bit higher level of English but still could be better, she said that she wants to be a doctor. And so I said, "Just so you know, being a doctor involves, you know—after you complete your high school, then you do four years of undergraduate, four years of graduate school, and then four years of residency. And during that time you're going to have to pay and work pretty insane hours, like at least during the residency, right." So, she wasn't really aware of that. But then we were—you know, we always put it back to the client. We try to give

them the information they need to make their own decision. So I wasn't doing that to talk her out of it, but make sure she understood that that's what being a doctor means here. But then, you know, someone suggested maybe she can look at physician's assistant, which is similar. You're going to be doing similar work and it's not as long a commitment.

Last, as a refugee's resettlement benefits and social services decline, SPs sometimes presented advice to refugees with college goals about "budgeting" and "time management" to develop a strategy to manage work and school simultaneously in the context of diminishing basic support services for themselves and their family:

I mean part of the advice is they come and say, "Oh we don't have money, my FoodShare is coming down, I want to go to school, please look for a part time job." So I would say, OK, you go to school, we'll look for an evening job for you. You go to school, we'll look for a weekend job for you. I mean you don't need to leave school to work full-time and then I readjust their budget again. I think there are unnecessary expenses like internet or a phone or just buying unnecessary stuff that they don't need.

The final sentence in the above quote, while spoken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, nonetheless reveals limitations in the typical, somewhat paternalistic approach to providing advice to RRBs, as internet access, at the very least, and smartphones are increasingly vital elements of any person's ability to function in educational and employment settings of the modern world.

Our data suggest that the key to long-term success seems to be the creation of social connections and availability of adequate support. Many SPs agreed, as their own definitions of integration aligned more closely with long-term goals. Some distinguished between the concepts of **resettled** as being short term and **integrated** as being long term. According to one SP,

Resettled is very short term; mostly surviving mode and what we initially desire but not where we want people to stay. Safe housing, employment that covers expenses, beginning to advance to the next level of English and can do most day to day without assistance. Pay bills, buy groceries, transportation, etcetera.

Integrated, on the other hand, is “what we would hope for and takes a longer adjustment, but [means] people move from surviving to thriving. Better employment, accomplished at language, socially involved and feel as though they are welcome and making contribution to the community.” That the SP made these comments from within a narrowly focused system built upon the time politics of speed helps underscore the underlying tension that appeared to be widely recognized on both sides. However, the framework proposed by the SP—contrasting the short- and long-term time frames of resettlement verses integration—obscures the process documented and theorized in this article, that the time politics of resettlement establishes and pressures RBBs to follow a pathway into the secondary labour market—and the deskilling and precarious conditions of such labour might frustrate and obstruct the longer-term goals of integration, including education and career development.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The goals of this study were to document the policy discourses and conditions that impact and constrain the work of refugee resettlement providers and to investigate how these policy conditions entail a structure of (un)welcome that may direct newcomers away from higher education and professional opportunities and into the low-wage labour market. We suggest that our coordination of two independent studies is a major

strength in this piece because the findings are based on a robust corpus of interviews with SPs and RRBs alike. Limitations include that the studies draw data from one Midwestern US state, which may preclude generalization to the implementation of resettlement policy on a national level. Furthermore, to address our research questions, we focused our analysis on how resettlement policy impacted the work of SPs to resettle RRBs. The authors intend to focus future work on more fulsome analysis related to how RBBs experience via the extensive interview data produced by the studies.

The goals of refugee resettlement are narrowly focused on employment and “self-sufficiency” and the system is built upon short-term, time-delimited provision of support to refugees. We argue that this combination effectively thwarts and discourages refugees with college and career goals. The teleology of refugee resettlement as “rapid self-sufficiency,” measured by the rate and pace of employment and of transition off resettlement and social services, is imposed upon resettlement providers and refugees by regimenting bureaucratic rhythms and temporal benchmarks through the resettlement process. We describe how this mechanism of a time politics of speed (Cwerner, 2004) constrains the work of SPs to support resettlement, higher education, and meaningful careers for refugees, and effectively thwarts and hinders the aims of refugees in Wisconsin, establishing a structure of (un)welcome.

This time politics used to impose and manage this structure of (un)welcomeness is mediated by the socio-historical and political context in which refugee resettlement takes place, which became central to refugee resettlement policy with the establishment of the Refugee Act in 1980 (Kennedy, 1981) and increased in importance during the quest for welfare reform during the 1990s (Gonzalez

Benson, 2016; Zimmermann & Tumlin, 1999). Importantly, this structure of (un)welcome is imposed upon the work of refugee resettlement through policy (Levinson et al., 2009; Shore & Wright, 2003), bureaucratically regimenting the rate and rhythm of activity, without need or explicit reference to a politics of anti-immigrant nationalism. Rather, time politics, as a mechanism of policy control of resettlement, is consistent with values of bureaucratic efficiency and the telos of “independence” and “self-sufficiency” for RRBs (Bandhauer, 2014; Cwerner, 2004; Levinson et al., 2009).

While supporting refugees to obtain economic self-sufficiency is a laudable goal, resettlement systems built upon a time politics of speed may have the effect of greatly slowing the **integration** process of RRBs. This finding, and other research that measures the employment outcomes of the resettlement process in the US (Anderson, 2010), indicate that the current resettlement regime—with its narrow teleology and it being under-resourced for decades (LIRS, 2009; US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2010)—contributes to a segmented labour market by directing immigrant labour into precarious and deskilled labour roles (Cain, 1976; Taubman & Wachter, 1986). Thus, refugee resettlement systems, while effective at meeting the narrow goals of rapid employment and transition off of resettlement and other social services (Halpern, 2008), may create a more enduring and problematic situation of **misplacement** of displaced RRBs into precarious labour relations at the margins of their communities (Van Auken et al., 2016).

Research is needed to better inform policies to support higher education for refugees (Dryden-Peterson, 2012), particularly for adult refugees who face barriers to accessing college in the United States (Yi & Kiyama, 2018). Current efforts to address

these barriers involve a complex patchwork of local, state, national, and international governments, non-governmental and philanthropic organizations, and various levels and types of educational institutions and systems (Streitwieser et al., 2019). Policy research is needed to identify the organizations and government entities that support college for refugees, to document the constraints and best practices, and to identify the considerations needed to scale effective supports for refugee newcomers to the United States.

The results of the present study demonstrate that research and policy to address barriers and access to higher education for refugees require emphasis on reorganizing the resettlement process to include the support and time for refugees to acquire not only basic skills needed for “self-sufficiency” but also more sustained and advanced supports to access and succeed in education and careers. Therefore, governments should consider changing policies to diminish the time politics of speed, and allow SPs to help RRBs address lower order needs—foundations and facilitators of integration—in their early adjustment to their new living situation, to permit more time for them to attempt to heal from their traumas and get their new houses in order, as was the case for the former “Lost Boy” of Sudan discussed above. With a firmer foundation in place, RRBs can, with continued and additional support over time, better build social connections, develop language skills, and yes, pursue educational goals, which will more efficiently enhance their ability to become successful, better integrated, stronger contributors to local communities and workforces—and **citizens**.²

The structure of (un)welcome documented in this article involves a time politics of speed

²Survey results from Study 1 demonstrate a strong, statistically significant, inverse relationship between citizenship status and feelings of sadness/hopefulness. But RRBs expressed the need for more support in attaining this status.

that pressures newcomers to rapidly obtain employment in the low-wage labour market and to forgo education and career development. SPs and educators sometimes have deficit perspectives on refugee newcomers (DeMartino, 2021), and in consequence, refugees often face active discouragement from pursuing education and career goals (Larsen, 2022). As one SP described the college aspirations of the newcomer refugees she served, “It is really hard. There are a lot of challenges. So I would say that for adults the reality is, you need to work.” It is the case that refugees—especially adult refugees who experience the time pressures to obtain rapid self-sufficiency—face barriers to higher education and career success that are challenging and persistent; but it is equally important to note that many refugees (including adults) resettle in the United States with educational credentials and goals, and some of them utilize resettlement and educational resources to eventually achieve those goals (Streitwieser et al., 2019; Wolfgram et al., 2018; Yi & Kiyama, 2018). Counternarratives that illustrate the assets and strategies that refugees employ in their educational journeys are lacking (Shaw et al., 2021). Research is needed to document and write counternarratives to challenge deficit understandings of refugees, to centre refugee voices and experiences, and to highlight the assets and strategies that some refugees have used to gain access to higher education and careers.

In short, we argue that the deeply systemic nature of the primary barriers to RRB integration and success upon which we have focused here must be recognized. Policy changes should be pursued, but approaches that fail to recognize how the time politics of speed limit the agency of SPs and RRBs alike will not succeed in producing widespread positive change. Further, while it may be

limited in varying degrees depending on actors’ statuses, agency is always present in every social system, and this is no different. Despite the very real constraints that structures of resettlement present, we suggest that SPs can, and indeed some do, approach their work through an abundance perspective (Leinbach, 2018) that seeks to identify assets—including the navigational skills and other strengths that RRBs bring with them and have honed during their struggles to arrive in their new homes and attempt to succeed—that can help overcome barriers. Consistent with this, the higher education sector in the US is well equipped—and ethically obligated, we argue—to address barriers to higher education for RRBs (Wolfgram et al., 2018; Yi & Kiyama, 2018). Abundance in communities can be revealed simply by asking for help; how can VOLAGs, other SPs and local stakeholders, educational institutions, and RRBs themselves help each other to create institutional mechanisms to amplify the assets of the refugee community and support the education and careers of RRBs? Even the pursuit of answers to such questions will likely help change systems and create a more open society where both RRBs and their new communities alike are better able to flourish.

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