



Refugee Integration in the United States

By David Dyssegaard Kallick with Silva Mathema

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Introduction and summary

Refugees are admitted to the United States for humanitarian reasons: They face well-founded fear of persecution in their home countries and seek a safe haven here. But they also contribute to the American economy, bringing vitality to areas with declining populations, contributing to the growth of areas whose populations are already increasing, and expanding the labor force as they seek and find work to make better lives for themselves and their children.

Around 3 million refugees have been admitted to the United States.¹ This report focuses on four groups—Somali, Burmese, Hmong, and Bosnian refugees—that are identifiable in U.S. Bureau of the Census data and that together constitute about 500,000 U.S. residents.

Refugees come from a wide range of backgrounds and regions, so no single group can be considered typical. The groups examined here, however, show that there are some broad trends among them, as well as some distinctions.

Other studies have illustrated that refugees quickly become self-sufficient in the United States, a central goal of federal resettlement policy.² What this report examines is how these groups fare in the long run, finding that over time, refugees integrate well into their new communities. After being in the United States for 10 years, refugees are in many regards similar to their U.S.-born neighbors, with similar rates of labor force participation and business ownership. The large majority have learned to speak English after being in the country for 10 years and have become naturalized U.S. citizens after being in the country for 20 years.

This report uses “Burma” and “Burmese” throughout to refer to the country also known as Myanmar and to the people from that country. These are the terms used in the decennial census and the American Community Survey, and they are also common usage among refugees from that country.

The following are among the report's major findings, which are based on an analysis of 2014 American Community Survey, or ACS, 5-year data for Somali, Burmese, Hmong, and Bosnian refugees:

Refugee groups are gaining a foothold in the labor force

- **Refugee men quickly move into the labor force.** The labor force participation rates of men in these refugee communities often exceed that of U.S.-born men.
- **Refugee women become increasingly integrated into the labor force over time.** Recently arrived Somali, Burmese, and Hmong women have lower-than-average labor force participation rates, but those who have been in the United States for more than 10 years have rates about as high as or sometimes higher than those of U.S.-born women. Bosnian women have high labor force participation rates soon after arrival, which become higher still after they have been in the United States for 10 years.

Refugee groups are advancing in their careers and starting businesses

- **Once established in the United States, refugees often see substantial wage gains.** Burmese refugees see the biggest gains. Recently arrived Burmese men have a median wage of \$23,000 per year, while the median for those who have been in the United States for more than 10 years is \$54,000. The median wage for Burmese women who have been in the United States for more than 10 years is \$50,000, up from \$21,000 for recent arrivals.
- **Refugees move up the occupational ladder as they become rooted in the United States.** Among Somalis who are recent arrivals, for example, 23 percent work in white-collar jobs, while far more—43 percent—do so after having been in the United States for 10 years or more.
- **Refugees start businesses, which helps expand local economies.** Thirty-one out of every 1,000 Bosnian refugees in the labor force are business owners, as are 26 out of every 1,000 Burmese, 22 out of every 1,000 Hmong, and 15 out of every 1,000 Somalis. By way of comparison, 31 out of every 1,000 U.S.-born people in the labor force are business owners, as are 36 out of every 1,000 foreign-born people in the labor force.

- **Refugee wages are in the middle of the range of wages for U.S.-born workers.** Refugees enter a U.S. economy that is characterized by well-documented wage gaps based on race and gender. Refugee earnings are generally higher than those of the lowest-earning U.S.-born race and gender group, black women, but lower than those of the highest-earning U.S.-born group, white men. No refugee group—men or women—has a median annual wage at the level of U.S.-born white men, either among high school graduates or among college graduates. For refugees who are high school graduates, the highest earnings rate is 87 percent of the level of U.S.-born white men, even after restricting the sample to refugees who speak English at least “well.” For refugee college graduates, the highest rate is 74 percent of the earnings of comparably educated U.S.-born white men. On the other hand, among both high school and college graduates, the majority of the refugee groups considered earn more than black women, who are in both cases the lowest-earning U.S.-born group. Also interesting is that the gender wage gap is often considerably smaller within these refugee groups than for U.S.-born workers. Indeed, the gender gap is sometimes reversed. Somali and Burmese women with college degrees earn more than their male counterparts, and Hmong women earn the same as Hmong men, though the earnings level is low for both. In contrast, U.S.-born women earn less than U.S.-born men in general and also when disaggregated by race and educational attainment.

Refugees integrate into American society over time

- **Refugees learn English over time.** After living in the country for more than 10 years, 86 percent of Somalis speak English at least “well,” and 61 percent speak English “very well” or exclusively. Among Hmong who are in the United States for more than 10 years, 67 percent speak English at least “well,” and 43 percent speak English “very well” or exclusively.
- **Refugees who have been in the United States longer generally own their own homes.** Seventy-three percent of Burmese refugees and 72 percent of Bosnian refugees who have been in the United States for more than 10 years live in homes they own themselves—higher than the rate for U.S.-born people at 68 percent. Only Somalis have a considerably lower home ownership rate: 21 percent of Somalis who have lived in the United States for more than 10 years own their own homes.

Throughout this report, “white” refers to non-Hispanic white, “black” to non-Hispanic black, and “Asian” to non-Hispanic Asian.

- **Refugees become U.S. citizens.** Among the people in each of the four refugee groups, more than three-quarters who have been in the United States for more than 20 years have become naturalized citizens.

States and metropolitan areas where refugees make the biggest difference

- **These four refugee groups are playing a particularly big role in certain states and metropolitan areas.** Somali, Burmese, Hmong, and Bosnian refugees are part of the economic revitalization of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. They are also helping spur growth in St. Louis; Fargo, North Dakota; and Columbus, Ohio, where political leaders have welcomed their contributions. In Wisconsin, the Wausau, Sheboygan, Eau Claire, Appleton, and Green Bay metropolitan areas all stand out as places without large numbers of immigrants but where these refugees make up a significant share of the immigrant population.

Refugees have recently been on the front pages of newspapers around the world on a daily basis. The Syrian crisis—to name just one of numerous situations around the world causing massive population displacement—has resulted in hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers in Europe, even larger numbers of Syrians living in Lebanon and Turkey, and significant political tensions around resettlement in the United States.³

Refugees undoubtedly breathe huge sighs of relief when, after tremendous hardship, they arrive in a place where they can feel safe, and the communities that welcome them should feel good about the humanitarian aid they provide. This report's strong findings about economic and social integration over time show that local areas should also feel confident that resettled refugees will find a place in the labor market. Economic growth is not the primary reason refugees are resettled, but it is a positive byproduct of giving people with nowhere to turn a new place to call home. This report illustrates the many ways in which these four refugee groups are already thriving, while also pointing to some areas where further attention could help them do better. As a growing number of local political leaders are realizing, doing what is good for refugees is also good for American communities: Their success is our success.

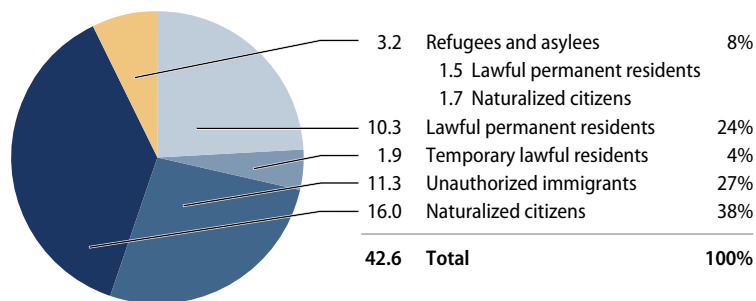
Refugees are part of a larger story of immigration

Refugees are just one small part of the United States’ overall immigration story.

Eight percent of all immigrants living in the United States today, 3.2 million people in total, initially came to this country as refugees or were granted asylum. Nearly all of these refugees and asylees have since become either naturalized citizens or lawful permanent residents, also known as green card holders. The difference between refugees and asylees rests primarily on whether the application for protection from persecution was filed while outside the United States, as is the case for refugees, or at the U.S. border or from within the United States, as is the case for asylees. This report groups both together under the terms “refugee communities” or “refugees.”

FIGURE 1
1 in 12 immigrants in the United States is a refugee or asylee

Total population, in millions



Note: The current status for nearly all refugees and asylees is either legal permanent resident or naturalized citizen. Estimates include refugees and asylees arriving after 1980.

Source: Analysis provided to the Fiscal Policy Institute by Jeffrey S. Passel and D’Vera Cohn of the Pew Research Center. Estimates based on a residual methodology developed by the Pew Research Center and applied by Passel and Cohn to the 2014 March Current Population Survey (preliminary).

In addition to refugees and asylees, an additional 38 percent of immigrants in the United States have become naturalized U.S. citizens and an additional 24 percent are lawful permanent residents. Four percent of immigrants in the United States are temporary lawful residents, such as those connected to specialized or agricultural work or attending a U.S. university.⁴ In all, 73 percent of U.S. immigrants have some form of lawful immigration status; the remaining 27 percent have no such status and are therefore unauthorized.

Where refugees originate reflects the history of conflicts and oppressive regimes around the world. The top 10 groups of U.S. refugees, starting with the largest, fled under duress from Vietnam, Russia, Iraq, Bosnia, Laos, Burma, Somalia, Iran, Cuba, and Cambodia. (see Table 1)

TABLE 1
Top 10 refugee groups in the United States

Rank		Cumulative number of refugee arrivals, UNHCR data	Share of total refugees, UNHCR data	FPI estimate of refugee arrivals based on the ACS
1	Vietnamese	526,874	21%	**
2	Russian	460,772	19%	**
3	Iraqi	152,352	6%	**
4	Bosnian and Herzegovinian	145,278	6%	120,443
5	Laotian*	141,727	6%	92,952
6	Burmese	137,081	6%	159,987
7	Somali	121,985	5%	120,703
8	Iranian	96,120	4%	**
9	Cuban	93,222	4%	**
10	Cambodian	88,526	4%	**
	All other refugee groups	513,917	21%	**
	Total	2,477,854	100%	
	Four refugee groups studied in this report combined	546,071	22%	494,085

* Note: U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees data for Laos are matched to FPI estimates of ACS data for all Hmong refugees.

** Note: Numbers for these groups were not estimated.

Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of data from U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, using cumulative totals for all arrivals since 1982 with no estimate of attrition; comparison with Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2014 American Community Survey 1-year data. See Methodology for further detail.

The four groups considered in this report come from the middle of that top 10 list, and together they make up about 1 out of every 5 refugees resettled in the United States from 1982 to 2014.

The groups come from a range of refugee experiences: Originating in Africa, Europe, and Asia, they have diverse cultural backgrounds and religious practices and fit differently into the American racial and ethnic mix. The groups came to the United States with varying levels of education. They also came during different historical periods: Some are mostly recent arrivals, while others have been living in the United States for some time.

A significant challenge in studying refugee communities is that the Census Bureau's major surveys do not ask about refugee status. The four groups this report focuses on, however, include comparatively small numbers of nonrefugee immigrants in the United States, and the refugee groups can be identified by looking at place of birth, languages spoken at home, and/or ancestry reported. The left column of Table 1 shows the cumulative total number of people admitted to the United States as refugees between 1982—the first year for which resettlement data are available from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR—and 2014, the last year for which data are available. The right column shows the number of people in each of the four refugee groups, as identified through the 2014 American Community Survey.

In all four cases, there is a strong relationship between the number of people officially admitted as refugees and the number of people estimated to be in U.S. refugee communities.

For the purpose of this report's analysis, it is not necessary for the match to be perfect, and the degree of correspondence should not be overstated. (See Methodology for further detail.) This study looks at refugee communities, not individual people who have been admitted as refugees. Some may have been family members of people who were granted refugee status but who were not granted refugee status themselves; some may have been granted refugee protection through the asylum process, which would not be captured in the UNHCR data; and some may have found ways to immigrate through other types of visas. There is little doubt, however, that refugee resettlement is behind the large numbers of Somalis in Minneapolis-St. Paul and Bosnians in St. Louis, whether or not every single Somali or Bosnian in those communities is an officially designated refugee.

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The data presented in this report do not include the U.S.-born children of refugees, except where specifically indicated. It is well established that in general, the U.S.-born children of immigrants do very well in the United States.⁵ Those U.S.-born children were excluded from the data in order to keep the focus on the degree to which people who have overcome substantial difficulties to be in the United States are faring well.

Background of the 4 refugee groups

Somali refugees

Somali refugees began arriving in the United States in the 1990s as a result of civil war, a government that bitterly pitted clans and ethnic groups against one another, and a drought that worsened an already desperate situation. One estimate shows that between 1992 and 1993, roughly 2 million Somalis were internally displaced, 800,000 sought refuge in Kenya and Ethiopia, and 250,000 died of either starvation or wounds.⁶

The analysis of the American Community Survey in Figure 2 shows that by 2000, there were 39,000 Somali refugees living in the United States and that by 2014, there were 121,000. The religious heritage of Somali refugees is mostly Sunni Muslim, and languages spoken include Somali, Swahili, Arabic, Italian, and English.⁷

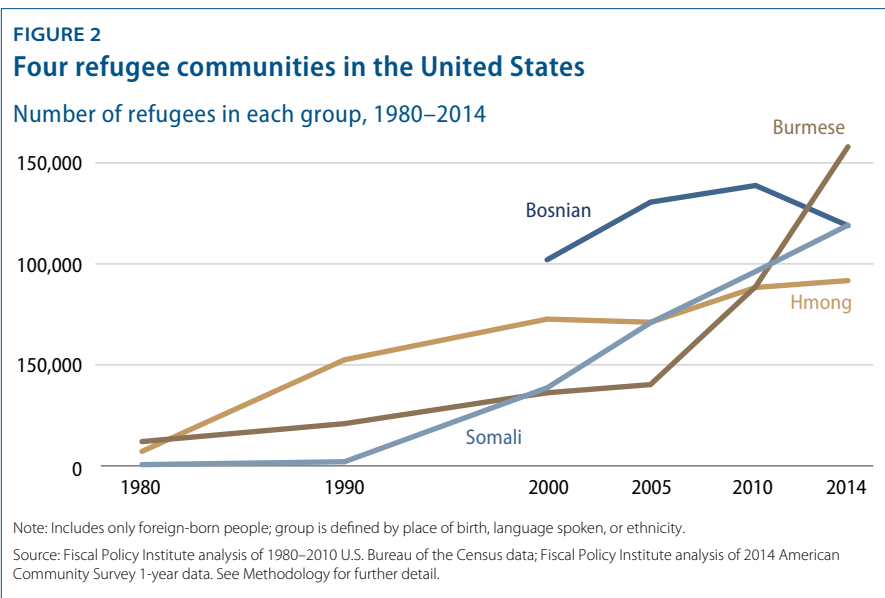
Burmese refugees

Refugees from Burma—renamed Myanmar by the military regime in 1989 but still commonly called Burma among refugee communities—make up one of the largest refugee groups arriving to the United States in recent years, but the flow of Burmese refugees is not new.⁸ Refugees from Burma have been coming to the United States for several decades. According to analysis of the ACS, there were 12,000 Burmese in the United States as early as 1980, increasing to 21,000 in 1990, 37,000 in 2000, 90,000 in 2010, and 160,000 in 2014.

Ethnic, religious, and other sectarian violence that took place from 1962 to 2010 during the reign of two military governments drove large numbers of people to flee the country. Floods, cyclones, and other natural disasters exacerbated the situation. Refugees from Burma include people from states with large ethnic minority populations—Chin, Karen, and Karenni, for example—that have long histories of conflict with the national government, political opponents of the regime, and the Rohingya and other Muslims.⁹

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In April 2016, leadership of the country passed to the National League for Democracy—a party that stood in bitter opposition to the previous military regime—which made changes to some, but not all, of these conditions.¹⁰



Hmong refugees

Hmong refugees started coming to the United States in the 1970s, when Laotian Hmong worked closely with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in opposition to communist forces in Laos in what has often been called the Secret War. After Laos established a communist government in 1975, people in Hmong villages were raped, tortured, and massacred en masse in what some experts have called a genocide.¹¹ Hmong refugees rushed across the border to Thailand, and many spent years in refugee camps there. Some permanently settled in Thailand, some hoped to return one day to Laos, and some resettled in countries such as France, Canada, or Australia. The large majority, however, were resettled in the United States.¹² Up to half of the Hmong refugees in the United States are Christians; others follow traditional ancestor worship, animist, and Buddhist practices.¹³

As Figure 2 illustrates, there were 7,000 people of Hmong ancestry in the United States in 1980, which increased to 53,000 in 1990, 74,000 in 2000, and 93,000 in 2014.

Bosnian refugees

Bosnian refugees came to the United States in the 1990s after the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. It has been reported that 250,000 of the 4.4 million people in Bosnia and Herzegovina were killed in the conflict, 1 million people were internally displaced, and 1.3 million people fled the country.¹⁴ This conflict put the term “ethnic cleansing” on the map, and Bosnian Muslims were one of the groups subjected to systematic killings, torture, rape, and forcible displacement from their homes. The United States agreed to take many Bosnians as refugees.¹⁵ Figure 2 shows that there were 103,000 Bosnians in the United States in 2000 and 141,000 Bosnians in 2010. That number declined to 120,000 by 2014, in part because some refugees have returned to Bosnia’s more stable current conditions. The conflict also displaced many Kosovars, Croatians, and other ethnic populations of the former Yugoslavia.

U.S. refugee resettlement procedures

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol define refugees as people who are outside their country and are unable or unwilling to go back because of “a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”¹⁶ The United States is a signatory to the 1967 protocol.¹⁷

The resettlement of refugees in the United States involves coordination and partnership among multiple levels of government and nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs. As set out by the Refugee Act of 1980, each year the president determines, after consultation with relevant congressional committees, the number of refugees to be admitted to the country.¹⁸ In fiscal year 2016, the president allocated 85,000 refugee admissions slots for the entire world, with the following regional allocations: 25,000 slots for Africa, 13,000 slots for East Asia, 4,000 slots for Europe and Central Asia, 3,000 slots for Latin America and the Caribbean, 34,000 slots for the Near East and South Asia, and an unallocated reserve of 6,000 slots.¹⁹ The unallocated reserve can

be used for cases in which the need for refugee resettlement is higher than the regional amount allocated at the beginning of the fiscal year. Due in part to the worsening Syrian refugee situation, the target of 85,000 set by the United States for the current fiscal year exceeds the 70,000-person admission target set for each of the past three fiscal years.²⁰

However, the United States has not been a major site of resettlement for Syrian refugees. Last year, more than 1 million people fleeing war and oppression in their countries entered Europe, about half of them from Syria. Large numbers of Syrian refugees are in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.²¹ Between November 2015 and February 2016, Canada resettled 27,000 Syrian refugees.²² By contrast, the United States resettled 3,000 Syrian refugees from 2011—the start of the Syrian civil war—to March 30, 2016.²³ Although the United States announced that it will resettle 10,000 Syrians in FY 2016, it is far behind its goal and has just recently ramped up its efforts.²⁴ While the Syrian refugee crisis has dominated the recent news, there are other equally compelling refugee crises around the world. It is also important

to recognize that the United States has a long and strong history of welcoming refugees and has resettled 3 million refugees since 1975, more than any other country in the world.²⁵

The vast majority of refugees resettled in the United States are first interviewed and then referred by the UNHCR.²⁶ After the UNHCR refers a refugee to the United States, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security reviews the case, conducts multiple and overlapping background checks and security screenings in conjunction with other law enforcement and security agencies, interviews the applicant, and makes a decision on admittance.²⁷ Once a decision is made, the refugee is referred to one of the nine private resettlement agencies responsible for providing initial reception as well as basic services such as housing, education, clothing, and medical assistance. The resettlement agencies, including the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants and HIAS, review each refugee case sent by overseas resettlement support centers and determine where to resettle them in the United States.²⁸ Resettlement decisions are based on a vari-

ety of factors, including the needs of the refugee, housing costs, whether the refugee has relatives in a community, and whether local communities have resources available to take in refugees. The nine resettlement agencies have a large network of local affiliates spread throughout the United States, with 312 offices in 185 locations.²⁹ These agencies have resettled refugees in nearly 190 U.S. communities.³⁰

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, or USRAP, aims to make refugees “economically self-sufficient” as soon as possible. Refugees receive assistance and access to social service programs for a limited time, and most of these programs—such as employment services, on-the-job training, and vocational training—are geared toward helping refugees find and keep jobs.³¹ To facilitate integration, new refugees receive work authorization; are required to apply for lawful permanent resident, or LPR, status within a year; and, once they have LPR status, are eligible to apply for citizenship in five years.

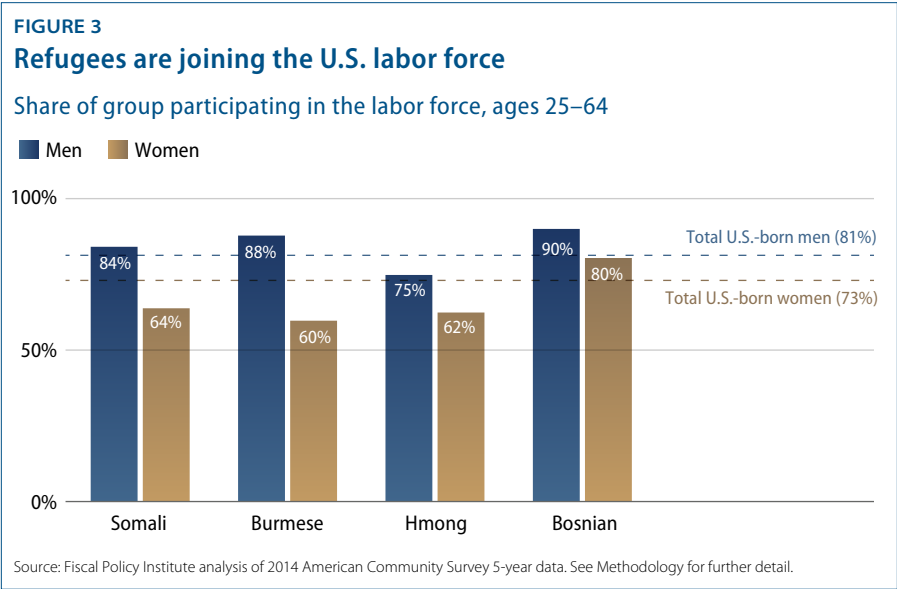
Refugee groups are gaining a foothold in the labor force

The refugee groups this report studies are finding their way in the American labor market and integrating well once they have been in the country for some time. Refugee men generally start out with very high labor force participation rates and see their wages increase as they spend more time in the United States, where they improve their English, develop better networks, and gain experience in the labor market. Some groups of refugee women start with comparatively low labor force participation rates, but once they have been in the United States for 10 years, they tend to roughly match and sometimes exceed the labor force participation rates of their U.S.-born counterparts. Like refugee men, refugee women also see their median wages increase significantly as they gain experience.

Men in the four refugee groups each have labor force participation rates that are comparable to or higher than those of their U.S.-born counterparts. The labor force participation rate for U.S.-born men of prime working age is 81 percent; for Hmong men, it is a little lower at 75 percent. It is higher for Somali men at 84 percent, Burmese men at 88 percent, and Bosnian men at 90 percent.³² For U.S.-born women, the labor force participation rate is 73 percent. The rates are lower for Somali women at 64 percent, Burmese women at 60 percent, and Hmong women at 62 percent. Bosnian women's rate stands higher, at 80 percent. This analysis focuses on prime working age—ages 25 to 64—since the standard definition of labor force participation, age 16 and older, would be swayed by the larger share of retirees among the U.S.-born population.

The labor force participation rates for men and women in these four refugee groups generally follow different trends over time, although they consistently demonstrate growing integration into the nation's labor market. Even during their first 10 years in the country, Somali, Burmese, and Bosnian men have rates of labor force participation that are higher than those of U.S.-born men. This remains true after they have

been in the United States for 10 years. Hmong men, by contrast, start with a comparatively low rate of labor force participation at 68 percent and after 10 years rise to a level—75 percent—that is still slightly lower than that of U.S.-born men.

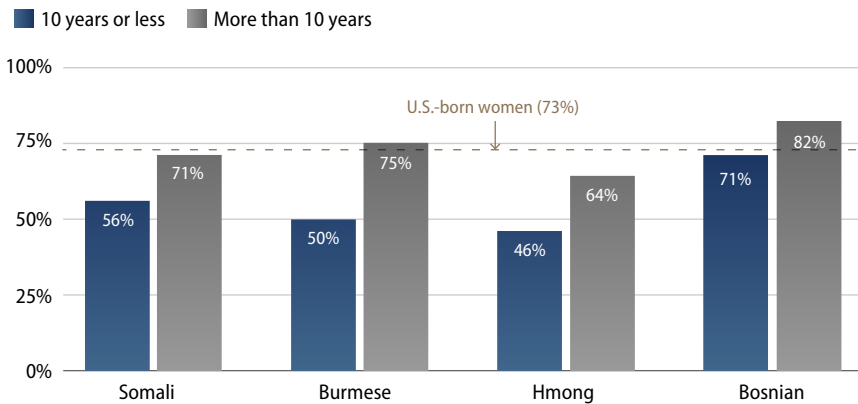


Refugee women follow a different pattern, often starting with lower labor force participation rates that rise steeply over time. During their first 10 years in the country, Somali, Burmese, and Hmong women have labor force participation rates considerably below that of U.S.-born women, at 56 percent, 50 percent, and 46 percent, respectively, compared with 73 percent for all U.S.-born women. For refugee women who have been in the United States for more than 10 years, however, the rates of labor force participation rise to about the same level as or higher than that of U.S.-born women. Interestingly, Bosnian women have quite a high labor force participation rate—71 percent—even as recent arrivals to the United States, and this increases even further to 82 percent for those in the United States for more than 10 years.

FIGURE 4

Refugee women's labor force participation increases with time spent in the United States

By length of time living in the United States, ages 25–64



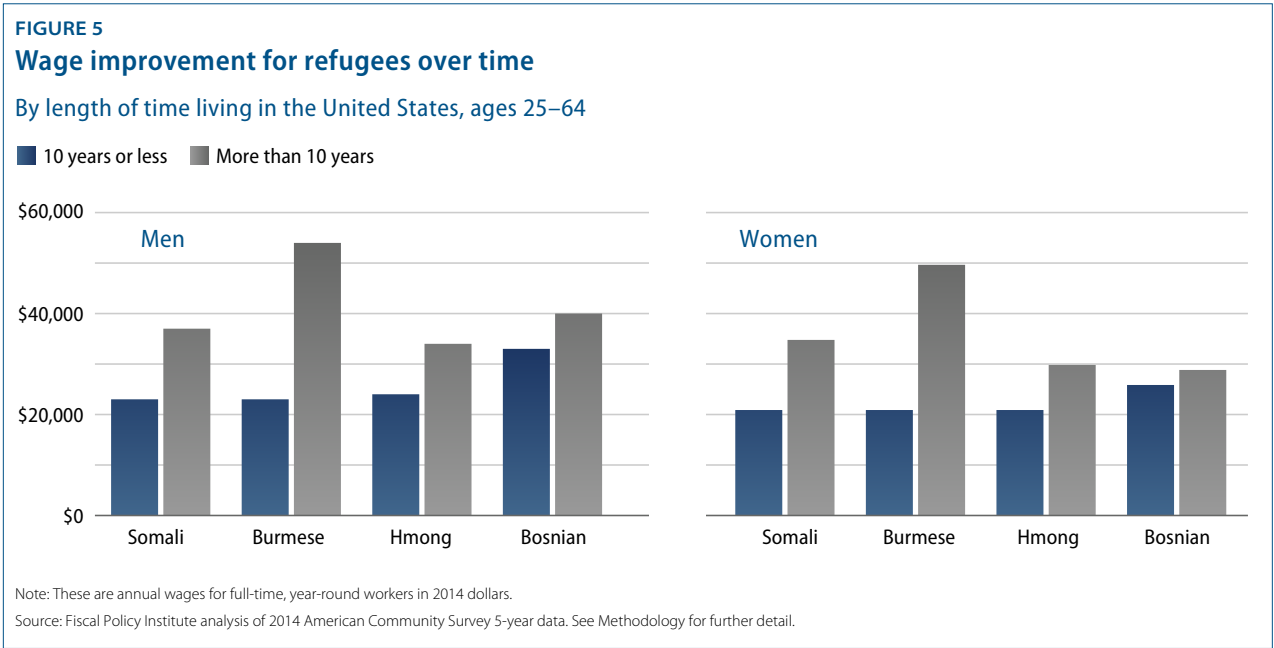
Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2014 American Community Survey 5-year data. See Methodology for further detail.

A recent Migration Policy Institute report looked at how refugees fared in the short run and showed that “the refugee resettlement program’s key goal of promoting early employment is largely being achieved.”³³ This report’s findings add to that picture of what happens to refugees in the long run: Over time, refugee women and men overcome language, cultural, and employment barriers in order to integrate into the American labor market.

Refugee groups are advancing in their careers and starting businesses

Wage data begin to fill out the story of how refugee communities work to improve their conditions over time: Those who have been in the United States for 10 years or less are just getting a foothold in the economy, while those who have been in the country for more than 10 years are doing relatively well—often as well as their U.S.-born counterparts.

The most dramatic improvement is for Burmese refugees—who also have much higher levels of educational attainment than other groups. (see Table 3) Recently arrived Burmese men and women have comparatively low wages. Yet Burmese men go from median annual wages of \$23,000 for full-time, year-round workers to \$54,000 after 10 years. Burmese women who are full-time, year-round workers advance from \$21,000 annually to \$50,000.



Other refugee groups follow a similar but less dramatic pattern than the Burmese. Somali men see their median annual earnings rise from \$23,000 to \$37,000 after having spent more than 10 years in the United States; Hmong men see wages rise from \$24,000 to \$34,000; and Bosnian men see an increase from \$33,000 to \$40,000. Among women, Somalis see an increase in earnings from \$21,000 to \$35,000, and Hmong see an increase from \$21,000 to \$30,000. Bosnian women see the most modest growth, from \$26,000 to \$29,000.

Occupational mobility

Wage increases are due in part to a shift in occupations as refugees become more established in their communities. Rather than getting pigeonholed in a particular part of the labor market, refugees continue to move toward better job opportunities or move up occupational ladders. Looking at five broad occupational categories—white collar, service, blue collar, and farming and related jobs—one can see a clear shift from when refugees first arrive to when they have become more established. Among Somalis, 23 percent are working in white-collar jobs when they have been in the United States for 10 years or less, compared with 43 percent when they have been in the country for more than 10 years. For Burmese, the share in white-collar jobs increases from 24 percent to 62 percent, and for Hmong, it rises from 27 percent to 42 percent. A comparatively high share of Bosnians start in white-collar jobs—at 37 percent—but do not see much of an increase over time, with 39 percent in white-collar jobs after they have been in the United States for 10 years.

TABLE 2
Refugees shift occupations as they become more established

Share of refugees by type of occupation and length of time living in the United States

	Somali		Burmese		Hmong		Bosnian	
	10 years or less	More than 10 years	10 years or less	More than 10 years	10 years or less	More than 10 years	10 years or less	More than 10 years
White collar	23%	43%	24%	62%	27%	42%	37%	39%
Service	33%	26%	26%	18%	24%	18%	27%	22%
Blue collar	43%	30%	47%	20%	44%	39%	35%	38%
Farming	1%	1%	3%	1%	5%	1%	1%	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2014 American Community Survey 5-year data. See Methodology for further detail.

Looking in greater detail within white-collar jobs, Burmese see particular success at the high-wage end of the spectrum. Three percent of Burmese workers who have been in the United States for 10 years or less have jobs in executive, administrative, and managerial jobs, as do an impressive 14 percent of those who have been in the United States for more than 10 years. Burmese make similar advances in professional specialties, such as medicine, law, and engineering: 2 percent of those who have been in the country for 10 years or less are in professional specialties, rising to 10 percent for those in the country for more than 10 years. Taken together, 24 percent of all Burmese workers who have been in the United States for more than 10 years are either in executive or managerial jobs or in professional specialties. By way of comparison, 12 percent of U.S.-born workers are in executive or managerial jobs, and 4 percent are in professional specialties.

All three of the other refugee groups considered here also make substantial advances in working executive or managerial jobs, though none reach the concentration of U.S.-born workers. The share of Somalis in these jobs increases from 2 percent in the first 10 years to 6 percent for those in the country longer than 10 years; Hmong rise from 2 percent to 7 percent; and Bosnians rise from 5 percent to 8 percent. None of these groups exceeds 3 percent of workers in professional specialties, even after having been in the United States for more than 10 years.

Looking further into the detailed occupations of white-collar workers, Somalis, Burmese, and Hmong show a particular concentration in fields related to teaching, social work, and the arts. Comparing those in the United States for 10 years or less with those in the country longer than 10 years, the share of Somalis working as teachers, professors, librarians, social scientists, social workers, or artists increases from 4 percent to 9 percent; the share of Burmese increases from 4 percent to 8 percent; and the share of Hmong rises from 2 percent to 7 percent. Bosnians are less likely to be in teaching, social work, and the arts: Just 3 percent are in these fields after 10 years in the United States. Among U.S.-born workers, 10 percent work in these occupations.

Over time, refugees approach the rate of U.S.-born workers in administrative support jobs. Fifteen percent of U.S.-born workers are in administrative support. After being in the United States for more than 10 years, slightly more than 10 percent of each of the refugee groups work in this field.

Somalis, Burmese, and Hmong show a particular concentration in fields related to teaching, social work, and the arts.

Hmong and Burmese refugees have strong roots in farming before they come to the United States, so it is unsurprising that many also find work in farming once they arrive, often helping to revive local agriculture. Hmong and Burmese refugees—and to a lesser extent, those from Somalia and Bosnia—fill these jobs as U.S.-born residents move to other types of jobs and to other geographic areas. In some cases, refugee farmers have also brought new agricultural products to local markets, sometimes serving their own communities, but often also beginning to introduce new fruits and vegetables to families and chefs who did not know them before.

A similar story is repeated in local areas across the country. In Seattle, Hmong farmers have carved out a niche selling flowers at Pike Place Market;³⁴ in San Diego, Somali refugees sell otherwise unavailable produce such as pumpkin leaves and lablab beans;³⁵ and in North Carolina, Burmese farmers are introducing pennywort, lime leaves, and kermit eggplants.³⁶ In Wisconsin, Hmong farmers are seen “at just about every farmers market” and are developing techniques that are specific to the scale of their farming and that may hold lessons for other farmers as well—from controlling pests by spreading out tomato plants rather than concentrating them to planting collard greens in random patterns where they can get more sun rather than in narrow rows.³⁷

While refugee groups have helped reinvigorate local farming traditions, it is interesting to note that the longer refugees are in the United States, the more they—like U.S.-born residents—seem to gravitate away from farming. A full study of people in farm work requires a different type of analysis than can be undertaken using the American Community Survey and should, for example, include consideration of migrant work. Nonetheless, the data here show a pronounced presence in farming for Burmese and Hmong immigrants who have been in the United States for 10 years or less—3 percent and 5 percent, respectively, of these two groups work in farming—and a move away from that type of work after they have been in the United States for longer than 10 years—decreasing to 1 percent for each group. Bosnian and Somali refugee communities have a small presence in farm and related work from the start.

Business ownership

Refugees are not only employees, but they also start businesses. It is well known that immigrants in general are more likely to be business owners than their U.S.-born counterparts.³⁸ There are 36 business owners for every 1,000 immigrants and

Refugees are not only employees, but they also start businesses.

31 business owners for every 1,000 U.S.-born people in the labor force—defining a business owner as a person who owns his or her own incorporated business and whose main job is to run that business.³⁹

Among the four refugee groups under consideration in this report, Bosnians have the highest rate of business ownership—at 31 business owners per 1,000 people in the labor force—and show a particular propensity for the trucking and construction businesses, as well as in professional and business services and restaurants.⁴⁰

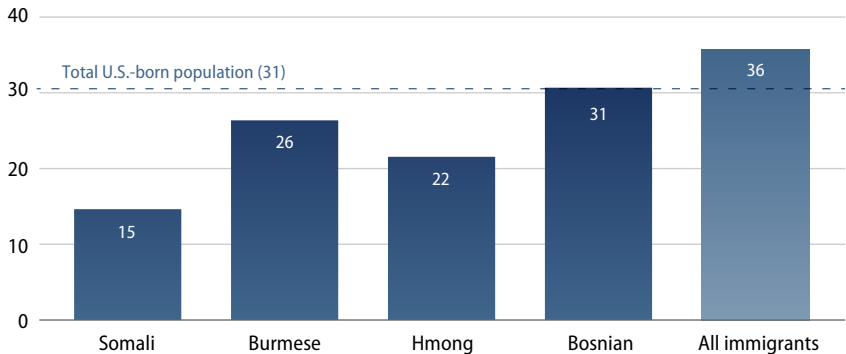
Burmese, with a business ownership rate of 26 owners per 1,000 people, are spread across a wide number of types of businesses, from retail store owners to doctors with their own private practices, to restaurants, car washes, and architectural firms.

Hmong, whose business ownership rate is 22 owners per 1,000 people, are more likely to own businesses in agriculture, retail, restaurants, home health care, and nail salons.

And Somalis, whose business ownership rate is the lowest in this grouping, at 15 owners per 1,000 people, are most likely to be shop owners and travel agents, and quite a few have an incorporated business in taxi or truck driving—though some concentration is also found among architects, engineers, and scientific consultants.

FIGURE 6
Refugees are also business owners

Business owners per 1,000 people in the labor force, by group



Note: Business owners are those who own their own incorporated business and whose main job is to run that business.
Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2014 American Community Survey 5-year data. See Methodology for further detail.

The data here show that the rates of business ownership vary for these four refugee groups. This is no surprise, since other studies have shown considerable variation in rates of business ownership for immigrants in general. Some groups come with capital to invest, some have higher levels of educational attainment—which correlates with higher rates of business ownership—and some come from cultural traditions or recent experiences that are connected with being merchants or professionals, who often have their own businesses, or manufacturers.

As shown in a 2012 Fiscal Policy Institute, or FPI, report, immigrants from Greece, Israel and the Palestinian territories, Syria, Iran, and Lebanon have the highest rates of business ownership.⁴¹ It is also worth noting that immigrants in general are playing a particularly large role in Main Street businesses such as restaurants, grocery stores, beauty salons, and dry cleaners. These small businesses often play an important role in urban revitalization.⁴²

Refugees integrate into American society over time

New arrivals face challenges, of course, not least those who come from areas without much opportunity for formal education. But in the long run, all groups achieve significant levels of integration. And refugees who arrive as children—and who grow up in this country, at least in part—show even further success.

Educational attainment

Education is increasingly important to work in the United States, so it is useful to see how the educational attainment levels of refugee groups compare with that of U.S.-born residents. Overall, 29 percent of U.S.-born people have a bachelor's degree, and 90 percent have a high school degree, with no significant difference between the rates for men and women.⁴³

Educational attainment for refugees is often, though not always, lower. Many refugee groups face real challenges in coming from backgrounds where high school and sometimes even primary school were not common, as well as backgrounds that include wars, years spent in refugee camps, and desperately impoverished communities. According to a recent study, only one-quarter of Somali refugees are able to read in their native language upon arriving in the United States, as are just 18 percent of people from Laos—nearly all of them Hmong.⁴⁴

The share of people with a high school degree can be quite low in refugee communities. Overall, 62 percent of Somalis graduated from high school, as did 56 percent of Burmese and 59 percent of Hmong. Bosnians, however, have a rate of high school completion comparable to that of U.S.-born residents: 85 percent have a high school degree.⁴⁵

High school completion rates are generally lowest for refugees who arrive at age 18 or older—as adults. The rates of high school completion for adult arrivals among Somali, Burmese, and Hmong men and women range from 15 percent for Hmong women to 69 percent for Somali men. Bosnians are, again, the one group that stands out among these four: Even among adult arrivals, 80 percent of Bosnian women and 88 percent of Bosnian men graduated from high school.

When people in these refugee groups are given a more stable environment and the opportunity to go to school in the United States, however, the picture changes dramatically. Among those who arrived in the United States as children younger than 18 years old, large majorities graduate from high school among all subgroups. A number of refugee groups match the U.S.-born level of high school completion: Bosnian women, Hmong men, Burmese men, and Bosnian men who arrived as children all have high school graduation rates that are about the same as the U.S.-born rate of 90 percent. The rates for other groups range from 80 percent for Somali women to 86 percent for Somali men.

In terms of college completion, Burmese men and women really stand out. Those who arrived as adults are about as likely to have a bachelor's degree as their U.S.-born counterparts: 26 percent of Burmese men and 27 percent of women, compared to 29 percent of U.S.-born people overall. Among Burmese who arrived as children, an impressive 45 percent of men and 49 percent of women graduated from college with a bachelor's degree or more.

In all four refugee groups, the people who arrived as children were much more likely to complete a bachelor's degree than those who arrived as adults. Childhood arrivals in all four groups who have the opportunity to go to American schools show substantial improvements over adult arrivals, and Bosnians and Hmong have made particular strides. Somalis are less likely to have a college degree than the other groups, with just 17 percent of men and 19 percent of women graduating with a bachelor's degree among those who arrived as children and 15 percent of men and 7 percent of women among those who arrived as adults.

TABLE 3
Educational attainment: An impressive jump for childhood arrivals

By whether individual was older or younger than 18 upon arrival

Completed high school		Somali	Burmese	Hmong	Bosnian
Men currently ages 25 and older	Adult arrivals	69%	52%	39%	88%
	Childhood arrivals	86%	90%	90%	89%
Women currently ages 25 and older	Adult arrivals	47%	51%	15%	80%
	Childhood arrivals	80%	86%	84%	91%

Bachelor's degree or higher		Somali	Burmese	Hmong	Bosnian
Men currently ages 25 and older	Adult arrivals	15%	26%	6%	15%
	Childhood arrivals	17%	45%	25%	31%
Women currently ages 25 and older	Adult arrivals	7%	27%	2%	12%
	Childhood arrivals	19%	49%	22%	36%

Note: Childhood arrivals are those who came to the United States when they were 18 years old or younger. Adult arrivals are those who were older than 18 when they came to the United States.

Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2014 American Community Survey 5-year data. See Methodology for further detail.

Refugee wages are in the middle of the range of wages for U.S.-born workers

Gauging the wages of refugee groups requires a yardstick by which to judge how they are faring. Yet simply comparing refugee wages with U.S.-born wages masks a great deal, since there are well-known wage gaps in the United States between men and women and between whites and other racial groups.

Figure 7 compares the wages of different U.S.-born racial groups by gender—first for people whose highest level of educational attainment is a high school degree, then for those for whom it is a college degree. The highest-earning group in both cases is U.S.-born white men, so this report uses the wages of that group as a benchmark. By definition, U.S.-born white men earn 100 percent of the benchmark in each case.

To make apples-to-apples comparisons, this analysis considers only those refugees who report speaking English “well,” “very well,” or who report the language spoken at home as “only English” and compares them with U.S.-born people, regardless of how well they speak English.⁴⁶ Further, the analysis looks only at full-time, year-round workers.

First, consider the wage disparities among U.S.-born groups. Asian men come closest to the wages of U.S.-born white men. U.S.-born Asian men who are high school graduates have a median wage that is 85 percent of the median for U.S.-born white men who are high school graduates, and U.S.-born Asian college graduates earn 93 percent of that benchmark. U.S.-born Hispanic men earn 83 percent of the benchmark among both high school and college graduates, and U.S.-born black men earn 76 percent of the benchmark for high school graduates and 74 percent of the benchmark for college graduates.

The wage gap in the United States between men and women has been extensively documented, yet the disparity is nonetheless striking.⁴⁷ Among U.S.-born racial groups, the differential between men and women ranges from 13 percentage points to 27 percentage points for high school graduates and from 10 percentage points to 30 percentage points for college graduates. The biggest differential in each case is between U.S.-born white men and women. The smallest differential is between U.S.-born black men and women, but the reason for this is not that black women earn more than other groups but that black men earn less.

Comparing the refugee groups to U.S.-born groups reveals that median wages for refugees are generally higher than those of the lowest-earning U.S.-born race and gender group, black women, but lower than those of the highest-earning U.S.-born group, white men.

Among high school graduates, Bosnian men come closest to matching the earnings of U.S.-born white men with the same level of educational attainment. Bosnian men who are high school graduates earn 87 percent of what U.S.-born white men with high school degrees earn—far more than the next-highest refugee group, Burmese women, who earn 74 percent of that benchmark. Bosnian men with high school degrees also do better than any U.S.-born race and gender group besides white men.

By contrast, Somalis, both men and women, have by far the lowest median wage for high school graduates of any of the groups considered here. Somali men have a median wage that is 60 percent of the benchmark and Somali women just 51 percent.

Many factors are involved in these wage differentials, but one likely issue is that Bosnians are the only group that would be considered white in the American racial context, while Somalis are the only group that would be considered black, suggesting that racial bias in the labor market that affects U.S.-born workers may similarly be an issue for refugees.

The story is more mixed among college graduates. Bosnian men still have the highest wage level among the four groups of refugee men, but it is lower than that of Somali and Burmese women with college degrees. Among women college graduates in the four refugee groups, Bosnians and Hmong have the lowest median wage—just 56 percent and 62 percent of the benchmark, respectively.

It is interesting to note that in none of the U.S.-born groups do women earn more than men, yet Somali and Burmese women with college degrees both earn more than the men in their respective groups with the same degree, and Hmong women earn the same as Hmong men, though the level is quite low for both. Burmese women with high school degrees also earn more than Burmese men with the same level of educational attainment, and Hmong women with high school degrees earn essentially the same as Hmong men—68 percent for women and 69 percent for men.

In addition to race and gender, other factors are likely to account for some of the differences in wages seen here. English language limitations are no doubt part of the story, making the finding below that refugee groups improve their English over time all the more important. While the above analysis restricts the findings for refugees to those who speak English at least “well,” there is nevertheless a difference between speaking well and being a native speaker that may limit job advancement.

Finally, U.S. requirements for certification in certain occupations sometimes hinder refugees and other immigrants with experience in a field from getting a job for which they are qualified or might easily become qualified—from physical therapist to architect and from registered nurse to engineer.⁴⁸ Some states have begun to revise their licensing requirements, and organizations have formed to help refugees and immigrants through the certification process. For example, the Welcome Back Initiative helps retrain immigrant health professionals, and Upwardly Global works to remove barriers to advancement for skilled immigrants in a variety of sectors.⁴⁹ Any so-called brain waste is a constraint on local economic growth as well as a limitation on the earnings of individual refugees.⁵⁰

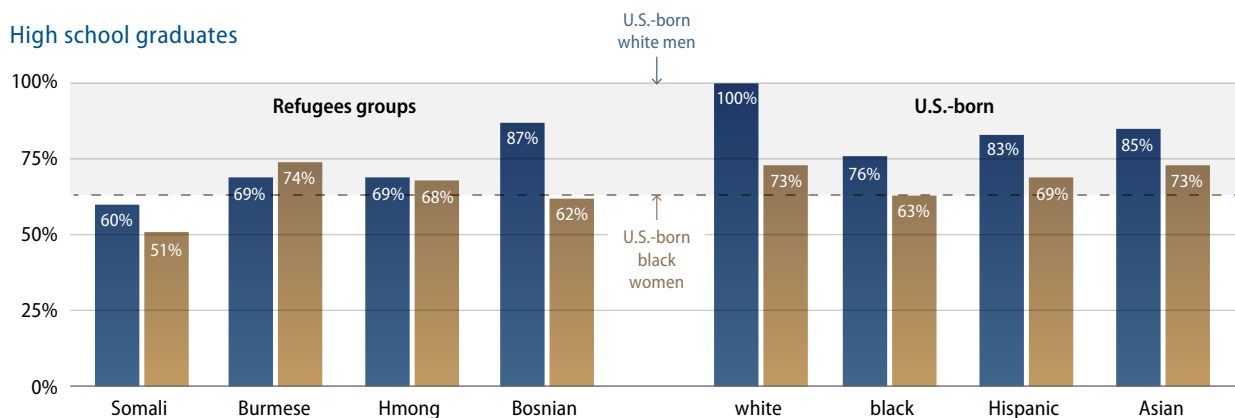
Somali and
Burmese women
with college
degrees both
earn more than
the men in their
respective groups
with the same
degree.

FIGURE 7
Refugee wages are in the middle of the U.S.-born wage range

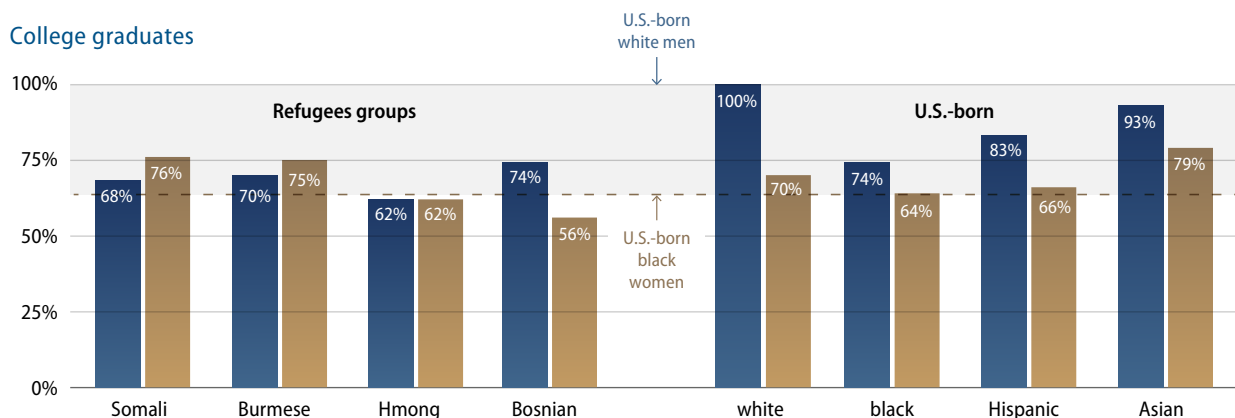
Annual median wage as a share of U.S.-born white men's median wage

■ Men ■ Women

High school graduates



College graduates



Note: These percentages represent full-time, year-round workers ages 25 and older. Refugee groups include only those who speak English "well," "very well," or exclusively. Language controls are not applied to U.S.-born populations. "White" refers to non-Hispanic white, "black" to non-Hispanic black, and "Asian" to non-Hispanic Asian.

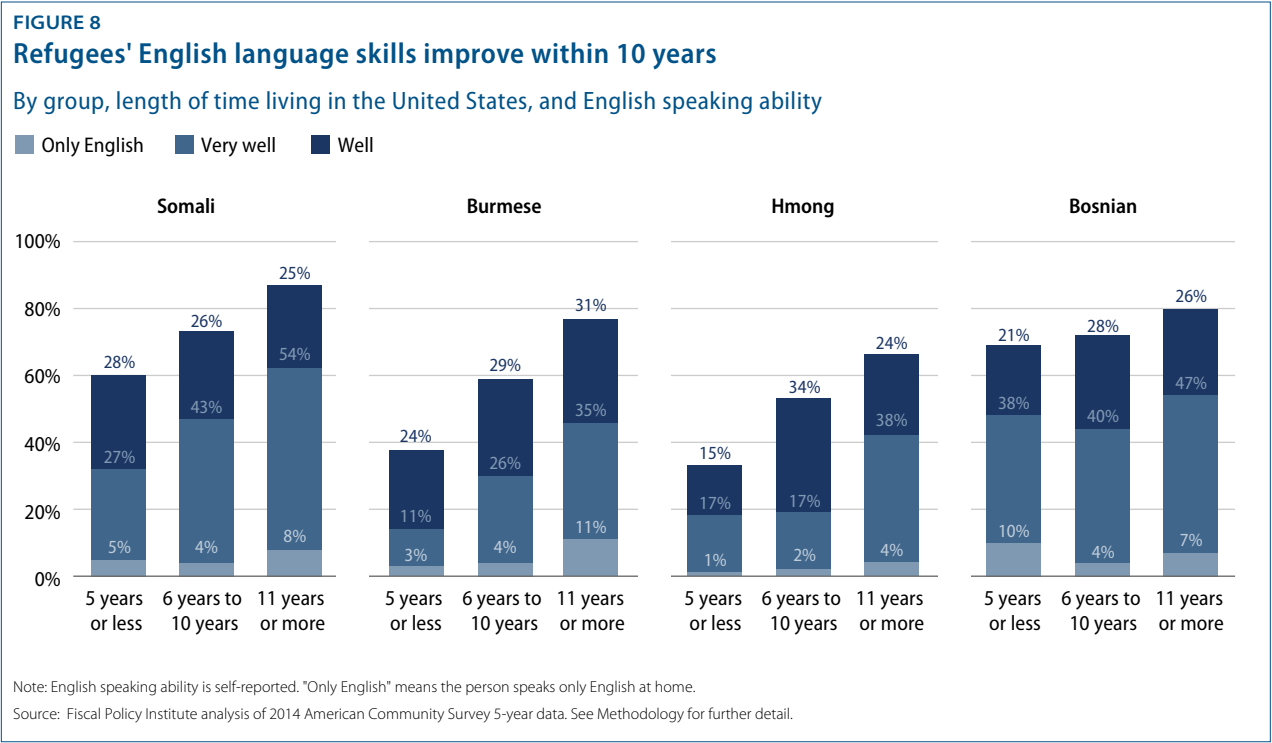
Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2014 ACS 5-year data. See Methodology for further detail.

English language skills

One of the biggest factors in how well refugees—and indeed immigrants of any background—integrate into American society and labor markets is facility with the English language. Except in a few job fields, immigrants with limited English skills are likely to face a ceiling that makes it hard for them to advance beyond relatively moderately paid work. Mastering English, meanwhile, can be a ticket to upward mobility.

It is therefore encouraging to see that refugees, like immigrants in general, tend to improve their English language skills over time. Among the four groups under consideration here, Somalis reach the highest level of English language ability. After they have been in the United States for 10 years, 86 percent report on the American Community Survey speaking English at least “well,” and 61 percent either speak “very well” or speak “only English” at home.⁵¹ Among Bosnians who have been in the United States for more than 10 years, 80 percent speak English at least “well,” and 54 percent speak it “very well” or exclusively. Among Burmese refugees, 77 percent speak English at least “well,” and 46 percent speak it “very well” or exclusively. Sixty-seven percent of Hmong refugees speak it at least “well,” and 43 percent speak it “very well” or exclusively.

Refugees tend to improve their English language skills over time.



In addition to being a consideration in workplace outcomes, English language ability plays a big role in cultural and social integration into local communities.⁵²

Home ownership

Home ownership is traditionally viewed as a gauge of both economic success and social integration. Here, too, the analysis shows that refugees who have been in the United States for more than 10 years reach home ownership rates that often approach and sometimes exceed those of U.S.-born families.

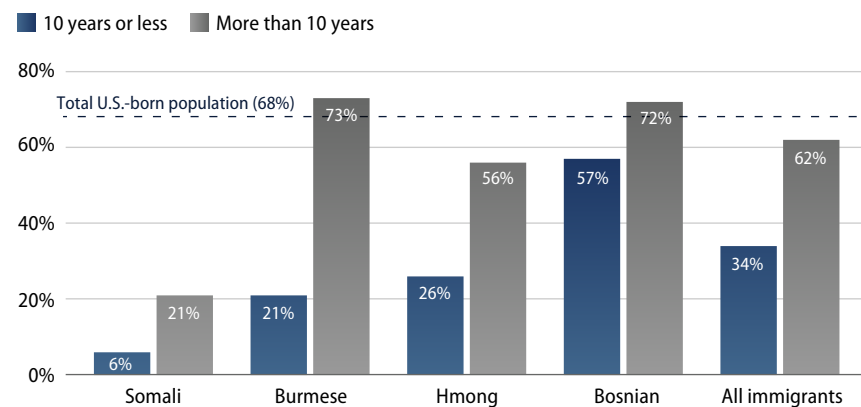
Families sometimes have very good economic and other reasons for renting, so home ownership should not be taken as a watertight indicator of success, particularly after the Great Recession housing bubble and collapse. Nonetheless, home ownership is clearly a goal of many families and is the primary way most families build assets.

Among U.S.-born families, 68 percent live in homes that they own. Among recent refugee arrivals, only Bosnians have levels of home ownership near that level, with 57 percent of Bosnians who have lived in the United States for 10 years or less owning their own homes.

FIGURE 9

Home ownership rates increase with time

By length of time living in the United States



Note: Home ownership rates represent the share of people living in owner-occupied housing.

Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2014 American Community Survey 5-year data, from Integrated Public Use Microdata Series. See Methodology for further detail.

Once refugees have been in the country for 10 years, however, 73 percent of Burmese and 72 percent of Bosnians own their own homes—higher than the average for U.S.-born people. Hmong are also in the same general range, with 56 per-

cent owning their own homes. Only Somalis continue to have low rates of home ownership, with 6 percent of Somalis who have been in the United States for 10 years or less owning their own homes; just 21 percent own their own homes after being in the country for more than 10 years.

Intermarriage

Another indicator of social integration is the number of people who marry outside their own group—how many Somalis marry people who were not born in Somalia, for example, or how many Somalis marry people who are not of Somali heritage. While there is no reason for intermarriage to be a particular goal, it is likely that a group with higher rates of intermarriage is in varying ways more broadly integrated into American society.⁵³

It is thus noteworthy that significant shares of people within each of the four refugee communities examined here marry outside their respective communities. Of those who are married, 11 percent of Somalis, 14 percent of Bosnians, 17 percent of Burmese, and 19 percent of Hmong have married people who do not share their nationality or heritage.

Hmong refugees, who generally have been in the United States the longest of these four groups, are the most likely to be married to someone born in the United States but the least likely to be married to someone born in the United States who is not of the same ethnic heritage. Six percent to 7 percent of Somalis, Burmese, and Bosnians are married to U.S.-born partners, and 5 percent to 6 percent are married to U.S.-born partners not of their ethnic heritage.

TABLE 4
Quite a few refugees marry U.S.-born spouses, often outside their communities

	Somali	Burmese	Hmong	Bosnian
Married outside of own group	11%	17%	19%	14%
Married to U.S.-born spouse	7%	6%	14%	7%
Married to U.S.-born spouse, not of same ancestry group	6%	5%	3%	6%

Note: "Married to U.S.-born spouse" and "Married to U.S.-born spouse, not of same ancestry group" are overlapping categories. For example, 11 percent of Somalis are married to someone who is not also a Somali refugee. Seven percent have spouses who were born in the United States, some of whom are of Somali ancestry. Six percent have spouses who were born in the United States and are not of Somali ancestry.

Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2014 American Community Survey 5-year data. See Methodology for further detail.

Citizenship

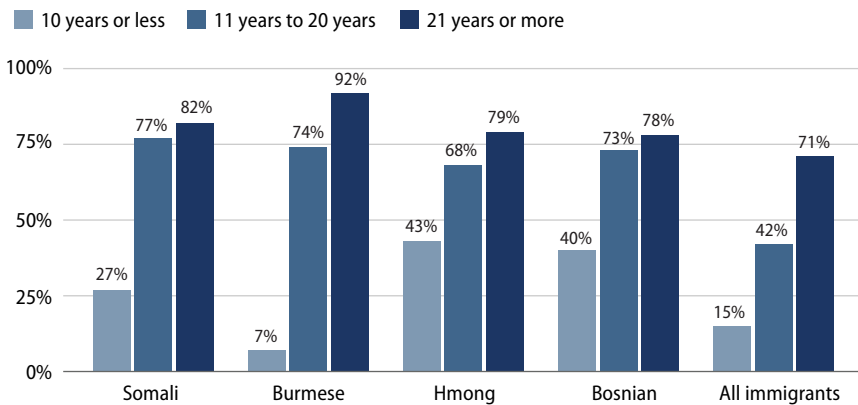
Becoming a U.S. citizen is, in some ways, the quintessential form of integration into American life. To become a citizen, refugees—like other immigrants—have to meet a number of requirements, pass a citizenship test, and take an oath of allegiance to the United States.⁵⁴ Citizens can vote, serve on juries, and carry a U.S. passport.

Over time, the vast majority of people in Somali, Burmese, Hmong, and Bosnian refugee groups become citizens. Some groups start out with relatively few members becoming citizens after living in the United States for 10 years or less, due in part to the share who have not been in the country long enough to naturalize. By the time they have been in the United States for 11 years to 20 years, however, between two-thirds and three-quarters of each group have become naturalized U.S. citizens. Once in the United States for more than 20 years, more than three-quarters of each group are naturalized citizens, with Burmese refugees having the highest rate at 92 percent.

Over time, the vast majority of people in Somali, Burmese, Hmong, and Bosnian refugee groups become citizens.

FIGURE 10
Refugees become U.S. citizens over time

By length of time living in the United States



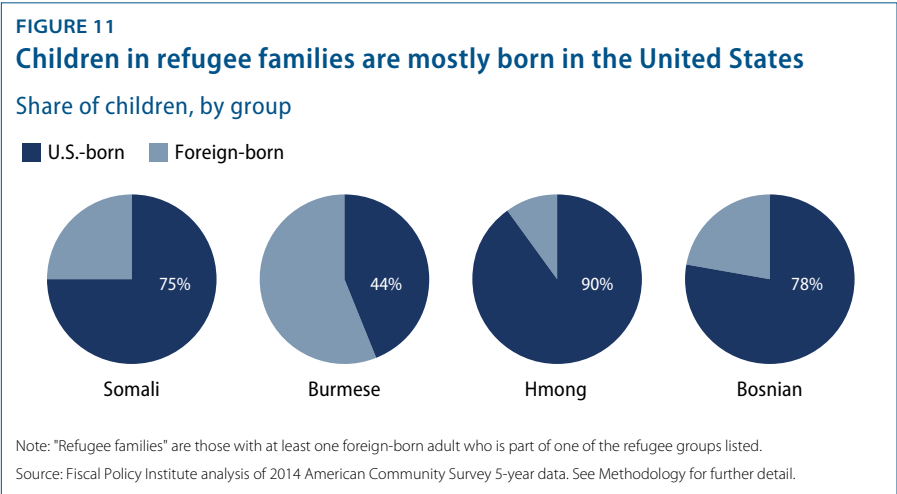
Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2014 American Community Survey 5-year data. See Methodology for further detail.

Children born in the United States

Children of immigrants and refugees who grow up in the United States are themselves typically very well integrated into American society and often serve as interpreters or guides for their parents to American institutions and social

customs. Children raised in the United States, for instance, typically speak English very well—often at a level indistinguishable from their U.S.-born peers—and the challenge for parents is frequently to keep their kids equally fluent in their native language. Having children also provides opportunities for parents to become more engaged in American society—by, for example, going to school meetings, arranging for their children’s participation in after-school programs, and going to birthday parties.⁵⁵

The children of refugees are overwhelmingly born in the United States, with the exception of the newest group of refugees, Burmese. Between 75 percent and 90 percent of children younger than age 18 in Somali, Hmong, and Bosnian families were born in the United States. Fifty-six percent of Burmese children, meanwhile, were born in another country. As is the case with all refugees, children born abroad may not be born in the country they are fleeing; some are also born in refugee camps while awaiting resettlement.



States and metropolitan areas where refugees make the biggest difference

The pattern of resettlement for refugees is different from the pattern of settlement for immigrants in general. Unlike other immigrant groups, refugees are placed in specific communities when they first come to the United States. Communities are chosen in negotiations between the federal and state governments and local resettlement agencies, with mayors and other local leaders frequently weighing in on the process. The main factors affecting resettlement are affordable housing, job availability, the presence of an agency that is willing and able to help refugees get settled, and whether a local community is home to others from the same refugee group or otherwise in a position to help a new arrival integrate.⁵⁶

Where refugees eventually cluster, however, is not determined solely by where they are first resettled. Once in the country, refugees will often move to where there are better work opportunities, where they have other family members, where there is an established community of their ethnic group, or where it is in other ways more welcoming. The ACS data reflect this secondary migration, showing not where refugee communities are initially resettled but where they are currently living.

Current efforts to welcome and turn away refugees

World politics and American presidential election campaigns have heightened tensions around the acceptance of refugees in the United States.⁵⁷ The scale of the current Syrian refugee crisis, as well as crises of other refugees from around the world, has pushed the world refugee population to levels not seen since World War II, testing refugee systems in Europe, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and elsewhere.⁵⁸ While countries such as Canada and Germany have taken the lead and resettled thousands of Syrian refugees in a short time period, the United States is at se-

rious risk of failing to meet its pledged goal of 10,000 refugees for FY 2016.⁵⁹ More than halfway through the fiscal year, the United States has only resettled a little more than 3,800 Syrian refugees but has increased its efforts to resettle more.⁶⁰

The global refugee crisis, as well as terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, has brought out strong reactions in the United States—both the best and the worst of American attitudes about refugees. While some politicians have resorted to

fearmongering and have tried to block these refugees from coming, many nonprofit organizations; service providers; and federal, state, and local officials have risen to the occasion to proclaim their support for continuing and expanding resettlement, recognizing both the humanitarian need and the gain to local economies.⁶¹

Numerous initiatives are underway at national, state, and local levels to promote and highlight efforts to welcome refugees. For example, a coalition of interfaith communities, advocates, and nonprofit organizations recently came together to launch the Refugees Welcome campaign, which urges communities to extend a warm welcome to refugees.⁶² This initiative aims to inform communities about specific ways they can engage and welcome refugees from different religious backgrounds, including hosting interfaith iftar parties to break the fast during Ramadan, inviting refugees to speak at congregations, or organizing welcome dinners.⁶³ Similarly, Welcoming America—a nonprofit that helps local organizations and governments build more inclusive communities—recently launched an initiative called Welcoming Refugees.⁶⁴ This project, in partnership with the federal government’s Office of Refugee Resettlement, supports local organizations

seeking to resettle refugees in their communities. Welcoming Refugees publishes toolkits and best practices guides, holds events, and conducts webinars targeted at local community leaders and organizations.

Likewise, governors of states such as California, Minnesota, Oregon, Connecticut, and Vermont have publicly declared their continuing support for the U.S. refugee resettlement program.⁶⁵ Oregon Gov. Kate Brown (D) tweeted her support: “Oregon will continue to accept refugees. They seek safe haven and we will continue to open the doors of opportunity for them.”⁶⁶

On the other hand, bills introduced in states including Arizona, North Carolina, Indiana, and Tennessee create a hostile climate for refugees by engaging in a thinly veiled attempt to prevent their states’ participation in refugee resettlement. They do so by requiring an audit of resettlement agencies or state funds used in resettlement or by allowing local governments to place a moratorium on resettlement in their county or city if they decide that they lack the capacity to take them in.⁶⁷ Many of these proposals have failed to pass, but a few are still pending. Numerous governors have similarly expressed opposition or have attempted to thwart refugee resettlement in their states.⁶⁸

Table 5 shows the states with the largest populations of Somali, Burmese, Hmong, and Bosnian communities. It is hardly surprising to see that high on the list are states with large immigrant populations: California, New York, Texas, Illinois, and Florida. More striking is the prominence of states with relatively low immigrant populations. Minnesota, for example, has the largest number of Somali refugees, the second-largest number of Hmong, and the fifth-largest number of Burmese—yet just 7 percent of its residents are immigrants, far below the national average of 13 percent. Ohio has the second-largest concentration of Somalis, while just 4 percent of Ohioans are immigrants. And Missouri has the second-largest Bosnian community, despite the fact that just 4 percent of its residents are immigrants.

TABLE 5

Top states for Somali, Burmese, Hmong, and Bosnian refugees

Number of refugees, by state

Rank	Somali		Burmese		Hmong		Bosnian	
1	Minnesota	27,384	California	25,432	California	30,968	Illinois	12,125
2	Ohio	10,104	New York	14,207	Minnesota	23,794	Missouri	10,905
3	Washington	9,079	Texas	12,924	Wisconsin	17,298	Florida	10,322
4	California	4,641	Indiana	7,820	North Carolina	2,980	New York	9,138
5	Texas	4,002	Minnesota	6,028	Michigan	1,612	Iowa	7,316
6	Massachusetts	3,418	North Carolina	5,159	Colorado	1,404	Michigan	6,750
7	Virginia	3,139	Maryland	4,884	Oklahoma	1,341	California	5,909
8	New York	2,838	Georgia	4,194	Washington	1,093	Georgia	5,584
9	Tennessee	2,813	Illinois	4,125	Georgia	965	Texas	4,897
10	Colorado	2,745	Pennsylvania	3,209	Alaska	933	Arizona	4,514
11	Maine	2,668	Arizona	2,983	Florida	904	Pennsylvania	4,384
12	Georgia	2,662	Florida	2,797	Oregon	535	Washington	3,704
13	Arizona	2,276	Colorado	2,491	Indiana	531	Kentucky	3,620
14	Utah	2,003	Kentucky	2,390	Arkansas	502	Virginia	3,542
15	Michigan	1,921	Oklahoma	2,374	Kansas	480	Ohio	3,333
All other		17,370	27,257		3,055		30,322	
Total		99,064	128,273		88,396		126,364	

Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2014 American Community Survey 5-year data. See Methodology for further detail.

The impact of refugee communities is often more visible at the metropolitan area level. Metropolitan areas, more than states, represent local economies: They are the central cities and surrounding suburbs that constitute a commuting area.

Research has shown a close correlation between where an economy is growing and where there has been growth in the immigrant population.⁶⁹ This does not come as a surprise to economists: Immigrants are drawn by job opportunities, among other factors, so they go where the economy is growing. Once there, they are also consumers who expand the sales of existing businesses and entrepreneurs who start new businesses in the area. As a result, immigrants are not just adding workers to local economies but also adding jobs and fueling further economic growth.

Refugee communities coming to metropolitan areas that already show significant growth in their numbers of other immigrants likely follow this pattern: Population growth is connected with economic growth. Metropolitan areas that fit this mold include San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Seattle, Dallas, Houston, and Washington, D.C., which all have overall immigrant shares well above the national average.

As with states, however, other metropolitan areas stand out as having comparatively small shares of immigrants in general but significant numbers of one or more of the four refugee groups in this report. (see Table 6)

The Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area, for instance, has the largest number of Somalis and Hmong and the fourth-largest number of Burmese in the nation, despite being a medium-sized metropolitan area with a comparatively low immigrant share at 10 percent. These refugee groups have played a significant role in the revitalization of Minneapolis and St. Paul: Together with other immigrant groups, they have helped spur the cities’ population rebound after a mid-20th century decline, as documented in the recent joint report by the Fiscal Policy Institute and Americas Society/Council of the Americas titled “Bringing Vitality to Main Street: How Immigrant Small Businesses Help Local Economies Grow.”⁷⁰ Refugees are among the immigrant groups there that are opening grocery stores, restaurants, barber shops, retail stores, and other Main Street businesses that help make neighborhoods once in decline feel more vibrant, safer, and generally more attractive to shoppers, residents, and other businesses.

The St. Louis metropolitan area has the second-highest number of Bosnian refugees, after Chicago. A *New York Times* article documents the role that Bosnian refugees are playing there, stating that, according to a source, “Many Bosnians hit the ground running here because they came from Europe with savings they had stashed away. ... At one time, Bosnians opened so many businesses on blighted streets that hostile rumors spread that they were receiving secret subsidies from the federal government.” There were, of course, no secret subsidies, and the article notes that local officials and residents now appreciate the important role Bosnians have played in helping the local economy grow.⁷¹

The Minneapolis–
St. Paul
metropolitan
area, for instance,
has the largest
number of Somalis
and Hmong
and the fourth-
largest number
of Burmese in the
nation.

TABLE 6
Top 20 metro areas for refugee communities

Number of refugees, by group

Rank	Somali		Burmese		Hmong		Bosnian	
1	Minneapolis–St. Paul	22,667	San Francisco	9,689	Minneapolis–St. Paul	23,119	Chicago	11,262
2	Columbus, Ohio	9,690	Los Angeles	8,765	Fresno, California	9,935	St. Louis	10,195
3	Seattle	8,697	New York	7,532	Sacramento, California	9,273	Atlanta	5,379
4	Washington, D.C.	3,454	Minneapolis–St. Paul	5,638	Milwaukee	4,974	Tampa–St. Petersburg, Florida	4,922
5	San Diego	3,220	Dallas–Fort Worth	5,138	Stockton, California	3,165	Detroit	4,694
6	Boston	3,147	Indianapolis	3,916	Madison, Wisconsin	2,049	Des Moines, Iowa	4,220
7	Atlanta	2,616	Atlanta	3,758	Merced, California	2,039	Phoenix	4,179
8	Phoenix	2,093	Washington, D.C.	3,643	Wausau, Wisconsin	1,957	New York	3,617
9	Salt Lake City	2,003	Fort Wayne, Indiana	3,500	Appleton, Wisconsin	1,817	Jacksonville, Florida	3,368
10	Nashville	1,979	Chicago	3,133	Chico, California	1,650	Salt Lake City	3,106
11	Denver	1,924	Houston	2,789	Hickory, North Carolina	1,573	Utica, New York	2,900
12	Portland, Maine	1,780	Phoenix	2,681	Sheboygan, Wisconsin	1,546	Cleveland	2,405
13	Portland, Oregon	1,773	Buffalo, New York	2,677	Denver	1,279	Boston	2,264
14	Louisville, Kentucky	1,536	Utica, New York	2,396	Eau Claire, Wisconsin	1,136	Cedar Falls, Iowa	2,111
15	Houston	1,446	Denver	2,146	Detroit	1,129	Houston	2,090
16	St. Cloud, Minnesota	1,413	Baltimore	2,088	Green Bay, Wisconsin	1,120	Seattle	2,083
17	Dallas–Fort Worth	1,321	San Jose, California	1,854	Seattle	1,036	San Francisco	2,009
18	Kansas City, Missouri–Kansas	1,299	Amarillo, Texas	1,787	Tulsa, Oklahoma	956	Dallas–Fort Worth	1,972
19	Lansing, Michigan	1,151	San Diego	1,764	Yuba City, California	931	Grand Rapids, Michigan	1,736
20	Syracuse, New York	1,038	Omaha, Nebraska	1,750	Atlanta	886	Las Vegas	1,685

Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2014 American Community Survey 5-year data. See Methodology for further detail.

Officials in the Columbus, Ohio, metropolitan area have also come to appreciate refugees’ role in building the local economy. Columbus, which has the second-largest number of Somali refugees in the country, has an overall immigrant share of 7 percent. In the introduction to a report funded in part and co-published by the city of Columbus, then-Mayor Michael Coleman wrote, “The Impact of Refugees in Central Ohio report confirms that the growing new American populations contribute to the cultural richness and enhance the economic growth and development of Columbus.” His successor, Andrew Ginther, welcomed the study as an opportunity to “celebrate the daily positive impact immigration has on our community.”⁷²

Metropolitan areas that share several characteristics

Finally, Table 7 shows the 43 metropolitan areas where the four refugee communities make up at least 5 percent of the immigrant population.

TABLE 7
Metro areas with the highest concentration of the four refugee groups combined
By refugee group as a share of all immigrants

Rank	Metro area	Total population	Immigrant share of population	Somali	Burmese	Hmong	Bosnian	Four refugee groups combined as share of immigrant population	
1	Wausau, Wisconsin	134,941	4%	0%	0%	39%	0%	39%	More than 30 percent
2	Waterloo–Cedar Falls, Iowa	131,913	5%	0%	0%	0%	34%	34%	
3	Utica, New York	286,225	6%	1%	13%	0%	16%	29%	20 percent to 30 percent
4	Sheboygan, Wisconsin	114,565	6%	0%	0%	22%	6%	28%	
5	Eau Claire, Wisconsin	157,608	3%	0%	0%	27%	0%	28%	
6	Lewiston–Auburn, Maine	107,523	3%	25%	0%	0%	0%	25%	
7	Bowling Green, Kentucky	138,845	7%	0%	12%	0%	12%	24%	
8	La Crosse–Onalaska, Minnesota–Wisconsin	116,260	3%	0%	0%	21%	0%	21%	
9	Fort Wayne, Indiana	360,768	6%	0%	16%	0%	5%	21%	
10	St. Cloud, Minnesota	166,879	4%	20%	0%	0%	0%	20%	

Table continues on next page

Rank	Metro area	Total population	Immigrant share of population	Four refugee groups combined as share of immigrant population					
				Somali	Burmese	Hmong	Bosnian		
11	Fargo, North Dakota	157,681	6%	9%	0%	0%	8%	18%	10 percent to 20 percent
12	Appleton, Wisconsin	266,112	4%	0%	0%	17%	0%	17%	
13	Battle Creek, Michigan	170,779	3%	0%	16%	0%	0%	16%	
14	Minneapolis–St. Paul	3,373,648	10%	7%	2%	7%	0%	16%	
15	Mankato, Minnesota	117,025	3%	15%	0%	0%	0%	16%	
16	Des Moines, Iowa	569,599	8%	1%	3%	0%	9%	14%	
17	Erie, Pennsylvania	280,218	4%	2%	1%	0%	8%	11%	
18	Chico, California	221,430	7%	0%	0%	10%	0%	10%	
19	Amarillo, Texas	246,860	9%	2%	8%	0%	0%	10%	
20	Rochester, Minnesota	147,510	10%	6%	0%	1%	2%	10%	
21	Green Bay, Wisconsin	252,758	5%	1%	0%	9%	0%	10%	
22	Burlington, Vermont	214,041	6%	4%	0%	0%	6%	10%	
23	Sioux Falls, South Dakota	288,017	5%	1%	2%	0%	5%	9%	5 percent to 10 percent
24	St. Louis	2,789,258	5%	0%	0%	0%	8%	8%	
25	Hickory, North Carolina	390,918	5%	0%	0%	8%	0%	8%	
26	Portland, Maine	531,978	5%	7%	0%	0%	1%	8%	
27	Columbus, Ohio	1,846,267	7%	7%	0%	0%	0%	8%	
28	Syracuse, New York	659,692	6%	3%	2%	0%	3%	8%	
29	Milwaukee	1,565,981	7%	1%	1%	5%	1%	7%	
30	Lansing, Michigan	466,893	6%	4%	2%	1%	0%	7%	
31	Louisville, Kentucky	1,228,822	5%	2%	1%	0%	3%	6%	
32	Lincoln, Nebraska	293,820	7%	0%	2%	0%	4%	6%	
33	Boise City, Idaho	641,220	7%	0%	3%	0%	4%	6%	
34	Buffalo, New York	1,134,831	6%	1%	4%	0%	1%	6%	
35	Harrisburg–Carlisle, Pennsylvania	554,976	6%	2%	1%	0%	3%	6%	
36	Madison, Wisconsin	502,562	8%	0%	0%	5%	0%	6%	
37	Akron, Ohio	703,317	4%	0%	3%	0%	2%	5%	
38	Grand Rapids, Michigan	665,965	7%	0%	1%	0%	4%	5%	
39	Roanoke, Virginia	299,058	5%	0%	2%	0%	3%	5%	
40	Fresno, California	949,322	22%	0%	0%	5%	0%	5%	
41	Indianapolis	1,781,078	7%	0%	3%	0%	0%	5%	
42	Salt Lake City	1,130,907	12%	2%	1%	0%	2%	5%	
43	Rockford, Illinois	346,110	8%	0%	1%	0%	3%	5%	

Note: This list is ranked by share of the metro area's immigrant population that is made up of the four refugee groups combined and includes all metro areas with at least 500 people in the four groups combined. Individual refugee groups that make up more than 5 percent of the immigrant population in a metro area are highlighted in **bold**. Rows may not sum due to independent rounding.

Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2014 American Community Survey 5-year data. See Methodology for further detail.

They are places with lower-than-average—and often far lower—immigrant populations. In the United States as a whole, immigrants make up 13 percent of the population. Only one of the metropolitan areas shown in Table 7—Fresno, California—is above that average; the majority have less than half of the average concentration of immigrants, and many have less than one-quarter.

The metropolitan areas in Table 7 are ranked by the share of Somalis, Bosnians, Burmese, and Hmong in their overall immigrant populations—in other words, places where a large share of immigrants are refugees from these particular groups. At the top of the list are places where the immigrant population is comparatively small, generally just 5 percent or 6 percent of the total population, but where refugees from a single country or ethnic group can be one-quarter or more of all immigrants.

The Wausau, Wisconsin, metropolitan area tops the chart, with Hmong refugees playing an outsized role. Just 4 percent of the overall population in the Wausau metropolitan area are immigrants, but of the 5,000 immigrants, 39 percent—about 2,000 people—are Hmong refugees. A similar 2006 analysis from the Brookings Institution also named Wausau as particularly interesting: “After a very rough period of adjustment for local residents and institutions, as well as refugees, today, the Hmong in Wausau are considered a success story.” According to the report, the number of Hmong refugees who needed welfare supports was down, and Hmong labor force participation was up. Further, the analysis found it likely that when new Hmong refugees arrived in Wausau, their resettlement was considerably easier due to the presence of established Hmong communities.⁷³

In Utica, New York, both Bosnian and Burmese refugees are playing a significant part in the revitalization of the city. Bosnians make up 16 percent of all immigrants in metropolitan Utica, and Burmese make up 13 percent. The Brookings analysis also noted that Utica stood out and reported that refugees brought new entrepreneurial activity to Utica, filled about half of the labor force needs of a local medical equipment manufacturer, and “revitalized declining neighborhoods, buying and renovating vacant housing.”⁷⁴

In places such as Utica, where the city population has declined and residences and storefronts are vacant, refugees are a gain to the local economy, and putting them on the tax rolls is a boon to local fiscal stability.

Just 4 percent
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2,000 people—are
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Conclusion

Refugees come to the United States from some of the most hard-hit corners of the world, having experienced hardships that the rest of us can barely imagine. Yet they show a remarkable resilience and capacity to thrive.

As the United States and other countries wrestle with how to handle the sharp rise in the number of people around the globe displaced by conflict and persecution, the long-term experience of the four groups studied in this report should provide some grounds for encouragement.

Among the findings for these four refugee communities are as follows. Once resettled in this country, men find work quickly. Over time, refugee women rise to the level of labor force participation of U.S.-born women, even among those groups that start out at considerably lower levels. Refugees see substantial wage gains as they gradually improve their footing in the American economy. Some start new businesses, and many shift to occupations better suited to their abilities as they find ways to get certification for their existing skills and learn new ones. By the time they have been in the United States for 10 years, a large majority of refugees have learned English and become homeowners; after 20 years, the large majority have become naturalized U.S. citizens.

Of course, past performance does not guarantee future results, as any investment prospectus will explain. But the refugee communities selected for study in this report—Somali, Burmese, Hmong, and Bosnian—represent a wide range of experiences. The fact that they all follow some general patterns gives good reason to expect that future refugee groups admitted to the United States will follow suit.

Refugees often require some help getting started, and while they currently receive some aid, there are areas that this report points to where they could use additional supports. Some refugee groups need particular assistance in educational attainment, while others would benefit from attention to home ownership or English

language learning opportunities. Federal, state, and local governments have every reason to invest in making sure that refugees reach their full economic and social potential: When refugees succeed, the communities they live in do better, and the U.S. economy grows.

America has a long, proud, and positive experience with resettling refugees. While refugee resettlement is primarily an issue of providing humanitarian assistance, it is also reassuring to see that in the long run, refugees become part of their new communities, make substantial contributions to local economies, and experience many of the same challenges and successes as all Americans.

Methodology

The primary data source for this report is the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey. The analysis draws primarily on the 2014 5-year data sample to give the greatest level of detail; that sample combines the years 2010 through 2014. In looking at overall population trends, the report relies on the 2014 1-year data sample, combined with data from the decennial census. The microdata samples are drawn from the enormously valuable Integrated Public Use Microdata Series of the Minnesota Population Center at the University of Minnesota. In this report, the term “refugees” includes both refugees and asylees.

It is not possible to directly identify the refugee status of an individual in these data. Data sources that look at refugee status either do not have information about how refugees fare once they are resettled for some time, as with the U.S. Refugee Admissions Database, or have a sample size that is too small to allow for detailed analysis of this kind, as is the case for the Survey of Income and Program Participation.

To break through these barriers, this study looks at four refugee groups—Bosnians, Burmese, Hmong, and Somalis—chosen specifically because there is a high degree of correspondence between people in these groups and refugees.

In order to identify the four refugee communities, the analysis considers responses to the decennial census and ACS questions about place of birth, ancestry, and language spoken at home.

For the Somali refugee group, the sample includes people who were born in Somalia as well as people born elsewhere outside the United States whose ancestry is Somali.

The Burmese refugee group includes people born in Burma; people born elsewhere outside the United States whose ancestry is Burmese or Shan, the two relevant options on the Census Bureau's forms; and people born elsewhere whose language spoken at home is Burmese, Lisu, Lolo, Karen, or Kachin. This report primarily uses the terms "Burma" to refer to the country also known as Myanmar and "Burmese" to refer to the people from there. The ACS data use the terms Burma and Burmese, and this is also common usage among refugee groups.

The Hmong refugee group is identified not by country of birth or language but exclusively by ancestry.

Finally, the Bosnian refugee group includes people who were born in Bosnia and Herzegovina or those born elsewhere outside the United States whose ancestry is Bosnian.

In all four cases, the analysis aims to include people who were born in refugee camps or other temporary places of settlement outside the country from which they were fleeing. This is possible by including in the sample people whose ethnicity or language match the above criteria, while still restricting the sample to people born outside of the United States.

These four groups together represent a wide range of experiences. There are refugee groups who began coming to the United States as early as the 1970s as well as groups fleeing more recent crises, some who were more educated in their country of origin and some who were less so, and most of whom fit into America's racial categories as black, white, and Asian. Notably, none are Hispanic. Although there are significant numbers of Hispanic refugees—from Central America, for example—it is difficult to identify them using this methodology since the majority of Central Americans living in the United States are not refugees, and there is no ready way to separate those who are refugees from those who are not.

While the primary reason for using ACS data was to get a broad sample with rich demographic, economic, and social data, an additional advantage of this methodology is that it takes into account secondary migration: The ACS shows where refugee communities are currently living, whereas data about refugee resettlement shows where they were first located in the United States but not whether they may since have moved.

Comparing the number of refugees identified in the ACS to UNHCR arrival data

This report is concerned with refugee communities and how they are integrating into local economies and local society. Refugee communities, as defined here, are not limited to individuals who have refugee status. The communities also include some family members and others who may not have come to the United States as refugees. It is, however, important to ensure that the groups studied are primarily made up of refugees. These four refugee communities were chosen with this in mind, and Table 1 shows the correspondence between the four refugee groups as identified in the analysis of the ACS and the cumulative total of refugees admitted since 1982 as recorded by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

The two data sources, UNHCR and ACS, used for this comparison are very different, so the correspondence between them is not expected to be perfect. Data in the Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of the ACS include some spouses, children, and other relatives who may not themselves be refugees. The ACS is also a survey of a representative sample, and it is known to undercount populations such as refugees, asylees, nonimmigrants, and unauthorized populations to varying degrees.⁷⁵

The UNHCR data are administrative data, not a sample. They show only arrivals, and this study's analysis of them is a cumulative total of people who have arrived in the United States. This does not pose a significant challenge, since there is likely to be little attrition due to death or refugees moving to other countries after arrival in the United States. The cumulative total number of refugees according to the UNHCR data is 2.5 million.⁷⁶ UNHCR data date to 1982, so refugees who arrived before 1982 are not included.

The total number of refugees and asylees living in the United States—as identified by the Pew Research Center using ACS data—is 3.2 million; the fact that Pew includes asylees and UNHCR does not accounts for at least part of the difference.

This study took the UNHCR refugee data and calculated the cumulative sum of refugee arrivals for the four groups to compare it with the ACS estimates for each year.⁷⁷ The results indicate that each of the groups in question is comprised mainly of refugee arrivals.

The table below compares estimated refugee communities, as identified by FPI using the ACS, and refugee individuals arriving year by year since 1982, as compiled by the UNHCR.

- The FPI estimate for the number of people in Somali refugee communities matches almost exactly the number of Somali refugees counted in the UNHCR data. Here, too, there is nonetheless some degree of slippage: The likelihood of Somalis being undercounted in the ACS, for example, probably offsets the fact that some people from Somalia are not refugees.
- For the Burmese population, the FPI estimate is 86 percent of the UNHCR’s cumulative arrival number. Part of this differential is likely due to some Burmese being asylees and some coming to the United States through other pathways as neither refugees nor asylees.
- Comparing FPI’s analysis of Hmong refugee communities with UNHCR data is complicated by the fact that the UNHCR only disaggregates the refugee arrivals data by country of origin, not by ethnicity. But research shows that most of the Hmong refugees in the United States are from Laos.⁷⁸ The UNHCR reports 141,727 refugees from Laos, compared with the ACS-based estimate of 92,952 Hmong.
- The FPI estimate of the number of Bosnian refugees is slightly lower than the number of Bosnian refugees counted by the UNHCR. In the case of Bosnians, there is some possibility that return to the country from which they fled is a possible factor. Both ACS and UNHCR estimates include people from Bosnia as well as from Herzegovina.

TABLE 8
Comparison of the Fiscal Policy Institute's estimates of refugee groups using the ACS with the UNHCR's refugee arrival data, 2014

	Somali	Somali (UNHCR as a share of ACS)	Burmese	Burmese (UNHCR as a share of ACS)	Laotian/ Hmong*	Hmong (UNHCR as a share of ACS)	Bosnian	Bosnian (UNHCR as a share of ACS)
UNHCR	121,968	101%	137,081	86%	141,727	152%	145,278	121%
FPI estimate using the ACS	120,703		159,987		92,952		120,443	

*Note: The ACS estimates are for Hmong refugees, while the UNHCR estimates are for the refugees arriving from Laos.
Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2014 American Community Survey 5-year data; U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, "Population Statistics: Resettlement," available at <http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/resettlement> (last accessed April 2016).

About the authors

David Dyssegaard Kallick is a senior fellow at the Fiscal Policy Institute, where he also directs FPI's Immigration Research Initiative and supports the immigration work of state-level research groups around the country in the State Priorities Partnership. He is the lead author of numerous immigration studies, including the FPI reports "Working for a Better Life"; "Immigrants and the Economy: Contribution of Immigrant Workers to the Country's 25 Largest Metropolitan Areas"; "Immigrant Small Business Owners"; and "Three Ways Immigration Reform Would Make the Economy More Productive"; he is also the author of the report co-released by the Fiscal Policy Institute with Americas Society/Council of the Americas, "Bringing Vitality to Main Street: How Immigrant Small Businesses Help Local Economies Grow." Kallick has published in both the United States and Europe on issues related to immigration, globalization, political economy, and rebuilding New York City after September 11. In addition to his work at the Fiscal Policy Institute, Kallick is a visiting assistant professor at the Pratt Institute's Graduate Center for City and Regional Planning.

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