

The socioeconomic adjustment challenges of Bosnian refugee resettlement in North Dakota

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Abstract: Immigrants are a growing part of the US ethnic population and many face challenges adjusting to life in US communities. Refugees, as a special segment of this population, often experience a particularly difficult initial adjustment period. The US refugee resettlement program has been based on the premises of permanent residence and early economic self-sufficiency through employment. This study investigates the problems that refugees from Bosnia face in their socioeconomic adjustments to their new lives in North Dakota, and the issues confronting the state/local services providers in the host communities. Bosnians have been resettled in North Dakota since 1993, and they are now the largest refugee group in the state. Survey questionnaires were conducted with members of the Bosnian population in the Fargo community to gain insights into resettlement processes. Among the many problems, one of the greatest adjustments for the Bosnian refugees was entering the US job market with limited English language skills. Both the refugees and resettlement service providers are constantly challenged to find ways for the refugees to move beyond entry-level, low-wage jobs and to use their skills/training to secure employment in areas of their former occupations.

Introduction

In the early 1990s, Eastern Europe held the attention of the world as civil war erupted in the republics of Yugoslavia. By 1992, the war had spread to Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) and people in ethnically mixed marriages began to flee their homes and seek protection from the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The UNHCR is responsible for granting legal refugee status and finding permanent humanitarian solutions, including resettlement in safe countries. In 1999 alone, 478,300 refugees from Bosnia were resettled in Yugoslavia (Serbia-Montenegro), Croatia, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United States (INS 2001).

Each year, the US permanently resettles more refugees than any other country (UNHCR 2003). According to the 1951 Convention and the 1980 Refugee Act, those considered for refugee admission must be “persons of special humanitarian concern who can establish persecution or have a well-founded fear of persecution” (Gordon 1996; Holman 1996; Viallet 2000; USDOS 2001). The US refugee resettlement process was temporarily put on hold following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The annual refugee admission ceiling (70,000) for 2002 was the lowest in a decade. Because of increased security measures, less than 27,000 were actually resettled (INS 2003). Ten national voluntary agencies work under cooperative agreements with the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migrations to sponsor and provide initial refugee resettlement services (USDOS 2001). Throughout the US, the local refugee resettlement agencies include state agencies, religious-based, private, and ethnic organizations.

Since the US refugee resettlement program is based on the pursuit of economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible, refugees are expected to secure employment within a few months of their arrival. This study examined the socioeconomic adjustments that confront refugees as they build new lives in North Dakota communities, specifically the Bosnian experience in Fargo. The findings of this study offer insight into the socioeconomic problems that other refugee groups may face in resettling in the state, as well as other areas of the US.

North Dakota Refugee Resettlement Process

North Dakota has traditionally sponsored refugees through the local efforts of churches in coordination with the Catholic, Episcopalian, and Lutheran resettlement agencies. Since the early 1990s, two national voluntary agencies, the Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM) in New York and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services (LIRS) in Baltimore, have sponsored refugees resettling in North Dakota. They are responsible for the guidelines of services to be provided during the first 90 days (Slobin and Klenon 1995; Slobin et al. 2002).

Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota (LSSND) provides refugee resettlement services through its Center for New Americans. The Center is required to meet the refugees at the airport; to provide housing, health checkups, and necessary clothing; to enroll children in school; to assist adults to learn English; and to help them apply for Social Security cards, and become “job ready” to seek employment. Services are provided for the first eight months and funded through federal and state monetary grants.

Table 1: Number of refugees arriving in North Dakota cities, 1991-2000.

City	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	Total	Percentages
Bismarck	9	52	62	35	100	52	116	126	134	33	719	16.1
Fargo	172	382	264	304	294	247	364	389	445	559	3420	76.5
Grand Forks	0	7	9	11	15	18	27	11	33	18	149	3.3
Jamestown	7	10	5	9	1	4	0	4	0	0	40	0.9
Minot	5	10	15	3	2	0	0	0	0	0	35	0.8
Valley City	10	7	0	7	7	0	0	0	0	0	31	0.7
Wahpeton	4	11	5	11	0	10	9	7	8	9	74	1.7
State Total	207	479	360	380	419	331	516	537	620	619	4468	100.0

Source: Lutheran Social Services of North Dakota, Center for New Americans

The refugees are encouraged to become a part of their new communities and economically self-sufficient as soon as possible. A refugee is eligible for adjustment of their status to lawful permanent resident after one year and eligible for naturalization to US citizenship after five years (USDOS 2001).

North Dakota's three largest cities (Fargo, Grand Forks, and Bismarck) are all staffed locations for refugee resettlement. Between 1991 and 2000, over 76 per cent of all resettlement activity was in Fargo (Table 1). Bismarck averaged 16 per cent of the resettlement over the same time period, and Grand Forks followed with three per cent. During 2000 a total of 619 refugees were resettled in North Dakota. Roughly 72 per cent of the refugees came from Bosnia, which represents the largest refugee group in the state. In 1993, at the beginning of the Bosnian resettlement in North Dakota, 19 refugees arrived. In 2000 alone, nearly 450 Bosnian refugees settled in the state.

In August 2001 the North Dakota Office of Refugee Resettlement essentially shut down the refugee resettlement program in Fargo, citing management problems. The increased refugee flow (annual average 619) during 1999 and 2000 apparently had overwhelmed the program. After a process of reorganization, the program was expected to resume accepting new refugees by October 2001 (Forum 2001). Then, the events of September 11th temporarily halted all refugee flows to the US. The US refugee resettlement program has since resumed, but at a much slower rate.

Research Problem: Socioeconomic Adjustment Challenges of Refugee Resettlement

A 1995 US study of Bosnian resettlement found that the adjustment challenges that refugees face include learning English, securing employment, starting over as refugees, and culture shock. There are some cultural differences coming from a socialist system and moving to a capitalist system. For example, the social safety net, such as welfare, medical, dental, and childcare provisions, no longer exists (Somach 1995). The employment issues for refugees include the short timeline for obtaining their first job, finding jobs that fit their backgrounds and skills, and satisfaction with their job.

Refugees are given immediate authorization to work by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). They may seek employment as soon as they obtain a social security card. After a year in the US, they may apply for a Permanent Resident Alien Card or Green Card (Bureau of Refugee Services 2003). Early employment has become a definitive measure of a resettlement agency's success rate in assisting refugees to achieve their goal of economic self-sufficiency. However, researchers (Slobin et al 2002), who assessed the impact of refugees on the Fargo, North Dakota and Moorhead, Minnesota communities, argue that this employment urgency complicates the issues for achieving long-term sustained employment. Service providers have insufficient time to evaluate the refugees' education/employment backgrounds, therefore refugees end up taking jobs without the necessary skills or settling for entry-level, low-wage jobs.

The focus of the current study is the socioeconomic adjustment challenges that the Bosnian refugee population faces as it strives for self-sufficiency and economic independence in the Fargo community. This study is a continuance of a statewide research project examining resettlement issues for refugee populations in North Dakota's urban areas, including Fargo, Grand Forks, and Bismarck. As the largest and fastest growing city in North Dakota, Fargo resettles the majority of refugees. In part, Fargo's population growth during the last decade is due to refugee resettlement. A previous study (Hansen 2003) conducted in 2001 investigated the overall issues that Bosnian refugees face in adjusting to resettling in Grand Forks, which has a much smaller refugee population than Fargo. Although Grand Forks ranks as North Dakota's third largest city, the smaller than expected number of refugees can be attributed to the 1997 flood and its aftermath. The Grand Forks study, using data from questionnaires (English only) and personal interviews (English only), found

that the main concerns included the lack of employment opportunities with a livable wage, learning English, and job/skills training.

Research Methods

This study uses data from survey questionnaires to investigate the socioeconomic problems that Bosnian refugees face in adjusting to the Fargo community. The sampling procedure was not random, but instead uses the “snowballing” method, which is often used when conducting survey research with refugee groups. Participants in the research “are obtained through referrals among people who share the same characteristics” (Bloch 1999, 371). The questionnaire was translated into Serbo-Croatian, allowing refugees with low levels of English language proficiency an opportunity to participate in the study. The study relied on assistance from the Center for New Americans and members of the Bosnian population to distribute and collect the questionnaires. In fall 2002, 100 questionnaires were distributed to the adult members of the Bosnian population in Fargo. The response rate was 45 per cent. The identity of the respondents was not indicated on the survey form, nor was there any way to match the respondents’ answers to their identity.

The respondents were surveyed from a multidimensional perspective. The study’s participants answered 48 questions, of which 45 were structured and three were open-ended, regarding their resettlement experiences in North Dakota communities. In the questionnaire, 12 questions requested demographic, family, and length of residency data; nine questions addressed education and language; 13 questions requested employment and transportation data; seven questions addressed the assistance provided during the resettlement process; four questions addressed resettlement difficulties; and three questions asked what would improve the respondents’ lives. The questions were coded and entered into a database. Percentages were calculated for the structured questions of the survey. The open-ended questions were analyzed for emerging themes. The responses from men and women were examined for differences. For example, are there differences in how quickly that they found their first employment or how they adjusted to Fargo? Since this study has as its focus the socioeconomic adjustment problems of Bosnian refugees, the general research questions are: (1) What are the demographic characteristics, education, English language proficiency, and employment levels of the Bosnian refugees? (2) What are the problems that refugees face in their socioeconomic adjustments to their new lives in North Dakota?

(3) What could be improved in the community to make the refugees' lives easier or better?

Results

Twenty-one men and 24 women answered the questionnaires. They ranged in age from 20 to 57, with a majority in their 30s or 40s (64 per cent). Most are married (89 per cent) with children (84 per cent). Nearly 69 per cent had lived in North Dakota for over four years.

Eighty-four per cent of the respondents have at least a high school education. Forty-seven per cent report that they have completed some college or a trade/technical or undergraduate degree. Several questions examined their English language proficiency. Fifty-six per cent responded that they did not speak English when they first arrived in North Dakota (Table 2). Thirty-eight per cent report that they had studied English less than three months. Nearly 78 per cent said that they were somewhat confident in their English language skills or making progress in learning English.

Ninety-three per cent of the respondents were employed at the time of this questionnaire and 47 per cent had been with their current employer for over three years. They were employed in various types of work, including manufacturing (windows, food, plastics, etc.), hospitality, and retirement/nursing homes. Thirty-eight per cent found their current job through advice from friends in the community, the Center for New Americans assisted 22 per cent of respondents, and newspaper advertisements were used by 22 per cent of the respondents to find jobs. Forty-seven per cent found their first job less than three months after arriving in North Dakota (Table 3). The responses for male and female and how soon they found their first jobs were cross-tabulated by constructing a contingency table. A chi-square statistic (0.0232), $df=1$, $N=41$ was calculated with a p-value of 0.8788. Therefore, the hypothesis of no difference cannot be rejected. Men and women secure their first employment at the same rate. Based on the sample data reported in the contingency table, the percentage of men (52 per cent) finding their first jobs in less than three months was just slightly higher than for women (50 per cent). A majority (69 per cent) of the participants was satisfied with their current employment. Of those that were not, several responded that their jobs were lower than their professional skills or education level.

Several questions specifically referred to their experiences as they adjust to resettlement. One research question inquired about the problems

Table 2: English proficiency of Bosnian refugees.

Question		Responses	
		Number	Percentage
How well did you speak English when you first came to North Dakota?			
(N=45)	Very well	4	8.9
	Well	3	6.7
	Not well	13	28.9
	Not at all	25	55.6
How long have you studied English in North Dakota?			
(N=45)	Less than 3 months	17	37.8
	3-6 months	15	33.3
	More than 6 months	9	20.0
	No response	4	8.9
Do you feel you are making progress in learning English?			
(N=45)	I feel somewhat confident.	11	24.4
	Yes, I am definitely making progress.	24	53.3
	No, I am not learning English as fast as I would like.	9	20.0
	Others	1	2.2

Table 3: Employment statistics of Bosnian refugees.

Question		Responses	
		Number	Percentage
After arriving in North Dakota, how soon did you find your first job?			
(N=45)	Less than one month	3	6.7
	1-3 months	18	40.0
	3-6 months	11	24.4
	6 months-one year	6	13.3
	More than one year	3	6.7
	No response	4	8.9
Are you satisfied with your current job?			
(N=45)	Yes	31	68.9
	No	11	24.4
	No response	3	6.7

they encountered as they started working in North Dakota (Table 4). Among the respondents, common threads include lack of English language skills (26 per cent), not working in the occupation in which they received their education/training in Bosnia (19 per cent), transportation/distance to work (16 per cent), and low pay (14 per cent). The participants were asked about their adjustment to Fargo. The responses for male and female, ranging from easy/ok or difficult/very difficult adjustment to Fargo, were cross-tabulated by constructing a contingency table. A chi-square statistic (5.8765, $df=1$, $N=45$) was calculated with a p-value of 0.0153. Therefore, the hypothesis of no difference can be rejected. The adjustments to Fargo for men and women are different. More specifically, based on the sample data reported in the contingency table, over half (54 per cent) of the women reported that their adjustment was difficult/very difficult, while less than 20 per cent of the men responded the same way. Eighty per cent of the participants replied yes and 18 per cent were unsure when asked if they planned to stay in Fargo for the next two to five years. The participants were asked about what could be improved in the Fargo community to make their lives easier or better. The most often reported answers are more job opportunities (24 per cent), educational opportunities (22 per cent), and lower cost of housing (21 per cent).

Table 4: Socioeconomic adjustment challenges of refugee resettlement.

Question	Responses*	
	Number	Percentage
What were the problems as you started working in the United States? (N=133)		
Lack of English language	35	26.3
Not working in the occupation that I received my education/training in Bosnia	25	18.8
Transportation/distance to work	21	15.8
Low pay	18	13.5
Lack of health insurance/benefits	12	9.0
Lack of time	10	7.5
Job insecurity	7	5.3
Child care	5	3.8

*Respondents could check all answers that apply.

Discussion

The Bosnian experience in Fargo was investigated to understand the socioeconomic adjustment challenges confronting refugees resettling in North Dakota communities. Following guidelines set by the US refugee resettlement program, the Center for New Americans in Fargo provides assistance to newly arriving refugees, which includes completing a family self-sufficiency plan. In addition to collecting basic biographical information, this plan establishes short- and long-term goals to achieve self-sufficiency and economic independence (The Cultural Orientation Project 2000; LSS 2003; LSSND 2003). In the short term, refugees are expected to secure employment as soon as possible, even if that means taking a low-wage job or a job outside the refugee's former profession in Bosnia. It is also imperative that refugees stay on their first job for at least six months to establish a good work history. The Bosnian refugees who have resettled in Fargo are finding employment early in the resettlement process with 47 per cent employed by the third month after arriving in the community. However, as they enter the labor force, lack of English language skills was recognized as a major barrier to their pursuit of economic self-sufficiency. The English language proficiency of refugees arriving in Fargo varies, ranging from those with no English language skills (56 per cent) to being relatively fluent in English (16 per cent). For many refugees resettling in North Dakota communities, as this study and other researchers (Slobin et al 2002; Hansen 2003) confirm, it oftentimes becomes a trade-off between attending English language classes and accepting early employment. Although it takes a committed effort on their part, employers in Fargo have found that limited English language proficiency is not necessarily an insurmountable barrier to hiring refugees. The initial language barrier can be overcome by using interpreting services, job shadowing by bilingual coaches, reviewing job functions to minimize the need for English, and developing on-site English Language Learner classes (Slobin et al 2002; Olson 2003).

In the Fargo community, underemployment is cited as an adjustment issue for some refugees in their pursuit of economic self-sufficiency. Nineteen per cent of the respondents cite their greatest challenge remains not being able to work in the skilled or professional occupations as they had in Bosnia because their foreign-acquired skills/degrees are not recognized and US certification is needed. During the first years of resettlement, it is not uncommon for refugees to experience socioeconomic downward mobility. In the long term, members of the Bosnian population in the Fargo community are acquiring the skills/training to get a better job or to resume their former occupations.

North Dakota communities, such as Fargo, have promoted refugee resettlement to increase their labor markets. Yet, the question remains how to achieve sustained employment for refugees resettling in the state. The results of this study show that refugees want more job and educational opportunities to make their lives better. The service providers at the Center for New Americans offered some recommendations so that refugees resettling in North Dakota could better meet the socioeconomic adjustment challenges in their pursuit of economic self-sufficiency. They suggested providing longer financial assistance for refugees, if needed. The eight months of initial assistance for refugees resettling in the state is not sufficient for many. They also recommended substantial job training, which would include more partnerships with local employers, such as those included under the Job Training Partnerships Act (JTPA). This would give the refugees a chance to move beyond the entry-level, low-wage jobs more quickly. English language classes for at least a year are essential, including basic and occupational English language training. While a minimum language level is necessary for any job, the service providers cited that English language proficiency is absolutely critical to upgrade from entry-level jobs (Slobin et al 2002; Olson 2003).

Conclusion

This study found the principal issues confronting Bosnian refugees as they pursue economic self-sufficiency in Fargo are the lack of English language skills, not working in their former occupations, and low wages. These findings are consistent with prior research (Somach 1995; Dimeo and Somach 1996; Bluc and Dongieux 1999; Jackson 2000; Slobin et al 2002; Franz 2003; Hansen 2003) on Bosnian socioeconomic adjustments in the resettlement process in US communities. Under federal funding requirements, the need to quantify the success rate of the resettlement program has a tendency to force service providers to give only minimal attention to sustainable employment for refugee populations. Service providers in Fargo, as well as others assisting refugees in the community, realize that the success of their resettlement programs depends upon a concerted effort to address refugee employment concerns, including finding ways to integrate early employment with learning English (i.e., job shadowing, on-site English language classes, etc.), job fit, hourly wage, and career opportunities. The results of this study may be beneficial to other refugee resettlement programs in North Dakota, as well as other areas of the US.

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