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Resettled but Displaced:

Refugee Incorporation in San Diego, California and Boise, Idaho

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Sociology

by

Margaret Sarah Fee

2022

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Resettled but Displaced:  
Refugee Incorporation in San Diego, California and Boise, Idaho

by

Margaret Sarah Fee

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Roger Waldinger, Chair

Resettlement is considered one of three durable solutions for refugees and provides an alternative to protracted displacement when repatriation and local integration are impossible or unlikely. Rather than framing resettlement as a solution that marks the end of a refugee's displacement, I demonstrate that the displacement of forced migration extends through the initial resettlement phase. This dissertation offers a paradigm shift in how we think about the early stages of a refugee's resettlement. I show how humanitarian programs are not purely benevolent and can create new conditions of uncertainty, dislocation, and vulnerability. In reality, resettlement marks another uprooting and readjustment for refugees who may have already rebuilt their lives numerous times following internal migrations or relocations to camps and urban areas. Based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork consisting of over 1,000 hours of participant observation at a refugee resettlement agency in San Diego, CA and Boise, ID and

102 interviews with refugees and service providers, I reconceptualize early resettlement as a time of disorientation and dislocation rather than one of settlement and integration.

The dissertation of Margaret Sarah Fee is approved.

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2022

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## LIST OF TERMS

Case – The administrative term for a family unit or individual that has been processed and resettled

Client – The administrative term used by RAs for refugees in their caseload

Free case – A resettlement case that does not have any preexisting ties in the U.S.; resettlement destination is determined at the federal level

ORR – Office of Refugee Resettlement, federal agency within the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

PRM – Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration; federal agency within the U.S. Department of State

RA – Resettlement Agency, local social service agency federally subcontracted to implement the USRP

R&P – Reception & Placement, the program that covers case management services and assistance during a refugee's first 90 days in the U.S.

Secondary migrant – A refugee who relocates outside of their initial resettlement destination

Single case – A resettlement case that consists of only one person

Split case – The administrative term for a family that has been divided into multiple cases; typically children over 18 years old who are split from the rest of their family and processed as a single case

USRP – U.S. Resettlement Program

U.S. Tie case – A resettlement case that has a preexisting tie in the U.S.; resettlement destination is based on the location of the U.S. tie

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This dissertation was only possible because of the many people in San Diego and Boise who let me into their lives. I am forever grateful for their trust, candor, and thoughtfulness. Doing the work of resettlement alongside the caseworkers and other RA staff in each city was truly the most meaningful part of this project. I know how lucky I am to have been able to learn from the best. I am indebted to everyone who agreed to sit for an interview and share such intimate experiences and opinions with me. This dissertation, as well as with my own understanding of forced migration and resettlement, are better off for what they taught me. Thank you to Graeme Rodgers for believing in this project and helping to make it a reality. Thank you also to the leadership and staff of the IRC San Diego and Boise offices. Though I will not list their names in the interest of maintaining anonymity, I benefitted tremendously from their generous welcome, which immediately made me feel like part of the IRC community. I am also thankful to generous funding that supported this fieldwork from the National Science Foundation's Graduate Research Fellowship Program and Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant, P.E.O. International, and UCLA's Department of Sociology.

I am so fortunate to have had an intellectual home in the Department of Sociology at UCLA. I received incomparable training as a sociologist and migration scholar through coursework, working groups, and other opportunities. I also benefitted from exceptional guidance and mentorship throughout my graduate career. Thank you especially to Roger

Waldinger, my advisor and dissertation committee chair, for always showing interest in my research and for asking just the right questions to make my work stronger. And thank you to my other committee members: to Gail Kligman for the generosity of her time and attention by always offering thorough feedback in writing and in conversation, to Edward Walker for helping me build connections between refugee resettlement and political sociology from my earliest days at UCLA, and to David FitzGerald for his steady encouragement from the beginning and his thoughtfulness in connecting me to so many opportunities. I have benefitted from many other faculty members who provided important support that ultimately helped shape this project and my trajectory, especially Lauren Duquette-Rury, Aliza Luft, Rubén Hernandez-Leon, Ching Kwan Lee, and Nicole Fox. I have also learned so much from the rich and interdisciplinary community of migration scholars through UCLA's Center for the Study of International Migration and Migration Working Group.

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- Fee, Molly. 2019. "Paper integration: The structural constraints and consequences of the U.S. refugee resettlement program." *Migration Studies* 7(4):477-495.
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## INTRODUCTION

Geoffroi was three years old when his family fled the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and found safety in a refugee camp in Rwanda in the late 1990s. Though they lived there for fifteen years, Geoffroi explained, “it wasn’t a good life...we were living in the bad condition.” For the first eight years, “we were living in the tent. It’s not like, you know, a home.” His family was then moved to a more durable two-room house, though it was cramped for eight people, plus they had to share one bathroom with the whole community. For Geoffroi, life in the camp was characterized by poverty, food insecurity, inadequate healthcare, and limited educational opportunities. Camp residents were given a monthly allotment of beans and maize. Not only did they have to stretch this ration to feed their family, it was also used as a form of currency to pay for incidentals. Geoffroi said, “How can you manage to live on twelve kilograms of corn or maize, and then also be able to afford their clothing? That’s not possible. So that’s how bad the living condition was.” Though the camp had free education through the ninth grade, his two older brothers had to drop out to earn some money to help their family. Geoffroi said, “they sacrificed their lives so they can support their family members.”

Geoffroi’s mother first applied for resettlement in 2005. When other families around them began leaving for their resettlement destinations, they inquired about the progress of their case only to learn that their application no longer existed. They got another chance to apply in 2009. By this point, Geoffroi’s family had grown to fourteen people, which included his older siblings’ spouses and children who now had separate resettlement cases. While his siblings’ families got approved for resettlement outright, Geoffroi, along with his mother and younger siblings, were notified that their approval was still pending. Geoffroi explained, “[Our case] said approved but not approved. And so now, it leaves us with the confusing. With, ‘Well, are we

going to be able to go?” Geoffroi felt ambivalent about this mixed news. Though he was happy for his siblings, his future still felt so uncertain. He continued, “So some[times], you celebrate, and sometimes you don’t, because some of your members are going to get a chance to go, but then you’re like, ‘Well, what about us?’”

Geoffroi was nearing the end of high school as his family awaited the news of their resettlement. Camp residents had to pay tuition to attend school beyond the ninth grade. Though Geoffroi would soon be eligible to take a national exam to earn his high school diploma in Rwanda, he did not register because it seemed likely that their resettlement would get approved before he could sit for the exam. If he was not going to be able to finish his degree in Rwanda, it seemed pointless to continue paying to attend high school. He said, “I was like, ‘You know what? Screw that. Why would I waste my time, go to school, and my family are paying for the school?’” But as his siblings’ families left for the U.S., the approval process for Geoffroi, his mother, and younger siblings dragged on. The national high school exam came and went, and Geoffroi’s classmates earned their diploma while he looked on. He said, “You are waiting, you thought you were going to leave the country, and you’re still there. People that were in the same year with you, they have the diploma. You don’t have yours. Then you’re like, ‘What’s going on?’” Amid the obstacles and hardships of growing up in a refugee camp, Geoffroi had worked hard for his education, but the resettlement process was capricious and strung him along without regard for his life plans.

A year after the first members of his family had departed for the U.S., Geoffroi was taking a computer class. One day while in class he received a phone call from his mother telling him that their resettlement had been approved and they would be leaving in a week. When he got home, his family sent him to the market to buy some clothes for the journey. While he was on



the bus, he got another call telling him, “Hey, you need to get off the bus right now. We’re leaving.” Without warning, their departure had been moved up to that very day. Geoffroi said, “The car was right there, waiting for us to go in and then leave the country...it was like, ‘Wait, what?’...my bag was empty...You have to wear the same clothes that you were wearing, get in the car...[that will] drop us from the refugee camp to Kigali. That’s where we get the airplane.” After years of uncertainty, Geoffroi was given a moment’s notice of his resettlement, as if leaving behind the world he had inhabited for the past fifteen years was of no consequence.

He felt completely unprepared and only knew a little about what awaited him in the U.S. He said, “So you’re not even ready now, because, you know, you don’t have also enough information about the country.” He had wanted to buy clothes to hold him over until he could go shopping in the U.S., which he figured would take some time since he did not speak English or know how he would get around. He said, “You don’t know if you’re going to meet anybody here that can help you with that. So you don’t have any idea what’s going on.” Beyond wanting to feel prepared for his first weeks in a new country, Geoffroi also acknowledged that there was a cultural dimension to wanting some new clothes for his journey. He said, “A lot of them, they just want to make sure they’re dressed. They look good, right?” Resettlement to the U.S. is a big deal, and dressing for the occasion was a way to assert dignity and self-worth. He noted how resettlement is “a big event. It’s actually like a ceremony.” As someone prepares to leave, friends and family visit, celebrate, and come to say their goodbyes. Geoffroi explained how for those left behind in the camp, these departures, though joyous, were somewhat akin to a death, “because you’re like, ‘Well, I’ll never see you again’...it’s like if someone was passing away, it’s like, ‘Well, goodbye, may God be with you.’” This sense of finality was fueled by the prevailing

assumption that people who are resettled never come back. But given his family's speedy departure, Geoffroi was denied much of this ceremony.

Despite the unanticipated rush and hectic departure, Geoffroi was thrilled. His siblings who had already been resettled in Boise, Idaho gave him some ideas about what life would be like there. They told him that food was plentiful, that there would be people to help them, and that they would be able to make friends who spoke their language. But he was most excited about the opportunities he would have in the U.S. His brother told him, "You will get a chance to go back to school. You can graduate from high school. If you want, you can go to college. It will be up to you, and you can find a job, because there are some people that actually get a job and don't even speak good English. So you get a lot of opportunities here." Geoffroi said, "That's why I was really excited. I was like, 'Yeah, I can't wait to get there. I just want to be able to go back to school.'" Given the complications of daily life in the camp in Rwanda, Geoffroi explained how resettlement to the U.S. was imagined as a kind of heaven where food, money, and opportunity existed in abundance. He said, "You can say, 'Yeah, it's like a heaven to me,' because that's the thing that you dream of. You always dream to go to school, to be able to have opportunities to do things that you want, save money or support your family." This idealized image of life in the U.S. was propped up by how even small sums of money sent back as remittances could be transformative for loved ones still in the camp. His family in Boise told him, "'We're secure. You're not going to worry about who's going to knock on your door'...I was like, 'Yeah, I can't wait to go out there.' I was really excited." For refugees like Geoffroi, resettlement offered a life-altering opportunity to leave behind the difficulties of his childhood.

He arrived in Boise in the summer, when daylight lasts well into the evening. His siblings were able to help Geoffroi, his mother, and his younger siblings navigate all of the novelties of

life in a new country, like what to buy at the grocery store. He was most amazed by the speed with which food could be cooked in a microwave given the hours it used to take to prepare a meal over an open flame in the camp. His brother had a laptop and introduced Geoffroi to the wonders of Facebook. Geoffroi was eager to start high school in the fall but was taken aback by pressure from his Resettlement Agency caseworker to forego his education for work. According to Geoffroi, she told him, “Well, you’re the only one that speaks a little bit of English. You need to go to work to help your family.” His older siblings were supporting their own families, so it was up to Geoffroi to support his mother and younger siblings. Geoffroi said, “But my dream was to go to school and be able to, you know, change the life, the way I was living.” Though his caseworker pushed for full-time employment as the only way to cover his family’s expenses, Geoffroi did not want to give up on his dream of finishing high school after finally making it to the U.S. He wondered, “Can I do both?” Geoffroi continued, “Because when you are in the place where you’ve had nothing except sitting home, do[ing] nothing, you get the chance, you’re like, ‘Let me take my chances.’” Through the help of members of the Boise community, he registered for school against his caseworker’s advice.

He started high school that fall in the eleventh grade, but his schedule quickly became exhausting. When school let out, he would take the bus downtown where he would catch a van that drove him to his job forty minutes outside of Boise. By the time he finished work around 11 PM or midnight and got dropped back off downtown, the city buses were no longer running. He either had to wait for someone to pick him up, which could take another hour, or he would bike home. As temperatures dropped in the winter, this commute became grueling. Geoffroi said, “it was a real tough experience. It was really hard for me... Sometimes you have to bike, freezing your butt, you know... You get home. Your hands are frozen. You have to take a shower, and

you go to bed around 2 AM...So I wasn't getting enough sleep. So if I have to do my homework, then I end up going to bed about, you know, 4 AM or 3 AM, something like that." He would then take the bus to school at 6:45 AM the following morning. Thinking back on those early months in Boise, Geoffroi reflected, "So that was a time that I was like, 'Yeah, this is not a life that I expected.' It was like really, really hard."

Within that first year in the U.S., Geoffroi's mother passed away, and he was left to fully support and care for his younger siblings. His older siblings' apartments were not big enough to take them in, so rent fell to Geoffroi. Though despite these added responsibilities, Geoffroi still graduated from high school in two years and went straight to a four-year university. He benefitted from the support of community members who helped him budget and save as much money as possible. Though he had not yet completed his degree at the time of our interview in 2019, he had gotten married and started his own family, working full-time as a caregiver for people with mental illness. After a difficult early resettlement, Geoffroi had found stability, and most importantly, a home in Boise. He said, "I love Boise so much...I call Boise home, because it's quiet...I have two kids, so I have to make sure I live in a place where they are safe...It's a good place where you can raise your kids and be able to, you know, make a living." Though Geoffroi noted that "you don't make a lot of money in Boise...because the minimum wage in Boise is really low," he would not consider moving elsewhere because it would mean losing everything he had worked so hard to build. He said, "if I have to move, I have to start over, right?" In Geoffroi's opinion, Boise was a welcoming place for refugees. After all that it took to build a good life in the seven years since his resettlement, he saw no appeal in being uprooted again.

## **Resettlement as a (Final) Displacement**

Resettlement is considered one of three durable solutions for refugees and provides an alternative to protracted displacement when repatriation to the home country and local integration in the country of asylum are impossible or unlikely (Stein 1983). Rather than framing resettlement as a solution that marks the end of a refugee's displacement, this dissertation demonstrates how the displacement of forced migration extends through the initial resettlement phase, offering a paradigm shift in how we think about the early stages of a refugee's resettlement. Humanitarian programs are not purely benevolent and can create new conditions of uncertainty, dislocation, and vulnerability. In reality, resettlement marks another uprooting and readjustment for refugees who may have already rebuilt their lives numerous times following internal migrations or relocations to camps and urban areas. I reconceptualize early resettlement as a time of displacement rather than one of settlement and integration.

This dissertation centers on refugees' experiences to explore more deeply what makes resettlement so disorienting. Refugees arrive in the U.S. with ambitions and competencies as well as the lingering effects of trauma and protracted displacement. Once in their destination, refugees like Geoffroi begin receiving financial and social service support provided by their local Resettlement Agency (RA), yet this assistance come with formal and informal terms that dictate their incorporation. As refugees try to establish themselves in a new country and adapt to the expectations of their assistance, they are also contending with the displacing effects of resettlement that permeate numerous aspects of their lives, including their emotional, familial, and financial wellbeing. The rules and realities of U.S. resettlement do not always align with refugees' aspirations and notions of dignity. As refugees come to learn the conditions of their resettlement, disappointment and unmet expectations can engender mistrust in the system

responsible for welcoming them. Moreover, the bureaucratic savvy necessary to establish oneself in a new country is onerous. Refugees must navigate a complex system of agencies and protocols, and the number of appointments and applications can be overwhelming. RA caseworkers thus play an imperative role in managing refugees' displacement so as to ensure that the institutional dimension of their incorporation progresses smoothly during these first few months in the U.S. Even though refugees may experience early resettlement as another displacement, many, like Geoffroi, do eventually find stability and, with it, a more permanent refuge.

Based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork comprised of over 1,000 hours of participant observation at an RA in San Diego, California and Boise, Idaho as well as 102 interviews with refugees and service providers, I demonstrate the complex ways that refugees interact with programs of relief, as well as the imperfect system within which RA caseworkers operate. I find that the humanitarian and social policies intended to assist refugees constrain their incorporation, create economic insecurity, and expose them to new vulnerabilities. This dissertation loosely follows the stages of a refugee's resettlement and examines how displacement affects multiple domains of refugees' lives as they settle in a new country. The five empirical chapters move from a refugee's initial approval and arrival in the U.S. to longer-term relationships with service providers and reflections on identity.

### **Refugees Welcome?**

Resettlement is a scarce resource available to less than one percent of the global refugee population, yet it provides an important alternative to protracted displacement when repatriation and local integration are impossible or unlikely. Given that there are more than 26 million refugees globally, resettlement has been likened to "winning the lottery" (FitzGerald 2019:3) and

framed as a solution to displacement (Gowayed 2019), offering a way out for lucky refugees who are selected by governments in the Global North after a long and arduous application process. As refugees risk their lives to undertake dangerous journeys to safety by land and sea, resettlement offers incomparable assurance, safety, and permanency that can alleviate many of the hardships specific to protracted displacement, such as limited political rights, restricted educational and professional futures, food and housing insecurity, and immobility. Though resettlement is an important and even lifesaving tool for forced migration management, this dissertation explores how resettlement is itself a displacing process that is nonetheless disruptive to refugees' lives.

Rather than framing resettlement as a solution that marks the end of a refugee's challenges, this dissertation offers a paradigm shift for how we understand a refugee's resettlement. In contrast to the resettlement literature that foregrounds the policies and states accepting refugees (Van Selm 2014), I contribute to scholarship that centers on refugees' perspectives of their own resettlement (Fee 2021; Gowayed 2022; Ludwig 2016; Pearlman 2019; Omar 2022; Sriram 2020; Brown 2011; Abdi 2015) to underscore the complex lived realities of forced migration. Based on refugees' accounts of their resettlement experiences leading up to and following their arrival in San Diego and Boise as well as ethnographic fieldwork with newly arrived refugees in each city, I examine how the displacement of forced migration extends through the initial resettlement phase. In doing so, I show that humanitarian policies are not always compassionate in practice. This dissertation shifts away from framing refugees as a problem to be solved or managed, focusing instead on the shortcomings and consequences of the policies and programs that shape their lives (Malkki 1995). In reality, resettlement marks another uprooting and readjustment for refugees who may have already rebuilt their lives numerous times in the home country and countries of asylum.

I reframe resettlement as a time of uncertainty and dislocation rather than one of settlement and integration, exploring how early resettlement falls on a spectrum of what constitutes displacement. Resettlement is typically studied through the language of integration (FitzGerald & Arar 2018; Van Selm 2014; Bloemraad 2015; Rumbaut 1989; Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Khuu & Bean 2022), yet by contextualizing resettlement within the broader scope of refugees' lives and by examining issues of emotional wellbeing, family structure, parenting, employment, and trust, this dissertation demonstrates the importance of recognizing resettlement as one more uprooting that refugees must endure in a succession of displacements that began when they were first forced to leave their homes. While prior research examines how forced migration results in "displaced livelihoods" (Jacobsen 2014), I show how displacement carries over into initial resettlement and extends far beyond refugees' professional lives. Integration and belonging are multidimensional, encompassing linguistic, cultural, financial, and legal inclusion. Despite having been resettled, it takes time before refugees find "secure belonging" and regain a sense of home (Dromgold-Sermen 2020).

The migration literature's emphasis on the integrational dimensions of the U.S. Resettlement Program (USRP) stems from the distinctiveness of the formalized program of assistance that greets refugees upon arrival. In contrast to most immigrants arriving in the U.S., refugees benefit from immediate inclusion in the welfare state through refugee-specific and general public assistance. Though, as scholars have demonstrated, the welfare state can engender economic disadvantage (Mayblin 2020) and plays an active role in stratifying society (Esping-Andersen 1990; Katz 2013; Zuberi 2006). When social policies are tied to markers of class and labor market status, they further reinforce social stratification (Nasiali 2016). Despite not having full political membership, refugees resettled in the U.S. have long enjoyed social rights denied to



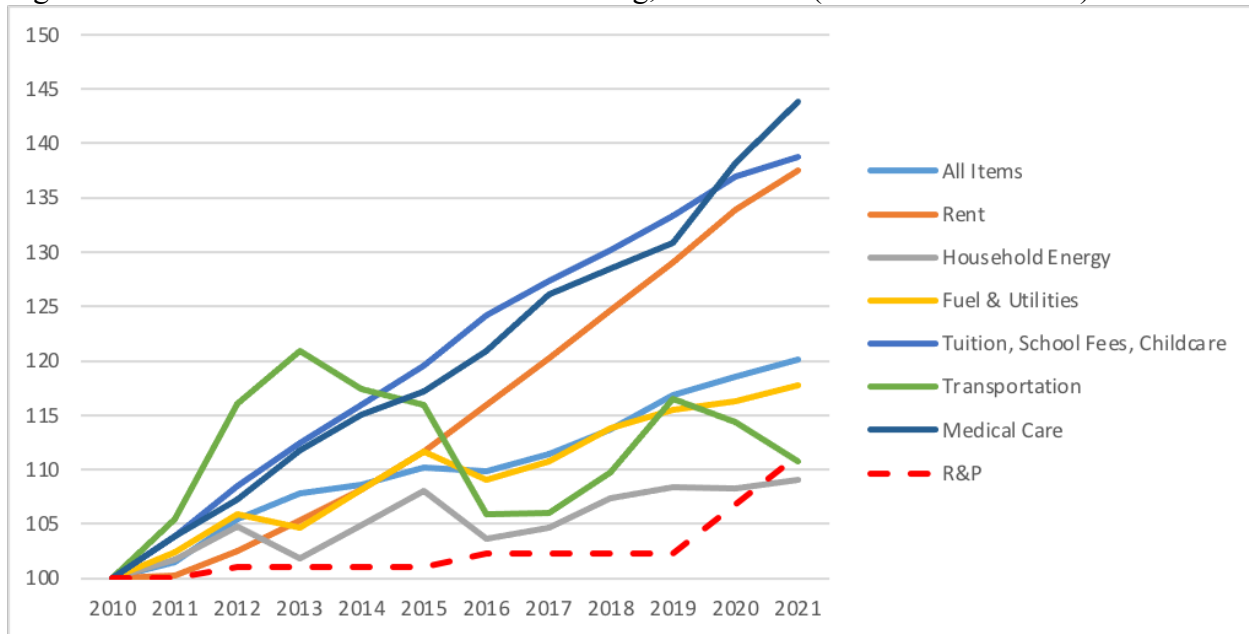
other categories of migrants (Pedraza-Bailey 1985) and are deemed deserving of public assistance in ways that other immigrants are not (Brown 2011). The USRP provides arriving refugees with resettlement-specific benefits and social service support that extend through their first several months in the U.S., after which they are eligible to enroll in numerous federal and state-based public assistance programs (Fredriksson 2000; Abdi 2015). Despite what may look like a generous approach to provisional membership, the USRP is nonetheless informed by the same neoliberal propensities as other social policies in the U.S., motivated by the dual goals of early employment and economic self-sufficiency (U.S. Congress 2001:350; Lanphier 1983), which are framed as the means through which refugees will eventually achieve linguistic and cultural integration (Gowayed 2019).

Through housing and neighborhood placement (Tang 2015; Darrow 2015b), employment opportunities (Abdi 2015; Darrow 2018; Grace et al. 2017; Nawyn 2011; Tran & Lara-García; Gowayed 2022; Kreisberg, de Graauw, & Gleeson 2022), and cultural orientation, refugee-specific services and benefits assume and promote a low-income standard of living for refugees, which may clash with refugees' expectations, prior frames of class belonging, and professional backgrounds. In contrast to the Scandinavian model of welfare that takes the middle class as its point of departure (Esping-Andersen 1990), the USRP funnels refugees into inexpensive, sometimes substandard housing, and low-income, minimum wage jobs, a practice that Darrow (2018) refers to as “administrative indentureship.” These employment expectations along with a gendered approach to public assistance distribution are disruptive as refugee families gain their bearings in a new country (Abdi 2015; Gowayed 2019).

The retrenchment of the welfare state and the rise of neoliberalism were not inevitable (Centeno and Cohen 2012). Instead they had political roots, which took hold and spread

internationally, moving economic control out of the hands of governments and into the market. Further retrenchment has particularly disadvantaged vulnerable groups (Weir, Orloff, & Skocpol 1988; Katz 2008, 2013; Somers 2008), such as immigrants (Fox 2012, 2019; Joseph 2020), who over time have been pushed out of the welfare state. Safety nets and programs of relief were replaced by workfare programs and market solutions that became the remedy to the “problem” of dependence, relying on punitive strategies to promote self-reliance (Wacquant 2009; Katz 2008; Zuberi 2006). Whether the result of neoliberalism or a combination of market solutions and nativism (Fox 2012), the Welfare Reform Act inhibited most immigrants’ access to social services. Despite the privileged status of refugees in the welfare state, the USRP has undergone a similar retrenchment over time both in its duration and amount of support, favoring employment over financial assistance. Since the resettlement of Vietnamese and Cubans in the 1970s and 1980s, refugee-specific services have been reduced from 36 months of transitional assistance to eight months of support (Haines 2010), and the level of financial assistance has not always kept pace with the rising cost of living (Lugar 2010, Fee & FitzGerald 2021). Figure 1 below shows how R&P funds have lagged behind the rising cost of everyday necessities, especially rent and medical care.

Figure 1. Consumer Price Index and R&P funding, 2010-2021 (index = 100 in 2010)



Fee & FitzGerald 2021

Several studies have pointed to the neoliberalization of the USRP (Nawyn 2011; Grace et al. 2017; Ong 2003; Tang 2015). Because of its emphasis on employment, Grace et al. (2017) question whether refugees enjoy the rights that supposedly come with their resettlement. Instead, they argue that many of the social rights conferred to refugees in the U.S. are only accessible through full labor market participation. As a result, social citizenship (Marshall 1965) is attenuated by market citizenship (Grace et al. 2017; Nawyn 2011). While a reduction in resettlement assistance has led to an expansion of market citizenship for arriving refugees, this retrenchment is not specific to the USRP. Policy feedback informs future political decisions in an iterative process (Weir, Orloff, and Skocpol 1988; Orloff 1998; Skocpol 1992). The retrenchment of the U.S. welfare state changed the political environment for programs of relief, including those specific to refugees. Despite a reduction in benefits over time, it is important to recognize that refugees have nonetheless retained access to certain social rights that have been stripped from most other immigrant groups (Joseph 2020). By focusing on what refugees no longer

receive, this literature has paid less attention to the interactions between refugees and the institutions that continue to serve them, albeit on a reduced scale than their predecessors.

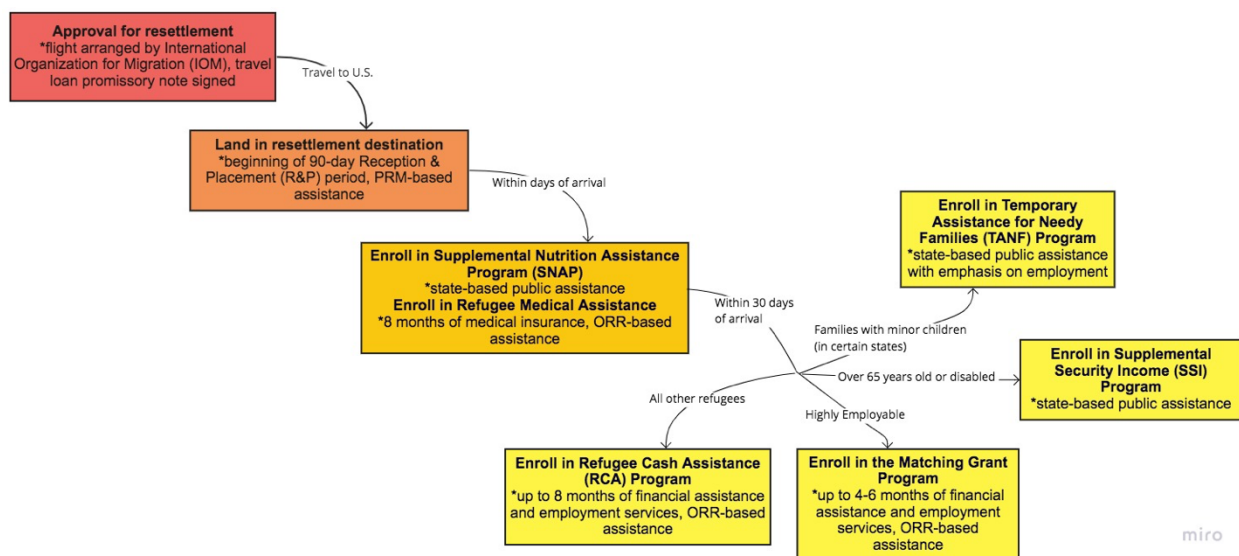
The USRP was formalized by the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, which turned a previously ad hoc approach to refugee admissions and resettlement service provision into a standardized program of support (Kennedy 1981). Since then, the USRP has followed a one-size-fits-all model of resettlement, providing all arriving refugees with the same scope of services and level of financial support regardless of the population of origin or their destination in the U.S. (Lugar 2010). Refugees who arrive in the U.S. through the resettlement program benefit from a uniform suite of services over a fixed timeline. Their first ninety days in the U.S. fall under the Reception & Placement (R&P) period, during which their assigned RA caseworker secures housing, enrolls them in various services and assistance programs, and attends to other needs such as grocery shopping or obtaining medical care. In order to pay for the expenses associated with this initial set up period, RAs receive a one-time per capita R&P grant with each new arrival, which at the time of fieldwork was \$1,125 per person. According to the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), during the R&P period, it is the responsibilities of RAs: :

To ensure the ability to receive promptly into the United States all refugees approved for admission under applicable provisions of the INA; To ensure that all refugees approved for admission to the United States are provided with reception and placement services appropriate to their personal circumstances; To maintain national capacity for the reception and placement of refugees, in accordance with admissions ceilings determined annually by the President after consultation with the Congress; and, To assist refugees in achieving economic self-sufficiency in coordination with other refugee services and assistance programs authorized by the INA and any mainstream services and assistance programs for which refugees are eligible (U.S. Department of State 2021).

Soon after arrival, refugees are enrolled in other refugees-specific and general assistance programs that provide support for six or more months and depend on their personal

circumstances and family composition. PRM oversees the administration of the 90-day R&P period after which program management falls under the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement. While the R&P period is focused on initial arrangements, these ongoing ORR programs focus on transitioning refugees to economic self-sufficiency. This approach to resettlement favors time limited assistance in the interest of early employment and stands in contrast to resettlement models in other countries that offer refugees a longer runway for adjustment (Lanphier 1983; Gowayed 2022). Figure 2 below illustrates the different forms of support that become available to refugees.

Figure 2. Flowchart of Resettlement Process and Services



In addition to the forms of assistance outlined above, refugees may also have access to an array of other programs offered by their local RA that are funded by ORR, local government, or private entities, such as in-house English classes, job readiness training, vocational training, and tutoring programs. These ongoing services are typically intended for “extended” refugee clients within their first five years in the U.S.

While the U.S. Government espouses the benevolent motivations of resettlement as a way to support particularly vulnerable refugees (Biden REF), there is a contradiction between this rhetoric of humanitarianism and the reality of neoliberal self-reliance once refugees arrive. Refugees quickly encounter a structure of assistance that exposes them to institutionalized inequalities in the U.S. that have long disadvantaged minorities and low-income communities (Gowayed 2022). As refugees come to understand the sometimes jarring circumstances of their resettlement, they are nonetheless expected to remain grateful to the country that offered them refuge. This dissertation explores the tensions that build when the politics of resettlement do not align with the lived experience of refugees.

### **Resettlement in San Diego, CA and Boise, ID**

For refugees arriving as “free cases” or without an established contact already in the U.S., their resettlement destination is decided at the federal level during a weekly meeting when refugees are assigned to local RAs in a round robin style allocation process from which refugees and communities of resettlement are notably excluded. These resettlement destination decisions have changed the landscape of the foreign-born population across the U.S. (Brown, Mott, and Malecki 2007) and “involves a level of social engineering virtually unknown in U.S. public administration” (Haines 2010:7). This dissertation examines the implementation of the USRP in San Diego, CA, a traditional city of immigration, and Boise, ID, a new immigrant destination, in order to better understand how federal allocation decisions are implemented and experienced at the local level by refugees and communities of resettlement. Local factors are meaningful in resettlement because of difference in state-based public assistance, cost of living, and labor markets (Brick et al 2010). While prior research has examined various cases of refugee resettlement (Abdi 2015; Gowayed 2022; Fadiman 1998; Ong 2003; Hein 2006; Tang 2015;

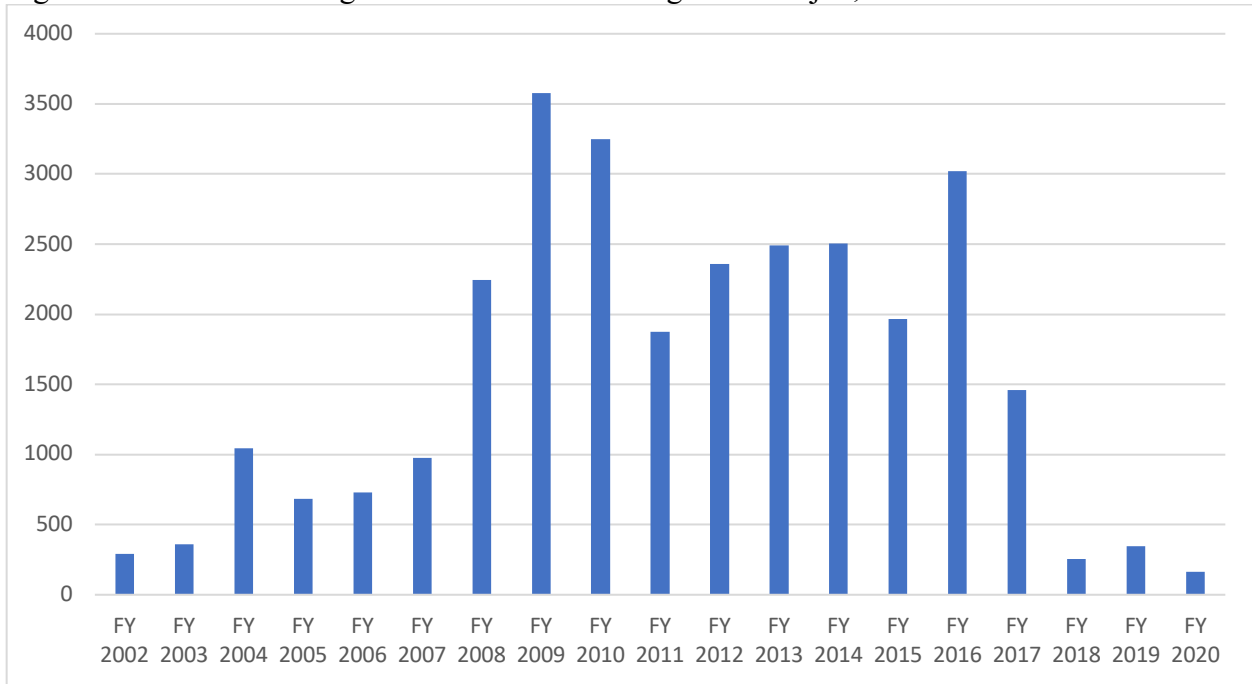
Besteman 2016; Chambers 2017), this project offers a deeper look at how resettlement unfolds in dissimilar destinations.

New immigrant destinations (Zúñiga & Hernández-León 2005; Massey 2008; Marrow 2011; Ribas 2015; Schmalzbauer 2014) have become critical to the government's ability to carry out the resettlement program. Approximately half of the top fifty cities of resettlement over the past fifteen years are new destinations where refugees make up a larger proportion of the foreign-born and total population (WRAPS 2018). However, contrary to what we know about new immigrant destinations, different mechanisms are responsible for the arrival of refugees in these cities. Formal channels at the federal level deliberately route arriving refugees to more affordable places that have yet to be overburdened by resettlement, even if these destinations are without the experience and infrastructure to incorporate immigrants. As Haines notes, "Indeed, the federal government actively plans their initial location and has, very much unlike the case for regular immigrants, even tried to fashion new ethnic communities in smaller, less 'impacted' areas" (2010:37). Perhaps the most obvious example of the effects of this allocation process is the development of a large Somali community in Minneapolis, Minnesota over the past two decades (Abdi 2015; Chambers 2017). This phenomenon has been reproduced on a smaller scale throughout the U.S. with the Burmese community in Fort Wayne, Indiana or the extremely diverse community in Clarkston, Georgia. Resettlement destinations are consequential to refugees, as cities and states vary in their political climate, social policies, labor markets, and available co-ethnic support (HRI 2009; Brick 2010). When and where a refugee is resettled matters, because "In essence, they have come to different Americas and must adjust to quite different environments" (Haines 2010:37).

Resettlement in San Diego and Boise differ in meaningful ways. San Diego, a large immigrant gateway city situated on the U.S.-Mexico border, has a history of welcoming refugees, most notably in the 1970s when nearby Camp Pendleton served as a reception center from which Vietnamese refugees were resettled elsewhere (Espiritu 2014), and has long been one of the top resettlement destinations in the U.S. (WRAPS 2020). Boise, in contrast, has more recently become a destination for the foreign-born. Though Boise has a celebrated history of Basque immigration in the nineteenth century and the Bracero Program brought Mexican migrants to Idaho, resettlement has created notable diversity in the city and a particular type of visibility for ethnic and racial minorities, the consequences of which are discussed in Chapter 5. This difference between San Diego and Boise played out in the landscape of ethnic- and community-based organizations in the city. While several refugee groups in San Diego have created a strong non-profit presence to support their communities, such as Somali Family Services, Karen Organization of San Diego, Syrian Community Network, and New Neighbor Relief, refugee communities in Boise have yet to establish a robust organizational presence beyond religious congregations, much to the disappointment of some community leaders.

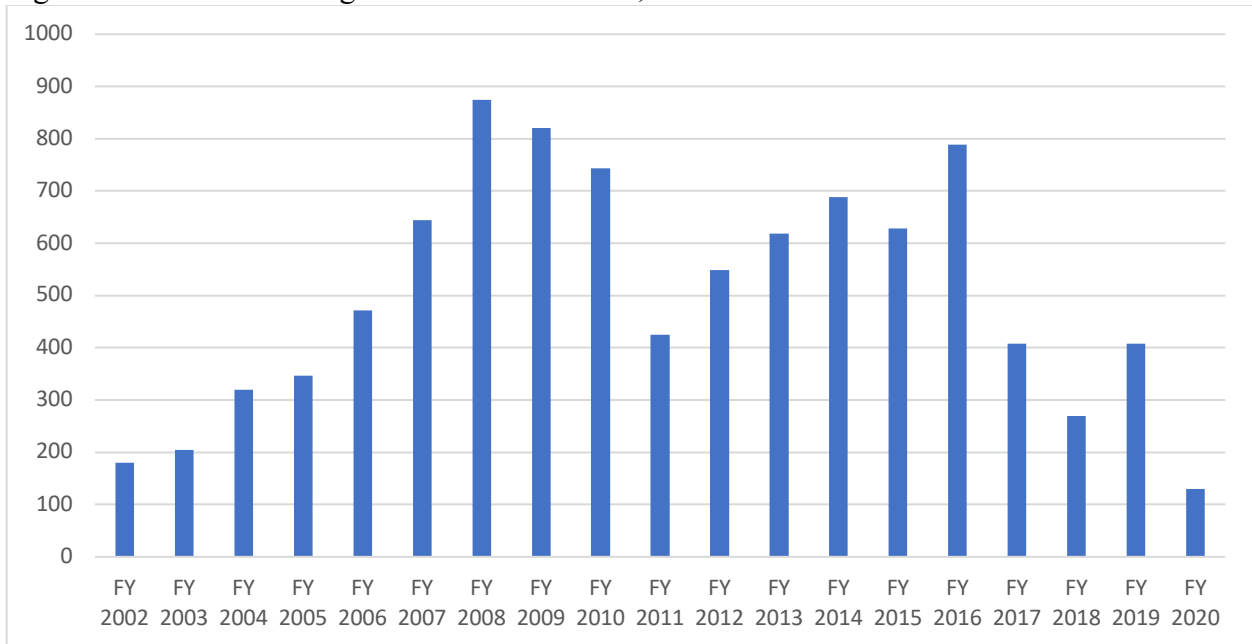


Figure 3. Number of Refugees Resettled in San Diego & El Cajon, FY 2002 - FY 2020



WRAPS 2020

Figure 4. Number of Refugees Resettled in Boise, FY 2002 - FY 2020



WRAPS 2020

Table 1. Top 10 Refugee Groups Resettled in San Diego & El Cajon, FY 2002 - FY 2020

<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Number of Refugees</b>
Iraq	16,971
Somalia	2,871
Burma	2,205
DRC	1,519
Syria	1,177
Afghanistan	767
Iran	725
Vietnam	428
Sudan	416
Ethiopia	379

WRAPS 2020

Table 2. Top 10 Refugee Groups Resettled in Boise, FY 2002 - FY 2020

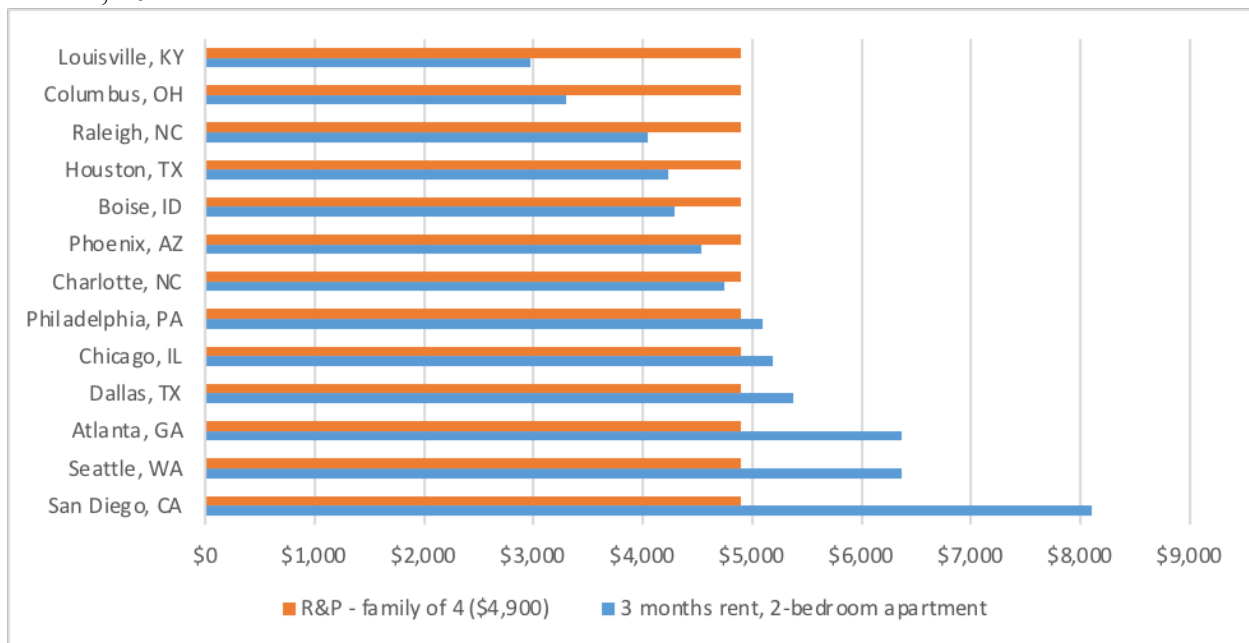
<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Number of Refugees</b>
DRC	2,056
Iraq	1,216
Burma	1,189
Somalia	1,124
Bhutan	870
Afghanistan	632
Russia	438
Burundi	332
Syria	249
Uzbekistan	217

WRAPS 2020

Resettlement destination is also meaningful for refugees' economic lives. Particularities in the local labor market shape the industries in which refugees will work. State-based social welfare policies determine how much public assistance is available to low-income families and for how long such programs will provide a safety net. California and Idaho represent most different cases in this regard. Most notably, refugees in San Diego who continue to be low income when their eight months of Refugee Medical Assistance ends remain insured under Medicaid. In Boise, however, Medicaid's narrow eligibility requirements result in many refugees becoming uninsured just eight months after their resettlement. While the TANF program in San Diego offers up to four years of cash aid and other benefits to families with minor children,

TANF benefits for refugee families in Boise are limited to up to four months of emergency rental assistance. Nonetheless, the high cost of living in San Diego counteracts any sense of stability that may be gained by a more generous approach to public assistance. These differences in state-based welfare affect refugees’ needs, and, in turn, RAs must adapt to support their current and former clients. Figure 5 below shows how differences in local rental markets quickly shape refugees’ economic stability upon resettlement.

Figure 5. R&P funds for a family of four and cost of renting a 2-bedroom apartment for 3 months, 2021



Fee & FitzGerald 2021

Resettlement destination is also important because it becomes the place that many arriving refugees come to see as their home. A Congolese community leader in Boise noted how there was a prevailing sense within the Congolese community to understand their assigned resettlement destination was a type of destiny. He said, “we feel like, okay, this is my destination. They choose me to be here. This is my destination. Let me create my life here. We spend more time all over because of the war. They just meant me here. Let me be here.” After becoming a

migrant out of compulsion and living through years of difficult displacements as a result of war, this man spoke of a prevailing desire to find meaning and rootedness in resettlement.

Though for refugees craving permanency, last minute changes can make them feel like pawns whose ultimate destination is of no consequences to far-removed decisionmakers. As they prepared to leave for the U.S., an Ethiopian family was told that they would be resettled in Georgia, but en route, after landing in New York, they were informed that they would be going to Boise, Idaho instead. Not only was this change confusing, it also felt belittling. Thinking back on this moment, the eldest child in this family told me, “I remember they were just so matter-of-fact about it, the agents, but I guess there wasn’t much they could have done.” In the moment, her parents had no form of recourse, yet this change robbed them of any sense of control or ownership over their future in a new country. This young woman continued,

I think about so many ethical issues now that I am where I am. Like you would never tell an American or a westerner, you know, this kind of information so matter-of-factly. But that’s because I have the luxury of looking back, education, knowing my rights, and not being scared, you know? But back then, you just said, ‘Okay.’ That makes me mad...it’s an unspoken kind of psychological impact, especially for the kids like me. It’s something that follows you, because it gives you this impression that you weren’t...important enough that you deserve this whole protocol that you were familiar with now.

When refugees are made to feel like their lives and futures are chips being moved around on a map, resettlement can feel alienating and displacing.

Refugees are not geographically restricted when they are first resettled and may even decide to relocate within days of their arrival. While it is not surprising that some refugees choose to move once in the U.S., especially if they know someone in another city or are aware of a strong community of co-ethnics elsewhere, once a refugee has been in the U.S. for thirty days, refugee-specific services do not move with them. This means that if a refugee relocates more than a month after her arrival in the U.S., she will forgo any remaining support and must rely

instead on state-based public assistance. In addition to losing access to any remaining cash aid, refugees also sever their ties with their RA and caseworker when they move. Even though RAs are technically only supposed to provide 90 days of case management services, refugees often continue to seek assistance long after. Once in a new city, another local RA may provide some support, but it is under no obligation to do so.

Not all arriving refugees are content to stay in their community of first resettlement. Secondary migration, or relocating from one's initial resettlement destination, points to the sedentary bias associated with durable solutions for refugees (Long 2014). When refugees decide to move from their initial community of resettlement, they are disrupting the program's assumption that refugees will become rooted in a city that is often randomly assigned to them. Ott (2011) critiques the assumption that the solution to a refugee's "problem" is achieved when the refugee is no longer moving, which is based on the notion that integration is associated with becoming sedentary. This model of resettlement does not acknowledge that secondary migration can also be a way for refugees to seek out better jobs, reunite with extended kin networks, or find places that offer greater religious and linguistic support (Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny 2011). Secondary migration shows that refugees may rely on strategies similar to other immigrants and non-immigrants in the U.S. by pursuing economic opportunities or social ties elsewhere. Moreover, refugees' willingness to relocate for employment has helped to fill vacancies in certain industries, such as factory work and meatpacking (Cohen 2018).

While resettlement location does matter in shaping refugees' experiences, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate that many of the circumstances of resettlement are shared regardless of local context. Given that fieldwork took place in such contrasting destinations, shared dynamics of disrupted family structures, financial insecurity, and loss of trust show the overpowering

nature of federal resettlement policy. Some of this lack of variation across sites is because refugees have to figure out how to survive regardless of local factors and getting by is not always pretty. Refugees work evening shifts, endure long commutes, patch together welfare, and rely on inconsistent charity, while caseworkers cobble together different forms of assistance at the last minute. Arriving refugees and RA caseworkers face similar obstacles that lead to similar outcomes. Though resettlement experiences may be place dependent in many ways, the chapters that follow reveal that there is also much in common.

## **Methodology**

Data collection took place from June 2018 through May 2019 in San Diego, California and Boise, Idaho and consisted of twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork (six months per city) and 102 interviews. Fieldwork access was granted by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) Office for U.S. Programs, as well as the local affiliate offices in both San Diego and Boise. The IRC is one of the nine national RAs with offices throughout the U.S. The ethnographic component of this project focused on refugees' initial resettlement, as well as continued service provision through the RA and external service providers. I strategically centered my ethnography within the RA, which is subcontracted by the federal government to carry out resettlement, making it an ideal vantage point from which to understand how resettlement is implemented on a daily basis. I conducted over 1,000 hours of participant observation shadowing caseworkers and employment specialists in both cities as they went about the work of resettling refugees. I spent countless hours with caseworkers as they made home visits, attended to myriad client needs, and provided continuing support beyond their prescribed duties. I also witnessed interactions between refugees and the welfare state, including the Department of Social Services, the Department of Public Health, the Social Security Administration, and educational institutions. I

assisted the RA by providing transportation to refugees, accompanying refugees to various appointments, and serving as a French-English interpreter for Congolese refugees.

By establishing field sites at two local affiliates of the same national RA, I was able to minimize the organizational variability that exists across national agencies. Nevertheless, each RA office had its own particular composition and dynamics. In San Diego, R&P casework was a small team of staff within a much larger organization that housed extensive youth programs, vocational training, English language classes, immigration services, small business support, and employment services, among others. These additional programs provided ongoing assistance to the sizeable refugee community across San Diego County. The San Diego IRC staff were divided between two offices, one in the neighborhood of City Heights in the city of San Diego and another in El Cajon, a small city in eastern San Diego County. Shortly before I began my fieldwork, the resettlement staff relocated from the City Heights office to the El Cajon office because housing had become too expensive for new arrivals in San Diego proper. The majority of my fieldwork took place at the El Cajon office and with new arrivals living in El Cajon. At the time of my fieldwork, the resettlement team had dwindled to three people, which included two caseworkers and one supervisor. At the height of a surge in arrivals at the end of the Obama Administration, their casework team had been as many as sixteen people, including more caseworkers and staff dedicated to clients' medical needs, housing, and paperwork. This drastic reduction was a casualty of the cuts made by the Trump Administration. As a result, the two remaining caseworkers took on all of the responsibilities that their colleagues had once shouldered, leaving them with a much more onerous job.

The RA office in Boise was a smaller, more intimate operation. Though they had some staff and programs focused on longer-term support, such as employment services, vocational

training, and immigration services, a larger proportion of their staff focused on initial resettlement services. Their casework team had maintained a more ideal composition and had better weathered the cuts from the Trump Administration. At the time of fieldwork, their casework staff consisted of a supervisor, two caseworkers, two casework assistants, two housing specialists, two medical caseworkers, and a youth caseworker, which allowed different staff to take ownership over discrete aspects of the R&P process. In both cities I worked as a casework assistant and provided additional support to the casework teams. Sometimes I shadowed casework staff and employment specialists as they went about their work, and other times I was charged with doing the work on my own. I spent two to four days per week at the San Diego office and four days per week at the Boise office, participating in nearly every aspect of the R&P process.

The 102 semi-structured interviews examined how resettlement unfolds beyond the walls of the RA. Interviews focused on two groups in each city: 1) refugees (60 interviews) and 2) representatives from local institutions (42 interviews). I recruited interlocutors through local RAs, community events, and snowball sampling. Interviews with refugees represented the many countries of origin in each city, including Afghanistan, Burma, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan (see Table 3 for demographics). These refugees had been resettled for at least one year, providing perspectives on longer-term incorporation experiences. Interviews with representatives of local institutions focused on RAs, social service agencies, local government, law enforcement, community organizations, and public schools.



Table 3. Demographics of Interviewees

Sample Characteristics - Refugees

City		
	San Diego	30
	Boise	30
Country of Origin		
	Afghanistan	8
	Burma	5
	Burundi	3
	Democratic Republic of the Congo	20
	Eritrea	1
	Ethiopia	2
	Iran	1
	Iraq	8
	Kenya	1
	Liberia	1
	Somalia	6
	Sudan	1
	Syria	2
	Uganda	1

Sample Characteristics – Service Providers

City		
	San Diego	19
	Boise	23
Role*		
	Resettlement Agency Staff (including caseworkers, employment specialists, administrators, etc.)	13
	External Service Provider (including social service agencies, schools, law enforcement, local government, etc.)	15
	Community Partner (including community based organizations, religious organizations, etc.)	14

\*Note: I have categorized interviewees according to their role at the time of the interview. Many interviewees have held many professional roles in resettlement over their careers, including several of the refugee interlocutors, which resulted in an even more robust sample of service providers in each city.

I have used pseudonyms throughout this dissertation in order to protect the anonymity of the people who participated in this research. At times, I am also deliberately vague out certain

details of refugees' lives in instances where it would make them more easily identifiable. I have chosen not to use pseudonyms for service providers and instead refer to them by their professional role as "a caseworker" or "an employment specialist." Resettlement Agencies are small organizations, so providing any more detail about the service providers would make it difficult to protect their identity. For this reason, I refer to some people simply as "casework staff" because any additional specification of their role as a youth caseworker or housing specialist would make them more easily identifiable.

My positionality as a researcher embedded within the RA shaped my interactions and access. I was cognizant of my association with RA staff who are in a position of authority and control. However, my vantage point from within the RA coupled with interviews and participation at community events allowed me to understand the different perspectives and conflicting demands of both refugees and service providers, and how they interact through service delivery. The objective of this research is to examine how resettlement unfolds in two different cities, and the findings presented in the chapters to follow emerged through coding and analysis of fieldnotes and interview transcripts.

## **Chapter Outline**

*Chapter 1: "Nobody Wants to Leave": Resettlement as Displacement:* This chapter examines the period leading up to and following a refugee's resettlement in the U.S. I contextualize resettlement within the broader scope of refugees lives and demonstrate how resettlement becomes another uprooting after which refugees must adapt and adjust to life in a new country. Though resettlement may ultimately be a good displacement, this chapter focuses on how resettlement can be disruptive to refugees' emotional wellbeing, family structure, caregiving practices. By reframing resettlement as a time of disorientation and dislocation, I demonstrate

how it falls on a spectrum of what constitutes displacement. Rather than early resettlement being a period of integration, newly arrived refugees are still coming to understand the rules, expectations, and realities of life in the U.S.

*Chapter 2: Managing Displacement:* Given the displacing effects of resettlement, this chapter focuses on how RA caseworkers take on the role of managing refugees' displacement during these first few months in a new country. I show how caseworkers' responsibilities encompass service management, needs management, administrative management, and crisis management for their newly arrived refugee clients. This chapter seeks to offer a more complete picture of the occupation of RA casework, highlighting the all-consuming nature of their role. In order to best support their clients and be considered a good caseworker, these service providers must frequently perform invisible labor that is largely unnoticed.

*Chapter 3: Resettled into Poverty:* This chapter focuses on how resettlement-specific and general assistance programs shape refugees' economic incorporation, and how the USRP's dual goals of early employment and economic self-sufficiency ultimately resettle refugees into poverty. Though refugees are granted social rights that provide access to programs of relief, these benefits immediately subject them to the disciplinary function of the state. The U.S. approach to resettlement is a product of a retrenched welfare state that promotes rapid incorporation into low-wage employment and uses poverty-level income as its benchmark of success. As a result, refugees are living at or below the poverty line. By exposing refugees to economic insecurity, the U.S. Resettlement Program makes them vulnerable to new forms of trauma.

*Chapter 4: Gaining Trust, Losing Trust:* This chapter explores the ongoing relationship between refugees and RAs. The resettlement program depends upon refugees' trust of their caseworker as they arrive in a new country completely reliant on their RA for food, shelter, and resources. Over

time as refugees' expectations go unmet, this initial trust can erode, making refugees wary of their caseworker. Concurrently, caseworkers are appraising their refugee clients. As refugees deviate from the trope of the "good" or "acquiescent" client, RA staff may begin to mistrust refugees and, in turn, doubt their deservingness. I show that the situations that breed mistrust between refugees and RA staff are inherent in the structure of the resettlement program. In an environment of scarcity and false expectations, refugees push the boundaries of claims making while caseworkers manage limited resources within strict institutional constraints. Though similar issues exist in both San Diego and Boise, the state-based environments in which each program operates shape this phenomenon in different ways.

*Chapter 5: Interrogating Refugee Status as Identity:* This chapter problematizes the indelibility of refugee status by examining refugees' perceptions of and experiences with the refugee label. Becoming a refugee involves much more than crossing a border. It is also a profound rupture with one's sense of home and homeland as well as one's identity and belonging. I question the intransient nature of the refugee label, which can slip from a legal bureaucratic status to a social category that remains long after resettlement. I demonstrate the heterogeneity of experiences that follow resettlement in the U.S., as the refugee label can become both a source of pride and stigma. By centering on refugee voices from multiple countries of origin this chapter highlights the varied and complex ways in which people relate to their histories of forced migration. I find that there are dual layers to the refugee label: one of self-identification and another of external perception. Regardless of their self-described relationship to this status, refugees are also at the whim of labeling by those around them who may permanently "other" them as foreigners and racial minorities. Particularly in cities like Boise without a history of recent immigration or ethnic and racial diversity, refugees arrive with a conspicuousness that makes shedding this label

even more challenging. Whether they are still seen as refugees is not entirely within their control, as they may remain a perpetual refugee in the eyes of their new community in the U.S.

## CHAPTER 1: “NOBODY WANTS TO LEAVE:” RESETTLEMENT AS DISPLACEMENT

Refugee resettlement offers sanctuary, yet it creates disruptions that can be overwhelming, disappointing, and confusing as refugees take on the arduous task of reestablishing their familial, emotional, and professional lives in a new country and language, all while navigating an institutional system that is not always intuitive or supportive. Upon resettlement, refugees must deal with everything that comes with leaving one home and building another in a new country. Though resettlement may offer a more permanent refuge, it nonetheless requires significant acclimation and adjustment. This chapter examines the periods leading up to and following a refugee’s resettlement in the U.S. Drawing on the perspective of newly arrived refugees, Resettlement Agency (RA) staff, and community partners in San Diego and Boise, I focus on the domains of emotional wellbeing, family structure, and parenting to demonstrate how resettlement creates another displacement in refugees’ lives.

### **Contextualizing Resettlement**

For refugees who ultimately end up in the U.S., resettlement was not part of their life plan and exists only in relation to their forced migration. A refugees’ trajectory is rarely linear or premeditated and may be comprised of several discrete migrations over the life course, some of which could never have been anticipated at the outset. Such was the case for Andre. In the nine years after he fled war in the DRC at the age of twelve, Andre had lived in five countries; the U.S. became the sixth. When Andre arrived in Boise, he was once again alone in a city and country where he knew no one. While resettlement remedied the transience that had come to shape Andre’s life, he nonetheless had to navigate new rules and expectations in Boise, adapting and adjusting his survival strategies just as he had done so many times before.

Places of first asylum, including refugee camps, may have at one point felt permanent rather than simply a “stepping stone” to the U.S. (Crawley & Jones 2021). Because resettlement is unreliable and rare and often only becomes possible long after initial displacement, refugees continue their lives and do their best in camps and urban areas despite challenging circumstances. As Crawley and Jones argue, “reducing the places in which migrants live to places of ‘transit’, and their experiences of ‘the journey’ to the physical process of moving, the social, emotional and economic lives lived and decisions taken in other places become invisible” (2021:3229). By fully acknowledging refugees’ lives in countries of asylum, however difficult they may have been, we can better understand how resettlement is displacing. With resettlement, refugees must “imagine a future they never expected” (Omar 2022:3).

The ever-changing politics of refugee selection (Loescher & Scanlan 1998; García 2017) can quickly turn the impossibility of resettlement into a reality. Yonas had been living in a refugee camp in Ethiopia for five years before the U.S. Government designated residents of that camp as a priority group for large scale resettlement. Though these refugees still had to successfully undergo an interview and screening process, which in Yonas’ case took another three years, anyone in the camp interested in applying for resettlement to the U.S. could now do so. In speaking to refugees’ lack of control over who gets resettled and when, Yonas said, “In the refugee camp, resettlement is not a right. You don’t claim resettlement. You just wait there, and if any country requested or would like to resettle refugees, that’s what you get a chance.” For Yonas, what had seemed unlikely during the nine years he had spent as a refugee, fleeing first to Eritrea and then back to Ethiopia, all of a sudden became possible because of this new priority designation for the camp. Even after applying, Yonas was cautious about assuming he would end up in the U.S. He said,

you compare the life where you are, and the life that you pictured. And I think very exciting was when we got the news that the United States would get a lot of people from the refugee camp. And then when the process started it takes a long period of time. And you don't really know if you are really going to be qualified or not, you go through multiple interviews, and multiple medical checkups. And you don't know what the qualifications and disqualifications are. It's a time of excitement and fear, until you get the approval paper at the end.

It was only upon approval that an alternate life and future became possible for Yonas in Boise, Idaho.

Crawley and Jones (2021) caution scholars from assuming that countries of first asylum and refugee camps are places of transit where refugees simply wait for an opportunity to move on to the Global North. They instead view migration as a social process where life continues in countries of asylum even amid hardships and subsequent migrations. They argue that refugees live “multi-layered lives in the ‘in-between’ places, relating tales of family, friends, lovers, schools and work as well as their experiences of daily survival in the face of extreme challenges” (Crawley & Jones 2021:3232). It is only when refugees move on or when the improbable outcome of resettlement occurs that countries of asylum undergo a rhetorical shift from a destination to an “in-between” transit country (Crawley & Jones 2021). As Yonas' journey illustrates, the possibility of resettlement did not enter his life until nine years after fleeing his home. Until he received approval, the camp in Ethiopia was a place of immobility rather than a place of transit and mobility. Even within the harsh context of a refugee camp or impoverished urban area, refugees have been creating and living lives prior to resettlement. Through this framework we can better understand how and why resettlement is displacing. Moving to the U.S. is another migration that is disruptive and disorienting as refugees leave behind routines, communities, and means of survival. Refugees like Yonas and Andre must again figure out how to rebuild a meaningful life in a new country.



Prior to resettlement, refugees may have already undergone multiple distinct displacements. Some of the Afghan refugees I interviewed were first displaced as children during war in the 1990s and returned in the early 2000s hopeful for a safe future following the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. But ongoing threats and deteriorating security drove them across borders once again. Aadam, a young father in Boise, recounted how his life had been shaped by recurrent displacements:

I'm from Afghanistan. When I was a kid, there was a civil war in that country. My family was internal refugees inside the country. So, we left the hometown and we went to the north of the country. It was more safer there. And so, I was grown up in a refugee life my entire life. I started school in North Afghanistan... Then the Taliban took over the country... [We] stayed one year under Taliban regime, but it was really hard. Then we became refugee to Pakistan... And then the new regime established in Afghanistan, the US troops went in Afghanistan to fight against the terrorism. It was a new beginning for that country. My family moved back to Afghanistan. And I finished my school and started working and life was beautiful. Everything was awesome. Not from luxury perspective, but I was in home. I lived in my home. I was in my country. I was with my family, friends. Then... a terrorist attack happened in my office and several colleagues got killed. Again, I became a refugee in Pakistan. And after two years, I was able to get the U.S. visa as a refugee and came to Idaho.

For Aadam, resettlement was another move among a series of multiple internal and international migrations.

Families may also be shaped by intergenerational histories of displacement that make it difficult to pinpoint “home.” A service provider in Boise explained how a father had expressed concern about his children forgetting the good memories they had of life in the DRC before the war and their displacement to Tanzania. The father told this service provider that he was troubled by the fact that his son was “always saying, ‘I’m from Tanzania,’ and he’s Congolese. I want him to know he’s Congolese.” When this service provider looked more into the family’s case, she learned that the father was actually Burundian but had grown up in the DRC after his family had fled war as refugees. This service provider added, “What he was worried about in his son is

what happened to him...The Congo was his home and what he loves, and so the same experience.” This family’s history of displacement across generations created different notions of home. Despite their difficult living conditions, this young man saw the refugee camp in Tanzania as home, just as his father had come to see the DRC.

Despite obstacles in the country of asylum, not all refugees necessarily view resettlement favorably. As Van Selm notes, “Many refugees do not want to resettle: fleeing for safety from a homeland where a person previously had a ‘normal’ life does not make that person suddenly want to move halfway around the world. Some resettle happily, seeing the opportunities a new life can bring for them or their children. Others are reluctant, but see it as the only way to move forward” (2014:518). Western Europe and North America are not universally desired destinations (Crawley and Jones 2020), and even when refugees do seek resettlement, they are operating under extremely limited options. Some refugees may be thrilled by the prospect of moving to the U.S., while for others resettlement is simply the best outcome to the worst case scenario of forced migration, insecurity, and limited futures. Though an Afghan father in Boise longed for his homeland, he was ecstatic when he learned that his family was moving to the U.S. He said, “it was kind of a dream and I was not believing like I’m coming to U.S., and I will live my life in United States with my wife and my kids. It was amazing.” Yet others find little appeal in the prospect of uprooting again to move even further from their home country. Bastien, a young Congolese man in Boise, explained how the idea of resettlement was not equally enticing to all residents of the refugee camp in Tanzania where he grew up. He said, “Especially old people...They will say, ‘No, I want to go back to my country.’ They will just be there, and they’re telling you, ‘I’m waiting for my country to have peace so I’ll go back.’ You will tell them...‘America is this, is this, is this.’ They say, ‘Okay, and in my country, we might have

those kinds of stuff, too...if just [in] my country, we can have peace.” A service provider in Boise recognized how, all things being equal, resettlement was rarely a refugee’s true preference. She said, “the majority of our families regardless of where they were displaced from, would say they would much prefer to go home rather than to have come here to the United States. Who wants to leave their home?”

Even when resettlement offers newfound safety and security, feelings about what is gained are complicated by what has been lost. Hafiz, an Afghan father, shared how once his family had arrived in San Diego, he and his wife mourned what they left behind. He said,

Especially [at] first...like two months, me and my wife crying all day and night. Why did we come here? Like everybody says we got a lot of things here, but...no, we lost a lot of things here. Only the one thing we can find is security...[out of] 100 things, only we find one thing here, and we lose a lot. We lose our mom, dad, families, love, our country. And you know, country, everybody loves their country.

Three years after their resettlement, dreams of returning to a safe homeland endured. Later in our conversation Hafiz said, “80% of [my friends], just waiting for Afghanistan to be a good security...Only if I know Afghanistan will be secure for one year, I want to go.”

For children born in the country of asylum, resettlement marks their first migration and is an uprooting from all they have ever known. Idil was nine years old when her family was resettled to San Diego from a refugee camp in Yemen. Her parents fled the civil war in Somalia in the 1990s and started a family after seeking refuge in Yemen. When Idil’s family of six was approved for resettlement after multiple attempts and failed applications, Idil remembered thinking to herself,

What waits for us over there? How different is it going to be? I was like really sad because we're going to leave, and we're going to leave everyone behind. And I've only known that camp that I lived in. It was basically my home. I never met anyone else. I've never lived anywhere else...in my mind, I was like, maybe we should stay. It was really sad. I wasn't ready for that huge change.

Their upcoming move was fraught for Idil's mother as well. Despite the hardships she faced as a single mother of five and the security that her young children would gain in the U.S., resettlement meant leaving behind the community she had built in Yemen. Idil continued, "I remember my mom was really sad, too, because she was like, 'I've known people for over 20 years and [I'm] just leaving them. I don't know if I'm ever going to see them again.' Yeah, my mom was really sad." For Idil's family, the benefits of resettlement were complicated by the loss of another home and the rupture of another displacement.

When Maxime and his sisters were accepted for resettlement, he felt torn between the joy of moving to the U.S. and the sadness of leaving behind the life he had worked so hard to build in Uganda. He explained,

It was quite difficult...we really made a huge family in Uganda...We were really happy to come to the United States, to be sure, but also...when you have lived in a place for eight years, you had assimilated...I used to pass the language [in school] with As, because the more I live in Uganda, we felt quite assimilated into the culture, and it was really sad to see us leaving some of the friends that we made.

Maxime fled the DRC as a child, and though resettling to San Diego offered an incomparable opportunity, he would also be forsaking the progress he had made and community he had found.

Because of her family's multiple migrations, Pascaline struggled with what it meant to consider the refugee camp where she spent her formative year as her home. After her parents fled the DRC, Pascaline was born in Tanzania and moved to Botswana when she was four years old. She spent the next eleven years living in a refugee camp where her life was shaped by restricted rights, immobility, food insecurity, and poor healthcare. She said, "I'm just grateful to be out of there and healthy." She added, "So, that's my home. I call it home because I don't really know what place to call home...Botswana is what I know most of, and then we moved here...It's really [the only] home that I know, right?" It was Botswana's poor treatment of refugees that

ultimately pushed Pascaline's family to apply for resettlement rather than the pull of a better life in the U.S. She explained,

I feel like people think we come here because we want to and that when we get here, like everything is done for us...[I]t wasn't our choice to leave Botswana and come here. They didn't want refugees there, so we had to leave, and then you don't choose where you're going, like, they just send you...[W]e uproot our lives somewhere else to come and start here, and it's a whole different world compared to where we come from and like everything, everything's so different.

Even though she was living under conditions of extreme hardship and with limited futures in Botswana, Pascaline's resettlement to the U.S. still felt like an uprooting.

In a perfect world, refugees would never have had to flee their home countries in the first place, living a peaceful life uninterrupted by the wars and persecution that ultimately drove them to leave. Maxime explained, "nobody wants to leave Congo. Nobody wants to leave. Everyone wants to stay in Congo, nobody wants to leave." An Iraqi Christian in San Diego explained the internal struggle that persisted as she left her country. In spite of the home, career, and family she enjoyed in Iraq, the threat of religiously motivated violence became intolerable. She put it quite simply: "you don't want to leave, but you have to leave," as the need to flee surpassed the desire to stay. This woman noted the particular pain she felt knowing that leaving Iraq meant forever losing her childhood home. A casework staff member in Boise acknowledged how if refugees did actually have a choice, they would probably never have become migrants. She said, "Where's the choice in any of this? No one's really choosing this. They'd like to stay home."

Andre remembers how his early childhood in the DRC was calm and easy until war turned him into a refugee. He explained,

Life was perfect, middle-class family. My father had a business, everything was looking up. And then war started when I was eight. Things started going up and down, we went away to the villages, came back after the war...Found our house still together. We rebuild our life again, and everything went back for two years. Then the second Congo war started, and that's when I finally left the country.

War in the DRC put an end to what had once been Andre's "perfect, middle-class" life. Despite his family's efforts to regain normalcy and the life they desired after an internal migration, ongoing war made it impossible.

Ma Htet, a young Chin woman, reflected on how her family's difficult adjustment in San Diego was complicated by the persecution they had experienced in Myanmar and the forced nature of their migration. She explained how being a refugee in the U.S. was "really hard for us, and then it's not like we want[ed] to leave our own country, you know?" The emotionally fraught circumstances of their resettlement was all the more stinging when they felt unwelcome. Ma Htet added, "it's even harder for us when people tell us that we don't belong in here and then tell us to go back to our country...We know that we don't belong here...I wish that they understood the feeling of losing our own home and like moving to different countries...sometimes if we don't get accepted or fit in any place or in certain group, we just don't know what to do, like we're just lost." Xenophobic slurs to "go back" sting particularly hard for refugees who never wanted to leave in the first place and have no place to go back to. Though Ma Htet's family had left Myanmar almost a decade earlier and had been in San Diego for seven years, she at times still felt unmoored.

This chapter situates resettlement within the full scope of refugees' migration trajectories and lives, taking what Arar and FitzGerald (forthcoming) call a "systems approach" to understanding forced migration. When refugees are resettled to the Global North, they do not start a 'new' life. Rather they continue lives that have been punctuated by uprootings and displacements. Like other migrants, refugees are transnational (Castles 2003), and it is important to recognize how they remain connected to places and people left behind. Resettling to the U.S. is a complicated process that can simultaneously evoke hope, regret, excitement, and grief.

Resettlement does not erase or undo all that came before, as refugees' past continues to inform their present and future through "entangled timelines" (Omar 2022). Feelings of uncertainty may persist even as refugees gain newfound security and stable legal status (Omar 2022; Dromgold-Sermen 2020). The 'solution' of resettlement does not resolve all that has been lost, as it is far from a panacea for the injuries of forced migration.

Ever since her home burned down in Syria, Yara has felt like her family has been on the move, even after their arrival in the U.S. Initially resettled to a city in the Southwestern U.S., Yara's family relocated after eight months to join the growing Syrian community in San Diego. Though Yara and her siblings were doing well in school, the high cost of living in San Diego made the family consider moving yet again. A year into their resettlement, Yara still felt far from settled. She said,

We are thinking about moving again... We don't really want to move, because it's been like moving since in Syria, when our house burned down, we have been moving so much. And it was like in Jordan, we moved to like eight houses... like we had to clean up, and we had to take on everything, start all over again. That was really hard, to do all that again and again. We just wanted to settle down, but it's really hard to like find that house.

Though resettlement brought security to some aspects of their lives, Yara's family still endured a transience that began when they first left their home in Syria. Yara was tired of moving, but a sense of rootedness remained elusive.

When framed as a durable solution, resettlement carries a presumption of permanency (Van Selm 2014), though this assumption may not always align with refugees' views. Given their history of multiple migrations combined with the deep pull to return to a homeland at peace, some refugees may instead view resettlement as a temporary necessity and a safer place from which to wait out an aspirational return to the home country, regardless of how realistic that return may be. This preference for return among some refugees should not be surprising, as they

became migrants out of compulsion, characterized by “the reluctance to uproot oneself, and the absence of positive original motivations to settle elsewhere” (Kunz 1973:130). While some refugees are indeed content to continue their lives in the U.S., others may always yearn for and envision a return. My own bias about the permanency of resettlement was challenged when a young Congolese mother who had been resettled in Boise one week earlier was asked during her service plan meeting at the RA about her long-term goals. She responded that she wanted to earn enough money in the U.S. to buy a home in the DRC. I was taken aback that after having only just arrived in the U.S., she was already looking toward leaving and returning to the country from which her family had long been displaced. After multiple displacements, it is understandable that hopes for the future may be inextricable from what was left behind (Omar 2022).

This enduring hope to return combined with the transnational nature of refugees’ networks may shape how refugees make decisions after arriving in the U.S. A service provider in San Diego who offers support to refugees experiencing domestic violence explained how complicated the decision-making process becomes for refugees in abusive relationships. Not only must refugees consider the immediate consequences of their decisions within the context of their life in the U.S., they must also think through potential repercussions should they ever return to the home country. She said, “They want services but at the same time, they don’t know how to ask for it because still, they have the challenge of what the community will think of me. Not only here [but] back home. But if we end up getting back home there will be a different punishment back home.” Regardless of its likelihood, the prospect of return may nonetheless wield significant power as refugees navigate life in the U.S.



Given aspirations for return, resettlement to the Global North may always remain second best to the imagined life that could have been had war, persecution, and violence not driven refugees from their homes. As Portes (1969) found in his study of Cuban refugees who arrived in the U.S. in the 1960s, “the idea of having to resettle and start anew in the United States was among the most dreaded possibilities” (507). In such cases, a longing to return to the home country may persist regardless of successes in the U.S. Hafiz explained how this dilemma shapes how refugees’ think about the future. He said,

I mean everybody likes their country, but the most important thing is our lives. Day by day the situation became worse, so most of the people tried to go out of the country to a safe place, wherever it is...It’s hard to say that in the next year or five years or three years there will be peace in Afghanistan. All the people are just waiting outside. I see some people that have been in Europe or in the United States for a long time, but still they hope that Afghanistan is good so they will go back.

Though his children were thriving in school in San Diego, this man longed for Afghanistan. For older refugees whose resettlement took place at a later moment in the life course, the home country may always remain at the top of their hierarchy of destinations.

Political and structural factors shape forced migration trajectories (Bernstein 2018), and refugees arrive with complicated histories. The path ahead once in the U.S. is not straightforward. While resettlement does provide the stability of legal recognition and institutional support denied to many asylum seekers, framing refugee status and resettlement as “a privilege or entitlement” (Zolberg et al. 1989:3) obfuscates the many challenges that follow refugees to their resettlement destination and await them after arrival. Though refugees resettled to the U.S. gain the financial and social service assistance of the USRP, they arrive without the supports that migration scholars have long noted are important in facilitating incorporation, such as social network and community ties, offers of employment or education, and financial savings.

If not for the USRP, these refugees would have had no other means of getting to or sustaining themselves in the U.S.

Hafiz was resettled in San Diego through the Special Immigrant Visa Program due to his work with the U.S. military. He shared how challenging it was to start over in a new country with limited resources, particularly given the landmine injury he had suffered on the job. He said, “When I moved from Afghanistan to here, I had only \$500. So that’s good that I received some welcome money...and I bought some furniture, carpet, something like that to my house, but my life started from zero. And it’s very difficult for me, because I’m disabled person...so with...six children and newly started life in America, it was very difficult.” Despite his own family’s struggles adapting to life in the U.S., Hafiz acknowledged how much more overwhelming the task of resettlement is for the Afghan refugees coming from refugee camps in Pakistan. He continued, “They are completely uneducated people. They are very, very poor people, refugees. They came from torture, from Pakistan. Even I saw the family, they came from tent, under the tent from Pakistan...So refugee people, they cannot speak English. They don’t have any money...They are very difficult for them to continue with their life here.” With little to no savings or support system beyond the RA, such refugees have an arduous road ahead.

By framing resettlement as a form of displacement, this chapter seeks to foreground the difficult and complicated nature of this undertaking given all of the ways that refugees must cope with the past while gaining their bearings in a new country. Resettlement is a lifesaving and essential tool of humanitarian protection, and many refugees do demonstrate successful integration over time according to a variety of measures, such as employment rates, English proficiency, educational attainment, and naturalization (Portes & Rumbaut 2001; Bernstein 2018; Tran & Lara-García 2020; Khuu & Bean 2021). However, it is also important to acknowledge the

complexities of resettlement as refugees navigate new struggles and opportunities in the U.S. After nearly two months in San Diego, Nina, a Congolese mother, shared how much the resettlement process had exhausted her. She said, “Life is too complicated here. It’s giving me a headache. Everyone is so busy.” Her husband Joseph had begun working six days a week as she continued to manage their various appointments at social service agencies and attend English classes with her toddler in tow while her other children were in school. The following day I waited with Nina and her toddler at the Department of Motor Vehicles to apply for her State ID card. She asked me if life in the U.S. would also require this many appointments and visits to offices. Prior studies of refugee integration tend to overlook the complexities of early resettlement and the immediate myriad challenges that refugees face upon arrival. While many refugees do achieve stability and success, this chapter highlights on the enormous task of resettling in a new country.

With an exhausting pace of meetings and office visits along with language challenges, the resettlement process can feel alienating and impersonal. From the moment refugees arrive, they receive a highly standardized protocol of assistance, which an RA administrator described as a “conveyor belt of services.” Strict guidelines combined with limited time and resources make it difficult for RA caseworkers to customize service provision. Refugees’ immediate material needs, such as housing and public assistance, are prioritized at the expense of the human dimensions of resettlement. In the rush of initial service delivery, refugees seldom have time to connect more meaningfully with their caseworkers and convey how they feel about their resettlement, what is most important to them, and their aspirations for the future. The early days and weeks of a refugee’s resettlement are filled with appointments, paperwork, enrollments, and orientations, not to mention settling into a new home and community. Table 4 below provides a

general overview of the services typically involved in the R&P period that spans a refugee's first 90 days in the U.S. Refugees are put on this “conveyor belt of services” as they manage the displacing effects of resettlement.

All of the change that comes with initial resettlement can be jarring, and it takes time for the mind and body to adjust. It is important to note that refugees are dealing with this rigorous pace of resettlement services while also coping with the effects of their long journeys, including jet lag and exhaustion, not to mention the accumulation of the material, emotional, and physical costs of waiting for resettlement (Fee 2021). Two days after a young Congolese family was resettled from Tanzania to Boise, the father shared with me how despite the abundance of food, he found that he had little appetite since his arrival. His body still ached from their long trip to the U.S., which began with a two-week stay in a transit center to undergo the final preparations for resettlement. They then embarked on a multi-leg flight itinerary from Tanzania to Boise, including layovers in the Middle East and Los Angeles, all with an infant in tow.

Table 4. Reception & Placement (R&P) Services

<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>Activity or Service</b>
Day 1 (arrival)	Airport pickup Brought to furnished housing (temporary or permanent) Initial home safety orientation Hot meal provided for family, along with basic groceries
Day 2	24-hour home visit Intake paperwork Explanation of Reception & Placement (R&P) benefits Provision of check for pocket money Trip to the bank to cash pocket money check First visit to the Resettlement Agency Receive donations of hygiene items, weather appropriate clothing, etc.
Within Week 1	Welfare enrollment Social Security card application First medical appointment First grocery shopping trip Service plan meeting Public transportation training
Within Month 1	Enrollment in English classes, begin English classes

	Enrollment of children in school, begin school Enrollment in Employment Program, begin Job Readiness classes 30-day home visit Sign lease agreement First rental payment
By Month 3	Cultural Orientation Cultural Orientation assessment Family budget Begin employment

**Confronting Expectations**

The displacing effects of resettlement are all the more disquieting for refugees because of the dissonance between their expectations for life in the U.S. and the reality upon arrival. Even when resettlement evokes mixed emotions, it nonetheless represents hopefulness for a different future. Rosine explained how a centralized board in the refugee camp in Kenya that displayed the names of the refugees who had moved forward in the resettlement application process came to signify the possibility of an alternative life. Rosine said, “the board, that was your hope. So that board was like, that was your hope right there, so people check it every day all the time.” The “promise of resettlement” holds significant power in protracted situations and is even exploited by countries of asylum to manage large refugee populations (Arar & FitzGerald forthcoming). Because the refugee groups prioritized for resettlement are typically in conditions of extreme vulnerability and precarity (UNHCR 2020), resettlement comes to embody lofty expectations fueled by the enduring power of the American Dream. While some refugees do eventually achieve the life that they aspired to in the U.S., it is not without struggle, sacrifice, and disillusionment. Other refugees may confront obstacles that derail their aspirations for the stable, secure, and prosperous future they imagined would be possible in the U.S. A young Somali man in San Diego remarked how the excitement of resettlement is propped up by misconceptions about life in the U.S. He said, “We are real excited...it’s really, really cool when you think you’re

going to United States...Other people think that guy has really become rich. But actually that's not something true...They're expecting [in] the United States...you're living easy lives. But actually we live real hard lives. And you have to work if you want to live here.”

A Congolese refugee shared at a community event in Boise how the limitation imposed on refugees in Kenya bolstered this contrast between their lived reality in the country of asylum and their assumptions of prosperity in the U.S. He said, “In Kenya, a refugee was like a useless person, worthless, so painful.” Once he had arrived in Boise, those he left behind in the camp held on to presumptions that did not reflect his new life. He continued, “In Africa, if they know you are in the U.S., they think you have too much money, a money tree.” He lived as leanly as possible in order to send financial support to family members still in Kenya. He said, “I sacrificed myself...If you don't sacrifice yourself, it's very difficult to assist someone.” Research has shown how, despite their own financial instability, refugees in the Global North often prioritize remittances ahead of their own wellbeing, at times even sending portions of their welfare assistance, which exacerbates their own economic insecurity and upholds misconceptions of their newfound wealth (Lindley 2009; Abdi 2015).

For refugees who were successful and financially stable in the home country, expectations of particular career trajectories can make resettlement feel humiliating and degrading. Chapter 3 discusses in more detail how refugees, particularly those from professional backgrounds, experience deskilling through initial employment services and job placement. One Afghan man who had previously worked for a major international organization was cautioned not to come to the U.S. by a relative who had already been resettled. This relative had been in the U.S. for over a decade and felt like he still had nothing to show after all these years. After moving forward with the resettlement process despite being warned otherwise, this Afghan man

began working the overnight shift at a 7-Eleven convenience store in San Diego, earning one-third of his prior salary.

Misguided expectations can even make refugees feel as though they are worse off than before. Toussaint, a Congolese community leader in Boise shared how disappointment tends to follow the initial relief of resettlement. He told me how refugees “feel frustrated,” and think, “Ugh, I thought this is the better solution, but [it’s] not.” He added, “everyone is happy when they just get resettled, but after some time, some of us, we feel, no, if I should know this, I should not come...The resettlement [to] US is a good solution for refugees, but because of these reasons I’m saying; there is habit, there is culture, laws. This makes refugees to feel uncomfortable.” Considering the hardships that greet refugees upon arrival, the known challenges in the country of asylum may seem less daunting than the unknown challenges that lay ahead. Especially at the beginning, the displacing effects of resettlement can be overwhelming, and some refugees express regret. The enormity of this transition in the early months is not lost on RA staff. A casework staff member in Boise struggled with how best to convey to new arrivals that they their lives were going to get a lot worse before they get better.

While refugees experience greater relative hardship in the country of asylum, the struggles they face upon resettlement are still considerable. Six years after his arrival in Boise, Bastien reflected on how this comparison between life before and after resettlement can obfuscate the very real challenges that refugees encounter in the U.S. If he used life in the refugee camp in Tanzania where he grew up as his benchmark, the displacement of resettlement seemed less severe, yet it did not make it any less real. He said,

If you can compare with where I came from, oh my God, it’s very, very good. But then when you become in America, when you start living here, then you start getting those kinds of challenges here, you know? You can’t compare with where you came from because you know how hard it is there, but the challenge of here,

too. If you forget where you came from, you might feel it is kind of like hard, but if you can compare you will still think that, oh, you can get this opportunity.

Refugees find themselves grappling with this comparative ambiguity. Though their situation has improved, it may nonetheless remain difficult. Bastien added that during his early days in Boise he was “happy but confused.” The challenges and disappointments of resettlement are worth recognizing even when they are an improvement from prior struggles.

The 90-day timeframe that governs the provision of R&P services is arbitrary and does not neatly align with a refugee's integration. Amidst all of the newness that accompanies arrival in the resettlement destination, it can feel daunting to learn early on that case management services will formally end in three short months. Refugees' expectations of ongoing assistance confront the reality of an underfunded and overstretched social service system. At Nina and Joseph's 30-day homevisit, their caseworker explained how the transition away from the RA would take place. He told them, "I'm not going to disappear. But new families are coming every month and they need more help." Nina asked if they could still come to him after five or six months. Their caseworker assured them, "Yes, we say three months, but it's always longer. It's for the rest of your life." Though this caseworker encouraged their independence, both for his own and his clients' benefit. He told them, “Try first, and then come to me if you need [help]. If I show you [how to do something] once, then I won't show you again." His reassurance did not relieve Nina's anxieties, and the ticking clock of initial R&P services continued to trouble her. Almost two weeks later, she asked this caseworker, "After six months are you just going to leave us? We're still new." Though Nina had been in the U.S. for six weeks, her feelings of displacement persisted. She did not yet feel comfortable with the intricacies of life in San Diego, and she feared that her resettlement services would end before her family had found the stability and security that continued to elude them.



Bastien noted how this imposed timeline can make newly arrived refugees feel abandoned and vulnerable. He said,

after agents decided to leave you, and it will just be on your own. They will tell you, “Now you become American after six months,” which is not true. Some of them, they will leave them after three months and tell them, “Now you’ll become American.” It’s not easy...A lot of people are getting challenged because the agency are leaving them the time they are not ready yet to be [by] themselves, you know?

A caseworker in San Diego echoed this sentiment. In his experience, the R&P period frequently extended beyond 90 days in practice, and he found the program’s timeframe to be “way unrealistic.” He added how he had recently helped a family resolve an issue with their landlord two years after their resettlement. While RA staff do often provide ongoing assistance to “extended clients,” the artificial cutoff date for R&P services makes refugees feel vulnerable and makes caseworkers feel overextended.

### **Resettlement and Emotional Wellbeing**

Despite the relief of finally being resettled and the steady pace of initial R&P services, the early weeks in a new country can take on an unanticipated loneliness as refugees adjust to their surroundings. Contrary to other immigrants whose migration to the U.S. is driven and facilitated by social networks (Massey et al. 1987; Hagan 1998; Hernández-León 2008), refugees, especially those arriving as “free cases,” are resettled in the absence of preexisting ties. Even for those resettled through a “U.S. tie,” typically a family member or friend whose resettlement preceded them, they are still arriving in a destination where they know only a few people who may also be recently resettled. Refugees do not benefit from the same network dynamics and psychosocial benefits that ease the initial settlement and incorporation of other migrants. As a result, resettlement may be followed by feelings of unwelcome solitude.

When persecution in the home country targets certain groups, families may be split when only one person is forced to flee. Consequently, the stresses of forced migration and resettlement are augmented by solitude. Kazem fled from Iran to Turkey on his own after a combination of accusations put him at risk of imprisonment. He arrived in Boise as a single case where he felt like he was without a support system to cope with the stresses of resettlement. He said, “I felt a relief and lots of grief and sorrow, because of separat[ing] from the people that I knew, cause here I’m alone you know. I have nobody. So, if I die, no one’s going to tell my family. And there’s no option for refugees who are single who are alone, that if they die, who’s going to tell their family? Nobody.” As the only member of his family who had become a refugee, Kazem felt particularly isolated, living a reality that felt completely apart from everyone he left behind.

In particular, the living arrangements secured by the RA as well as unfamiliar cultural norms can make refugees feel isolated upon arrival. One young Congolese man spoke at a community event about how his family’s first few weeks in Boise were characterized by loneliness. After moving into their apartment, they had expected their new neighbors to stop by to welcome them, but no one ever came. Instead his family spent their early days in the U.S. reminiscing about the life they left behind. When Pascal’s family arrived in Boise, he was eager to meet new people and try out the English phrases he had been practicing in the weeks leading up to his departure from a refugee camp in Tanzania. He told me, “I was happy really to be in a new town, but, you know, the ground smelled different, water tasted very different, people were very different, and I wanted to go to meet people...Then, a few weeks of being here, I didn’t make friends, and didn’t know anyone, and we were just ourselves in the house.” They had arrived in February, so he figured that this solitude was in part due to the winter weather. Much to his disappointment, his family felt just as isolated as the seasons changed. Pascal continued,

“The neighborhood was quiet, that’s how I can describe it...I was thinking it [was] just because it was cold. No, even in June, in the summer, I didn’t see anyone outside actually. It’s only one person here, once in a while, we can see one person with his dog running, and those were not people from my neighborhood...there wasn’t really much of interactions.” Likewise, when Andre arrived in Boise as a single case, he was surprised by how little his surroundings resembled his perceptions of what a U.S. city would look and feel like. He was struck by how quiet it was and how alone he felt. “No neighbors saying hello, no one talks to you.” Though he quickly gained employment, his days took on a lonely routine. “It was terrible. I would go to work, come home, and be alone and isolated.”

With limited English proficiency and in the absence of close ties in Boise, Bastien confronted similar feelings of seclusion when he was first resettled. He said, “when I came here, too, there are a lot of challenges, because you don’t know the language. So imagine you don’t know the language, and you don’t know anybody. How will I feel?” Though his family had the support of the RA, their caseworker did not always answer or return their calls, and Bastien knew that he was busy juggling the needs of other newly arrived families like his. Growing up in a refugee camp in Tanzania, Bastien used to regularly socialize with his neighbors and friends. But once in Boise, it felt like a “transformation of life.” Without places for young people to easily congregate, everyone spent more time at home. People were busier, and over time, Bastien grew accustomed to being on his own.

This lack of connection can persist beyond the initial resettlement phase. Despite hardships in the home country or country of asylum, refugees may nonetheless have enjoyed a deep sense of community, and social life in the U.S. may feel particularly isolating and compartmentalized. Hafiz explained how, “if you live in Afghanistan, you know more than 100

families, and they are coming to your house. They're helping you. You can help them. But in the United States, I'm living three years in one apartment. Even I don't know my downstairs neighbor because they don't want the connection with you." Refugees with family or friends already in the resettlement destination may be surprised when their close ties do not offer the hospitality that would have once been customary in the home country. Hafiz had an uncle already in San Diego and was taken aback by the limits of his welcome. Hafiz said, "I thought when I am going there, my uncle will hug me...When I found my uncle and aunt, only for five minutes he was very kind. After that, he told me, 'You can go to your house.'...I don't want to blame them because the situation, the system is like that." The constraints of small apartments and occupancy limits combined with inflexible work schedules cause new arrivals to feel slighted by their own kin. With time Hafiz came to understand the impossibility of providing the deep hospitality that new arrivals yearned for and expected once he was on the other side. He said,

My brother-in-law came from Afghanistan, and he thought like me, right? When he come to my house and he found me, my wife, we are leaving home, and he told me, "What can I do in your house when you are not here?" So immediately they rented a house, and they left my house. Because when they are coming, they're thinking you are sitting with them and laughing with them. I told them, "only Monday, Tuesday, I can sit. I don't want to lose my job for you." So this is my life. So these are the things we thought before and they completely changed here.

Even refugees with kinship networks in the resettlement destination are not spared from the loneliness of resettlement.

When I dropped off some paperwork for Jose, a young Congolese man who had just been resettled with his wife and baby, he was sitting outside of his father-in-law's home on a particularly secluded side street in Boise. He had been in the U.S. for less than 48 hours, and he and his wife were spending much of their time with their relatives who had been resettled about six months earlier. Yet on that Friday afternoon most of the family was out. The adults were at

work or English class and the children had not all returned from school. After I handed him the paperwork, Jose wanted me to stay and chat. He told me about how there were always people around at the refugee camp in Tanzania where he had lived. Now that he had made it to Boise, he sat alone in a folding chair in his father-in-law's driveway and saw no one.

Similarly, when Fidel's caseworker paid him a visit four days after he had arrived in Boise, Fidel told him that he was lonely and wanted to get a cell phone so that he could communicate with his friends and family elsewhere. Due to an unforeseen and last-minute change in Fidel's living situation, he was temporarily staying with two brothers who had already been in Boise for several years. Though they were all Congolese, these brothers were still strangers whose couch Fidel was sleeping on until his housing situation was resolved. The brothers were busy with work and school during the day and typically ate dinner at their mother's apartment in the evenings, leaving Fidel on his own during his first several days in the U.S. One of the brothers noted how Fidel did not yet understand how life works in the U.S. People are busy and do not just sit at home. Nonetheless, Fidel's initial resettlement was shaped by loneliness. He was disconnected from those he left behind in the refugee camp as he passed these early days in someone else's apartment in Boise.

As refugees gain their bearings, resettlement can feel infantilizing. Despite being capable adults, refugees must relearn how to do basic tasks in a new country with different conventions and norms. Amara explained how her parents' inexperience with certain aspects of everyday life in the U.S., such as paying bills, likened them to children. She said, "Even though my parents were grown-ups, they were kids, because it's the first time we learned about bills." Refugees resettled after years in a refugee camp must quickly become proficient in competencies critical to their wellbeing in the U.S. Amara added how this knowledge deficit can feel degrading and

humiliating. She wished people better understood the psychological impact of becoming a refugee, or “the trauma part.” She continued, “The psychological aspect is very overlooked. People just expect us to be grateful to be here... Your sense of self is stripped when you’re a refugee... You’re stripped of your personhood... You don’t just decide to become a refugee. It’s because there’s some real issue.” Another refugee in Boise noted how this initial period of learning is further complicated by other competing priorities, such as parenting, language learning, and becoming economically self-sufficient. These adjustments all happen simultaneously and require significant mental and emotional energy.

By virtue of being in a new country and without the accumulated resources they once had to resolve minor issues, refugees are put in a position where they must frequently ask for help. After a young Congolese man’s bicycle broke, he had to seek out assistance from his caseworker. The repair was minor, and this young man noted how he could have fixed it on his own if only he had tools at home. Refugees also risk their dignity when they must navigate various forms of charity to sustain themselves and their families. This same young Congolese man reported to his caseworker that volunteers from a church had offered free groceries to a group of newly arrived refugees. When he unpacked the food at home, he noticed that everything was several months expired, including meat that had turned black. While he did not want to get this church group in trouble, he also worried that the food could make someone ill.

At a legislative event with members of the Idaho State Congress, a formerly resettled refugee likened initial resettlement to “wandering through the wilderness.” Refugees may feel unmoored as so many aspects of their lives have changed and previously simple tasks demand more energy and attention. In a short period of time, they must gain employment, manage their finances, learn English, navigate public transportation, and attend to the needs of their children.

Refugees are managing these competing demands all while coping with the ongoing traumas of forced migration such as the loss of homeland, family separation, and the death of loved ones. Though resettlement resolves many of the immediate insecurities in refugees' lives, it does not automatically remedy lingering mental health issues. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, the stressors of early resettlement may be felt more acutely for those who have already experienced significant trauma. Given the enormity of the task that lies ahead, refugees may not have the luxury of focusing on their emotional wellbeing when they are simply trying to get by. Less pressing issues are pushed aside by matters of survival. A community partner who worked with refugee youth in Boise noted how the struggle to simply get by always took precedence. He said, "Hey, I need freaking food, I don't have funds, I don't have a place to live,' and it's hard to dig into any of the identity stuff when you're hungry." When urgent issues superseded less immediate ones, mental health is rarely prioritized.

The effects of trauma may linger in the background as refugees go through the necessary motions of their early resettlement services. An Afghan single mother of three young children experienced a tragic loss prior to her resettlement, and she continued to suffer from anxiety several months after her arrival in the U.S. At times she had difficulty recalling basic biographical information when asked at social service offices. Her caseworker told me how he would be talking to her and all of a sudden "she's gone and her mind is somewhere else." Another Afghan single mother who had been in the U.S. for several months could not recall her address, how much she received in monthly cash aid, or how much she received in monthly food stamps when asked by her caseworker. Though the caseworker had reviewed this information with her and was frustrated by her lack of attention, the woman replied, "my memory is bad because of things that happened." Trauma, stress, and the cognitive load of adjusting to life in a

new country shape refugees' emotional wellbeing during this initial resettlement stage. Some may also be dealing with the aftereffects of physical traumas that they or their family members have suffered, managing disabilities, chronic pain, or recovery from treatment and surgery, all of which complicate the expectations and adjustments of early resettlement.

Though RAs help connect refugees to counseling services, refugees may resist due to the stigma associated with mental health issues. At a community event, a young Iraqi woman shared how she was reluctant to attend counseling sessions after receiving a referral at her first medical appointment soon after arriving in Boise. She explained how depression was understood differently during times of war. In the context of life-threatening violence, mental health issues seemed trivial in comparison. Though she did agree to attend counseling session, she did not initially see the point. Another panelist chimed in that she had a similar experience when referred to counselling services. Despite her skepticism, she began to look forward to the sessions because in the midst of the loneliness of initial resettlement, it at least gave her a reason to leave the apartment and an opportunity to interact with someone.

Considering the lasting mental health impacts of persecution, war, and forced migration, the displacement of resettlement can itself be felt as a form of trauma as resettlement is filled with a world of uncertainties and unknowns. When boarding a flight to the U.S., a refugee may be given little more than the name of her destination, which may prove meaningless at the time. Though a refugee may have heard rumors about what life will be like in the U.S. or have attended a few days of pre-departure cultural orientation classes, what awaits in the days and weeks ahead remains unclear, including their physical safety in a new country and community. A mental health professional in Boise explained,

I think [resettlement is] a huge trauma. And to anyone who's moved into another culture, you know how jarring that is. But to have these elements of you're



moving from likely a camp setting or somewhere that was unsafe into what you thought was going to be safer. But you have a loss of community. So there's grief. You have suddenly a loss of a lot of your power with language, with just ability to navigate and all other systems. So there's a lot of grief and trauma in that process. Then there's a lot that we do and have built into our systems that's inherently traumatizing too with our requirements... You do this or we take your money which takes your house or you do this or we'll take your kids. And how traumatic is that?...So your safety as a human is threatened when your house is threatened, when your finances are threatened, when your kids, right? That is trauma. And that's built into our resettlement process.

The week after a Congolese family of six arrived in San Diego, I joined a caseworker to help assemble furniture for the single mother and her children. In the process of moving the mother's bed, we found a large kitchen knife hidden under her mattress. A few weeks after another Congolese family was resettled in San Diego, the mother mentioned how she was concerned by some of the behavior she had seen from fellow passengers on the bus. She asked if any of these people might be carrying a gun and, if so, how she could keep her young children safe while using public transportation. When refugees step off of the airplane in their resettlement destination, they are must figure out how to calculate risk given so many unknowns.

Resettlement services and financial assistance programs are numerous and complicated, and the speed with which services are delivered during a refugee's first 90 days can be overwhelming. Because the initial Reception and Placement (R&P) period is time limited, refugees are bombarded with programmatic requirements and bureaucratic processes which often begin within hours of arrival. Whereas caseworkers have the perspective and experience to understand the long-term trajectory of resettlement, arriving refugees are at a knowledge disadvantage and lack familiarity with how the winding journey of resettlement typically unfolds. The progression of R&P service delivery takes place in a vacuum of information, as refugees are without a roadmap for service delivery. While RA staff are deeply familiar with what the R&P period entails and the "conveyor belt" of services that await each new client,

refugees are ignorant of what will be provided and when as well as the important milestones that punctuate a successful resettlement. Though highly formulaic, R&P services are not intuitive from the vantage point of the client, leaving them unsure of what support they will receive and how their lives will progress, including needs as basic as food and housing. Without benefitting from the perspective that comes with experience, refugees can only see as far as their current situation, which can be shocking, concerning, and disappointing. Amara, a young Ethiopian woman whose family arrived in Boise when she was eleven years old felt like the most challenging part of her family's resettlement was her parents' inability to gauge their progress during those early months. She explained, "We weren't sure about our case. Like are we good? Are we doing good? We didn't have checkpoints. So oftentimes, we experienced feeling like a burden...Maybe if there was something...that would reiterate like, 'What you should be worried about is this thing.'...you know, just giving you an outline of the steps, I think that would be very good." While caseworkers can tell if a family is on track with resettlement objectives, the refugees themselves do not have the luxury of this perspective.

With all of the linguistic, economic, and cultural changes that accompany resettlement, the road ahead can feel like a black box. Amara recalled the stress that her parents felt in those early months. She wished someone could have

[let] them know that it's okay to relax. Because I think for my parents, they just felt like they were never doing enough. And it's already a big change, because here, both parents work, versus at home, where maybe you have the income earner, and then the rest of the family plays different roles. So just lots of psychological change, but then letting them know like, "You worry about the language at this stage. You're doing good."

The absence of a long-term perspective about one's resettlement trajectory heightens feelings of displacement and reliance on the RA. Caseworkers work off of an internalized schedule of service provision and are also aware of various strategies and backup measures to ensure that

clients can meet their expenses, especially for housing. For example, there are funds for emergency rental assistance, but they often only become available after refugees fall short on their rent or require applications that take time to process and do not guarantee approval, all of which feed stress. During my fieldwork, caseworkers always managed to secure stopgap funds to prevent eviction, but they were often last minute or piecemeal solutions.

The timing of a refugee's arrival can shape how supported and informed they feel during those early days. Resettlement agencies operate during standard weekday business hours and are closed on the weekend. Refugees whose flight arrives in the U.S. at the end of the week may feel abandoned and unprepared to immediately spend the weekend without the support of their caseworker. For example, when I visited Jose two days after he arrived in Boise with his wife and baby, he was anxious to talk to his caseworker. It was Friday afternoon, and he would not see his caseworker again until Monday. Though the family had been to the RA the previous day for some of their initial intake meetings, Jose seemed restless. He was brimming with questions and eager to have a better sense of what lay ahead for himself and his family. They were in temporary housing and everything still seemed in flux. While his caseworker knew that over the coming days and weeks Jose's family would be taken grocery shopping, receive more money, move into permanent housing, enroll in English classes, and begin employment services, Jose was not privy to the routines of resettlement or the steps that would happen in due time. Instead, he was focused on how he would not see his caseworker for the next two days. When his caseworker stopped by little later, Jose expressed concern that he had only been to the RA once. He wanted to know when his family would see a doctor and when he would start working and earning money. He was ready to begin building his life in a way that had not been possible in a refugee camp, yet he still felt in the dark about when and how it would happen. He told his caseworker,

“we left [the camp] and came here for money, not to joke around.” Without a clear sense of the progression of his family’s resettlement, Jose was growing impatient.

### **Displacing Families**

Forced migration alters families. When people flee during the chaos of war, they do not always reach the same points of safety, nor does everyone survive. If children are not at home when violence strikes, they may be compelled to leave without first being able to locate the rest of their families. Such was the case for many of the “Lost Boys” of Sudan who were tending to livestock when violence struck their homes, forcing them to escape and embark on a long and arduous journey to safety without knowing what had befallen their parents or siblings (Bixler 2006). Omari was a young child in the DRC when his mother was killed. As the rest of the family escaped, he got separated from some of his siblings. For years, he lived in a refugee camp with his brother and sister, not knowing that his other siblings had also survived. Only after he was resettled in Boise did he reconnect with his siblings who were now more than 8,000 miles away in East Africa.

Yonas found himself on his own as a young child in the aftermath of war in Ethiopia. He recounted, “During the war, it started in 1998, and...I got divided from my family and I ended up in Eritrea and lived there for a while for four years. And then after the bloody war ended, I went back again to Ethiopia...in 2004. I couldn’t find my family, so I lived in [a] refugee camp.” After eight years in the camp, he was resettled to Boise alone. Similarly, Andre, a young Congolese man in Boise, was separated from his family when war reached his home city. He explained,

School, family scattered all over. [I] couldn’t find them, and they kept pushing me out from another city to another city and finally all the way out of the country...From there on, that was when things went down. Coming from this middle class [life] now I am hiding for my life...Then I have to move out of the area, because that area becomes unsafe. Then from that area to another to another and that’s how I became a refugee...I arrived in Zimbabwe, and it was like,

“you’re from the Congo so that means you’re a refugee”...I lived in a refugee camp, so things become hard and worse at twelve years old. Don’t know anybody, no parents, no family...I was alone completely. So I had to start to rebuild...and agree that this is the reality of my new life. I am an orphan.”

In an effort to find safety, Andre continued to move south, down eastern DRC before eventually arriving in Zimbabwe unsure of the fate of his family. Family separation may also be a strategic decision in times of conflict. As life in the DRC grew increasingly dangerous, Ashina’s mother fled to Kampala, Uganda with the children while her father stayed behind in the DRC to continue running his business.

Just as forced migration can alter family composition, resettlement can prolong or even create new separations. This section demonstrates how the resettlement system, beginning with the application process in the country of asylum, can have a displacing effect on family units, adding complicating changes that further disrupt kinship networks and households. Resettlement can make permanent the initial separations caused by conflict and flight or cause new separations that become difficult to rectify. Idil’s mother fled Somalia alone and was the only member of her family to seek refuge in Yemen. Her resettlement to San Diego years later with her children added more borders and miles between Idil’s mother and her surviving relatives who had ended up elsewhere in East Africa. Idil explained, “when the war happened, my mom left by herself. So she basically got in a boat with some people and just came to Yemen...So she had like no one, no family. So it was no siblings, no aunts or uncles. And I’ve never really seen my family.”

When I asked Idil if any of her relatives had also been resettled, she replied, “no, it’s only just us.” Resettlement further solidified the separation that first split Idil’s mother from her family.

The precarity of refugees’ circumstances combined with the bureaucracy of resettlement can further complicate family separations. When Ashina’s mother applied for resettlement in Kampala, she feared that any mention of her husband could put his life in danger while he

remained in the DRC, so she deliberately omitted him from their application. Once they were approved to come to the U.S., the family had to leave for Boise without him. Ashina's mother endured the early years of resettlement as a single mother of six children, coping with the emotional and financial burdens of parenting in a new country on her own, just as she had for five years in Uganda. Five years after their arrival in Boise, Ashina's family was finally reunited when her father was resettled following a complex application process. Though the family was relieved to be together again, this long separation caused some growing pains. Ashina's father had missed seeing firsthand the years of struggle and sacrifice that his wife had endured as she took care of their family. As a successful businessman, he had trouble adjusting to a manual labor job in Boise. Ashina said, "My dad got a job and he was complaining 'I can't work'...Like his back [was] really hurting." But his absence during the rest of his family's resettlement years earlier meant that he did not fully appreciate how much higher the stakes had been for his wife. Ashina told her father, "This is different, you have to adapt to [the] culture. You have to learn first before you take a move...My mom did, too. She had to learn how to ride a bike in the snow and all the weather and...get where she is right now...and do all the things that she did while you were not here. We had to tell him. He doesn't know anything about it."

The resettlement application process is fickle, but processing delays and internal decisions have very real consequences for families. After fleeing to Jordan from Syria, Yara's family was resettled to the Southwestern U.S. where they lived for several months before relocating to San Diego. Yara's aunt was resettled as well, though she was sent to Maryland. This aunt had applied for resettlement with Yara's grandmother. For some reason the aunt was approved first but was reassured that the grandmother would soon follow. Yara explained, "Like my aunt and my grandma, they were together in the same file, and they just separate them, and

they took my aunt to the United States, and now my grandma was by herself. And one day when she asked about her mom, they said, ‘She will follow you after a month.’ And it has been like a year to almost two years.” When I asked Yara if her grandmother was still in Jordan, she replied, “She died...She passed away three months ago. She really wanted to come. And she was trying to come and see us, but she couldn’t do that.” The distance between the Southwestern U.S. and Maryland was difficult for Yara’s aunt who was adjusting to life in a new country and city alone. Yara continued, “my aunt was really depressed, too, this time, because it was the first time for her to be by herself.” Resettlement application approvals and subsequent destination decisions can seem counterintuitive and create irreparable harm to families. Not only was Yara’s extended family resettled to opposite sides of the country, her grandmother was inexplicably left behind in Jordan where she died awaiting reunification. This loss was particularly damaging for Yara’s aunt who had to cope with the death of her mother and the challenges of resettlement alone. As Omar notes in her study of Syrian mothers in Canada, within many refugee communities “the family is the most important unit and extended families are preferred over the nuclear family system” (2022:7). The USRP privileges the resettlement of nuclear families even when extended kinship networks would be integral to refugees’ wellbeing. For Yara’s aunt, resettlement ultimately came at the cost of her family. The unpredictability of resettlement can engender separation, which is all the more harmful when loved ones are lost in the process. Later in our conversation, I asked Yara what could have been helpful for her family when they first arrived. She replied, “I think the most [helpful] thing is understanding that there is a lot of family we miss. If we could be together, that would be also really helpful.”

Refugees over eighteen years old may end up being processed as single cases whose application timeline can become split from the rest of their family. This often occurred with adult

children who were at times resettled separately as “split cases.” This staggered resettlement can create new strains, both for the portion of the family resettled first and the members temporarily left behind. For example, Didier, a young Congolese man fled to Kampala, Uganda with his mother and siblings. After his father disappeared, Didier became an important income earner for his family. For some reason, his mother and younger siblings were resettled to Boise almost a year before Didier’s case was approved. Not only was he left behind in Kampala alone, his mother was without her son’s assistance and support as she faced resettlement alone with her minor children. Such separations create practical challenges and emotional burdens for families that have already endured forcible displacement.

One distinctive way that resettlement alters family composition is by breaking up plural marriage families. Because plural marriages are not recognized by U.S. law, families with multiple spouses, typically multiple wives, must split when applying for resettlement. The husband can only apply for resettlement with one wife and their children as a nuclear family, while any other wives must apply alone for resettlement with their children. This practice effectively creates single mother families and upends the economic and caregiving systems that these families relied on for survival. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, single mother families with young children are among the most challenging cases given the USRP's expectations of economic self-sufficiency. Because the timeline for processing resettlement cases varies so widely, and not all applications are successful, these divided families may not be resettled at the same time, to the same place, or at all, separating them temporarily or permanently across multiple borders. In one instance, a woman was resettled to Boise with her children, while her husband and his other wife and children were resettled in Canada. When a single mother was resettled in San Diego with her six children, her caseworker inquired about



her marital status. This woman shared that she had a husband, but he remained in the refugee camp in Tanzania with his other wife and their children. Her caseworker knew that her road to resettlement in San Diego was not going to be easy.

Likewise in Boise, a Congolese single mother with seven children all under the age of ten years old struggled with the USRP's expectations for economic self-sufficiency given her demanding childcare responsibilities. The RA later learned that she was not a single mother at all. Only after another family was resettled to Boise and the newly arrived husband began splitting his time between two households did the RA learn that she was actually part of a plural marriage family that had been separated and fortuitously reunited in the same city. One of the casework staff members noted how much this woman's demeanor changed after her husband arrived. She said, "when she came, she was a mess, and then all of a sudden, it was like - and they told us they were relatives, and they were hanging out together, and I was like, 'Man, she has really shaped up. That was a quick turnaround. That was amazing.' She had such a struggle, such a struggle when she first came. And then he got here, and of course...it was your husband. She was fine." This practice of splitting plural marriages sets women up to fully assume economic and care responsibilities for their families for the first time while in a new country.

The drawn-out timeline for processing and approving resettlement applications does not compensate for how families evolve over time. In the years that pass between when a resettlement application is first submitted and when it is eventually approved, new family units are created while others dissolve. Many refugees I spoke with noted how a prevailing fear of "spoiling" their resettlement application shaped the decisions that they made while waiting in the country of asylum. In these instances, refugees worried that if updates were made to their file after it has been submitted, they risked "spoiling" the case by delaying or even jeopardizing

approval. Regardless of the validity of this concern, refugees awaiting resettlement function within a context of extreme uncertainty and precarity (Fee 2021), and they may decide that submitting updates proved too risky. However, by withholding new information, the family units approved for resettlement may have become outdated.

In the six years between when Bastien's parents applied for resettlement and their family left the refugee camp in Tanzania for Boise, Bastien got married, welcomed his first child, and was expecting his second child. At the time of our interview, Bastien had not seen his wife and eldest child since he was resettled five years earlier and had never met his youngest child who was born after his departure. He was still trying to find a way for his family to join him in the U.S. Bastien explained how the bureaucracy of camp management had made it difficult to combine his resettlement case with that of his wife and child. He said,

It was not easy to make my wife and my kid together because they have different cases with UNHCR...In the camp, there is the cards that we always live with...Those cards...that is how you're going to get food, how you get anything. Even in case to come to America, they will give you the cards to know if you are [the] right refugee. So sometimes, when you try to make two cards together,...the process might take so long. And...in that moment you might get not approved.

When Bastien was approved for resettlement as part of his parents' case, he did not know if he would get another chance to leave the refugee camp where he had lived for thirteen years. He made the decision to go without his child and pregnant wife out of fear that if he stayed as part of a newly combined case, they may never leave at all. Like many refugees in similar situations, he assumed that it would be easier to bring his family once he was in the U.S. But Bastien's attempts to reunite with his family had thus far been unsuccessful, which were complicated by the fact that he did not mention his new family at the time of his approval. He has since taken DNA tests to prove paternity of his children. As he approached eligibility to apply for U.S. citizenship, he hoped that this new legal status would carry more power to

successfully bring his family to the U.S. In the meantime, he sent remittances through a mobile phone app to help his wife as she raised their children in the refugee camp. But time and distance wore on Bastien. He said, "It's not easy living like five years without having your wife...So you don't have that hope...But I still love them." Though it is unclear whether amending a resettlement application already in the pipeline may jeopardize a case's progress, one man from Burundi shared how his family's resettlement to the U.S. was delayed by two years when the standard pre-departure medical screening revealed his wife's pregnancy. Because their case required updating, their resettlement was postponed and did not move forward as originally planned.

Outdated information can also temporarily bring together estranged spouses who have long since separated. For example, a Congolese couple's marriage ended after they had registered their information for resettlement. In the years that followed, the former husband and wife both remarried in the refugee camp where they lived, and the man had children with his new wife. Despite the change in their marital status, this man and woman never updated their case out of fear that they would lose whatever progress their application had made and further delay the possibility of resettlement. A caseworker in Boise empathized with their logic. He said, "They wanted to keep their case. They didn't want to spoil it and put it back in a drawer." This former couple was eventually approved and resettled to a city in the Western U.S. They had assumed that once they arrived, they could send for their respective families who had been left behind in the refugee camp. A week after their arrival, the woman relocated to Boise alone where her friend lived, and she reached out to an RA for support. When the RA caseworkers learned the details of her situation, they grew concerned. This couple had unknowingly committed fraud by claiming to still be married and failing to inform the U.S. Government of their new families. It

was unclear whether they could ever apply for their respective families to join them because doing so would expose the earlier fraud. To make matters worse, all of the Reception & Placement funds allocated to support this couple were tied to the man as the case's Principal Applicant, and the woman's half of the per capita R&P funds remained in the city and state that had initially received them. Her portion of the case and funds could not be administratively transferred if her ex-husband stayed in their original destination. The wife arrived in Boise in need of assistance but without the essential funds for the RA to provide it. Not only had resettlement separated these two families, it also created obstacles that prevented this woman from accessing assistance.

The fear of "spoiling" a resettlement application highlights how vulnerable refugees feel to the whims of this potentially life-altering opportunity. When estranged families are brought back together by an approval, it can make the challenges inherent in resettlement that much more difficult for refugees and the RAs assisting them. When caseworkers in Boise were notified of the impending arrival of a young Congolese family, they began their usual preparations. They found an apartment, arranged for furniture, and coordinated a team of volunteers to shop for household essentials. Nothing about the pre-departure paperwork implied the complicated nature of this case. When the family finally exited the arrivals terminal at the Boise Airport late in the evening after an incoming flight delay, their faces hinted at the fatigue and overwhelm from their long trip. They were driven straight to their temporary housing, given a brief home safety orientation, and left to settle in for the night. RA staff returned the following day for their 24-hour home visit, which included plans to sign a lease for their new apartment. It was during this home visit that the complexities of the case came to light. Though their paperwork showed that they were a family unit, the husband and wife had separated, were no longer living together in

the refugee camp, and were not on good terms. They had been brought back together by the approval of their resettlement application and had to endure close quarters during their trip from Tanzania to Boise, including a motel stay in Los Angeles and the temporary accommodations the night before. The tension between the mother and father became palpable the day after their arrival, and caseworkers speculated about a possible history of domestic violence. It was clear that the family could not live together, so the RA scrambled to locate last minute accommodations for the father. They also split the family administratively. These changes unfolded as the family was being enrolled in welfare programs, which triggered a child support case for the father. For this family, the resettlement process exacerbated the messiness and stress that accompanies the dissolution of a marriage, pushing fractured relationships back together and forcing refugees to divulge intimate details to strangers as soon as they arrive in a new country.

Even when families stay together, resettlement can feel like an abrupt and upsetting change for children who may have limited information and context for what will soon take place. Like their parents, youth also experience resettlement as displacing. Aliyah was six years old when she was resettled to Boise from Uganda. Through the eyes of a child, the process and journey were traumatizing. She recalled,

the most prominent thing [I remember] is the journey here. That was the one that was the most traumatic for me 'cause I just didn't realize that I was leaving everybody behind and I was coming to the United States...I remember trying American food for the first time and absolutely hating it. It was pudding. I was like, "Ew...This is what you guys eat here?" And I remember it snowed. That was really weird for me experiencing snow. And I remember, also, being on the plane experiencing turbulence and how traumatic and scary that was. But, just like the overwhelming atmosphere of all the process we had to go through like the interrogations, immunizations, that we had to do to get in. I remember I'd always cry, too, 'cause they had to give me like four shots in both arms, and I was like, "I hate America."

From the point of view of a six-year-old, resettlement meant leaving family behind, eating strange foods, enduring a turbulent flight, and getting shots, none of which gave a good first impression about the life that awaited in the U.S.

When families embark on the long and life changing journey of resettlement, children use the limited information around them to make sense of what lies ahead. Because of the drawn out and unreliable nature of the resettlement application process, parents may spend years attending to paperwork and meetings, only to inform their children when departure is immanent. Even after a family's resettlement is approved, parents may still be wary about telling their children too much. Geoffroi, a young Congolese man in Boise, explained how people had to be careful with how information spread about their impending resettlement. Given the hardships of daily life in the refugee camp in Rwanda where he spent fifteen years, Geoffroi noted how jealousy drove some people to try to sabotage the resettlement of others. Upon gaining approval, he said, "you have to be careful...The people, they have jealousy if you're actually saying that you're leaving the country...They're living their life, right? But yours is going to change, but it's not going to affect them, their lives, right? Some people got killed because of that, the jealousy." In the days leading up to departure, the stakes are incredibly high. Geoffroi added, "any time you get the news, you celebrate, but you have to be careful." Keeping their children in the dark may be the best way for parents to ensure that nothing ruins this opportunity for a different life.

At ten years old, Henri was too preoccupied by his siblings to realize that the meetings he accompanied his parents on were actually the interviews that led to their resettlement. After fleeing the DRC for Zambia, Henri's mother had spent a decade managing the family's resettlement case, and during this time her six children were none the wiser. When they were finally approved and preparing to leave, Henri's parents did not let on about the finality of their

upcoming trip. Henri assumed that they were just traveling somewhere temporarily. He explained,

We all just thought we were just kind of going somewhere for a little bit...The two days before we left my mom had all our family, probably 50 to 100 people staying at our house, cooking food, celebrating. And I'm telling our friends, "I think I'm going somewhere. I'm not sure. My mom just has us packing." So I tell all my friends, "I'm going to come back this week, you know. I'm not going far."...Then like in the morning while we're driving, I saw my teachers, and my mom was saying bye to them and I don't know why but she was just kind of like crying and stuff like that. Thanking them.

It was not until they arrived in Boise that Henri understood the finality of their trip. He said, "My mom kind of like just kept that as a secret until the moment that we started flying out and came to the States... And I was asleep, so I didn't know that we arrived in Boise...And then in the morning [the next day] my mom was just like sitting us around. She's telling us, 'yeah, now we're in the States. This is where we're going to be living now...you're never going to see home again.'" Once in Boise, Henri was left to process his family's resettlement after it was a fait accompli.

Similarly, Amara's parents did not reveal much to their children before their resettlement from Djabuti to Boise. Amara was eleven years old when her family was resettled, and since she had had very little formal education, she did not yet have the context to understand that moving to the U.S. meant moving very far away. She explained,

I think the first day it really hit me was the day that we were leaving. I remember we went to the UNHCR interview, and they asked us kids a couple of questions, like, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"...I remember that, but still, I made no connection to what was going on. Like my parents were trying to live abroad? No, I had no comprehension of that. But the day that we were leaving, I thought we were going to come back, but everyone was crying, and then I started to cry, because I was like, "Oh my gosh, we're leaving. And I think it means that we may not come back." Otherwise, why would they be crying, you know? So I would say the day that we were leaving was when it registered. Beyond that, there was nothing special in my mind about coming to America or anywhere, because I didn't go to school to know what that implied...but I was very conscious of the adults around me crying, and then I thought, "Maybe we're going far away."

In the absence of information, children like Amara pieced together whatever clues they could from the adults around them.

While forced migration and resettlement can disperse and create hardship for families, resettlement at times also leads to unexpected reunions. Some refugees are unknowingly resettled in the same city as a family member or friend with whom they had previously lost all contact due to the disruptions of war and forced migration. They may not even know if their loved ones had survived, making these serendipitous reunions that much more remarkable and emotional. For example, when a recently resettled Congolese family showed up at their first required medical appointment in San Diego, the interpreter waiting to assist them was the mother's childhood friend, resulting in an unexpected and joyous moment amid the stress of resettlement. Similarly, Tresor, a young Congolese man, was shocked to see his uncle waiting at the airport to welcome his family to Boise. No one in Tresor's family knew that this uncle had been resettled, let alone to the same city. The RA had figured out their familial connection when preparing for the arriving case, and, much to the surprise of Tresor's family, had arranged for the uncle to join them at the airport. Tresor remembered how exhausted and overwhelmed they all were by the time they arrived in Boise after having traveled on multiple connecting flights through airports where no one spoke their language. He recounted the relief at hearing Swahili as they exited the arrivals terminal, only to realize that their uncle was among the group waiting for them. He said,

We saw people from Africa [waiting] here at the airport. And at the time, there wasn't very many. So, we saw my uncle and we were like, "Oh my God." We never thought we would see them again...I think [the RA] found out that we were coming and then, maybe, they talked to him. I don't know how they did it...So, we saw them at the airport, and we were like, "Dad, look! They're speaking Swahili." And he was like, "Yeah, I can hear them." We were all very excited, and we knew we were going to be okay when we saw them at the airport.



Though these moments of reunion are rare, they can momentarily relieve the alienating and displacing effects of resettlement.

### **Displacement and Parenting**

The displacing effects of resettlement are intensified for parents and caregivers. The responsibilities of parenting shape resettlement experiences while the stressors of resettlement in turn affect caregiving abilities. In concrete ways, parents may not be able to find the formula that their baby is accustomed to or diapers in the correct size. In more abstract ways, the uncertainties of resettlement may affect the social, emotional, and economic support that parents can provide to their children. Parenting, and particularly mothering, in a resettlement context is especially challenging given how long refugees have lived in uncertainty, with experiences of trauma, and in the absence of extended care networks (Omar 2022). For refugees with infants, the dislocation of early resettlement can make the material demands of caring for babies feel overwhelming. Refugee parents need to procure essentials all while dealing with the myriad other complications of early resettlement. Grace's baby was eight months old when her family was resettled to New England in the early 2000s. By the time their flight landed, she felt seasick, having spent most of the trip from Kenya to the U.S. rocking her baby in airplane aisles or mixing bottles of formula. She recalled how simply meeting her child's basic needs felt impossible in those early days. Procuring formula and diapers required navigating an unfamiliar and confusing bus system, only to arrive at the store and face shelves of unfamiliar brands. She said,

You're trying to figure out which bus needs to take you to the Walmart, and you're asking about it in the bus once you get on it, and then the bus [driver] will tell you, "Actually, you're going in the wrong direction." So anyway, it was such a discombobulating [experience]. My daughter was eight months old. I needed diapers. I needed wipes. I needed formula. [I] couldn't figure out the formula. My ex[-husband] who's actually going to the store...and trying to figure out -- [we] didn't have cell phones such that you can call back and say, "Hey, this is what they have, what do you want me to choose?" None of that.

The daily challenges of new resettlement were amplified for Grace as she cared for her child. Though refugees with young children are eligible for the WIC program to supplement their children's nutritional needs, enrollment takes time, and parents need these resources as soon as they step off of the airplane.

In the early weeks of resettlement, RAs typically provide diapers to refugees with young children. However, the availability and range of sizes is dependent on donations. When Joseph and Nina were resettled in San Diego, their youngest child was still in diapers, yet the only sizes available at the RA were for infants and of no use to them. As explained in greater detail in Chapter 3, Nina and Joseph had a particularly tight budget shortly after arrival due to high housing costs that tied up most of their R&P fund. When they inevitably ran out less than two weeks after their arrival, Nina had to make a homemade diaper for her child in order to get through a long day of appointments. The family had already used up their remaining pocket money, and the caseworker had no funds on hand to purchase diapers for them. The caseworker was frustrated that the RA had not put more effort into securing diapers in larger sizes and suggested instead to Nina and Joseph that this would be a great moment to begin potty training. With all of the uncertainty of early resettlement, not to mention long and unpredictable days of meetings and appointments, the first weeks in a new country are probably not an ideal time to toilet train a toddler.

In addition to the obstacles that prevent parents from obtaining essentials for their children, parents are also put in a position where they cannot fulfil their children's simple wants. When budgets are tight and caseworkers control the distribution of R&P funds, parents cannot make basic purchases. Nina and Joseph arrived with minimal luggage, and the clothing that their children had been wearing began to wear out after a couple of weeks. As their first day of school

approached, the children wanted new clothes. Nina was unsuccessful at finding donations at a local church and asked her caseworker for advice on where to purchase inexpensive clothing.

Before refugee parents are oriented to public services and transportation in the resettlement destination, they must rely on the responsiveness of others when a child gets sick. Newly arrived refugees do not yet know how to navigate the U.S. medical system and may not have had their first arranged medical appointment before their child falls ill, leaving them unsure of how and where to access proper care. When I joined the housing orientation for a newly arrived Congolese single mother of three the morning after they had moved into their new apartment and less than a week after their arrival in Boise, the mother shared at the end of the visit that her baby was running a fever and needed help. Simply getting her baby to a doctor required a multi-step process: I called her caseworker who then informed the medical caseworker who arranged for the baby to see a doctor later that day. Grace noted how uneasy this system of securing appointments made her feel when she was faced with the urgency of a sick infant early in her resettlement. She said, “in many hospitals in Kenya you don’t schedule an appointment with the doctor, you just show up. So this whole thing of my baby’s sick now but you’ll see her next week didn’t quite make sense.”

Refugee parents may need to seek out childcare for their young children in order to comply with resettlement and welfare benefit requirements regardless of their level of comfort with out-of-home care. Even before refugees begin working, resettlement-specific and general public assistance programs require that all adults of working age participate in job readiness and English classes. Consequently, parents are obliged to begin using daycare providers, particularly in the absence of extended care structures. There is an exemption, typically for mothers, when a child is under one year old, though necessity may nonetheless require employment. Though

public assistance programs in both San Diego and Boise help to cover the expense of daycare for low-income families, entrusting a young child to an unfamiliar system of care in a new country can feel daunting. Both cities had numerous at-home daycare providers from refugee backgrounds or who spoke the same home language, which can help alleviate some anxieties. Though, it was not always possible to find a provider with an opening who could offer parents the comforts of a shared culture or language. For example, at the time of my fieldwork, there were no Rohingya daycare providers in Boise even though there was a small community of families from this ethnic minority group. In order for a Ukrainian family in Boise to continue receiving financial assistance, the mother had to begin attending required classes and could no longer stay at home full-time to care for her youngest child. The mother tried to refuse, arguing that her child was “too sweet and kind” to be cared for outside of the home. The RA was having trouble finding a Russian-speaking provider to ease the transition. If this family wanted cash aid, keeping the child at home was not an option. Despite what these parents thought was best for their child, the resettlement program imposed caregiving arrangements.

The early days and weeks of resettlement can also be trying for expectant mothers. A young Congolese woman was early in her pregnancy when she was resettled to Boise with her husband and young child. She suffered from bouts of morning sickness yet still had to sit through long meetings in unfamiliar offices, excusing herself when the nausea was too much. The intense schedule of appointments and paperwork during a refugee’s first few days in the U.S. does not allow for predictable moments of rest and recuperation. While I was driving this family home after a meeting at the RA, I had to pull over a couple minutes into the drive after the mother began vomiting into a plastic grocery bag in the back seat. The nausea and fatigue of this woman’s pregnancy made the resettlement experience all the more draining.

The early days of resettlement are challenging for parents who must simultaneously care for and keep young children occupied while getting their bearings in a new country. Children have to tag along for days full of back-to-back appointments, sitting in waiting rooms and small offices while their parents attend to paperwork and program enrollments. Grace was unprepared for how jetlagged she would feel at the beginning. She said, “when we came, I was jetlagged. Nobody talked about jetlag...there was a jetlag to where all of a sudden you’re sleepy and you need to sleep right now but you have a eight-month-old. So that’s not going to happen. So I developed this headache.” Four days after a Congolese family of four arrived in San Diego, the father told me, “time goes too slowly here.” They were all still adjusting to an eleven-hour time difference. Exhausted by the early evening, they would all fall asleep by 7 PM and find themselves wide awake in the early hours of the morning. This father was overwhelmed by the prospect of keeping his young children entertained for two weeks before they could start school. Similarly, an Afghan father of five worried about the noise complaints he received from his downstairs neighbors. He did not know how to avoid the disturbance when his jetlagged children woke early and played in their two-bedroom apartment.

As time goes on, the challenges of parenting in a new country shift. When refugee parents are unfamiliar with deep-rooted historical and social dynamics in the U.S., they risk missing the broader context of issues that their children bring home from school. In hindsight, Grace realizes that she was ill-equipped to quickly recognize and address the racism her young daughter began encountering from peers at school. Reflecting on how her daughter’s experience in Boise differed from her own, Grace explained,

Her experience is very different from mine, because she’s experienced racism and I didn’t. So I remember when she was going through that, it took me a while to actually recognize that’s what it was. I just didn’t understand why...she didn’t even bring home those reports to me, but I would notice that there were changes

in her behavior. And eventually when I found out is when I realized, “oh my goodness, she’s being treated badly because she’s a little black girl.” And when I tried to bring it to the attention of the authorities, and obviously I’m trying, I’m not trying to rock the boat...they just chalked it down to, “Oh, you know, we have a discipline problem in this school.” So I know that her story’s very different from mine. But, you know, when you haven’t grown up with that...I really feel horrible that it took me so long to figure out that that’s what she was going through.

Grace felt like she had missed the early signs that her daughter was the target of racism at school.

Having grown up in East Africa, Grace could not rely on her own upbringing to decode the changes in her daughter's behavior. Though adult refugees are also subjected to racism in their daily lives, several interview respondents who had attended primary or secondary school in Boise spoke about a particular type of overt racism from their peers that their parents likely never experienced by virtue of being resettled in adulthood.

Over time, children become more rooted and acculturated in the U.S. through school, peer groups, and the media. In the wake of their family's resettlement, some refugee parents find themselves mourning an intergenerational loss of culture. They never aspired for their children to grow up in the U.S., yet a series of circumstances brought their families here. Among the many losses caused by forced migration is the inability for parents to raise their children ensconced in the culture and community of their own upbringing. As their children settle and adapt to life in a new country, parents may feel like they lack fluency in the new culture that their children navigate with greater ease. Toussaint explained how resettlement was never the desired outcome for his family; it was simply the least bad option. Returning to the DRC was impossible in light of continued violence and remaining in Tanzania with refugee status meant a life without freedom. And so, he told himself, "Okay, let me be in U.S." As a parent, he felt loss as he watched his children adapt in this new country that was so far from the one he left behind.

Toussaint noted how parents never feel capable participating in American culture the way their children do. He said,

It's hurtful to us. It's painful to us. Because what we are facing now is like we are not going to build a community which has that good habit we have. It's going to build an American community...not everything in American culture which is good to us...So that is one of the things we cannot solve it. But it's painful. It looks like we are going to lose it and observe something which we cannot practice it in full. We practice American culture, but we cannot practice it in full. And now we are losing our country.

The loss of culture in the second generation deepens the wounds of having lost the homeland involuntarily. Parents worry that the pull of American culture will be stronger than their traditions and authority, and while their children may find this new way of life appealing, it may conflict with values and ideals that are meaningful to their parents.

Grace elaborated on how a cultural chasm between parents and children takes root early on in the resettlement process as youth gain access to new experiences through school that are not afforded to their parents who are preoccupied with their family's economic survival. She said,

I feel like our children come here, go to school, and they're supported in a way that the parents don't get the support...yes, it's resettlement and yes, you're here, but the kids have so much more support. And so they get acculturated a lot faster, they get into pizza and hamburgers and, you know, the American way of life. And then there's this clash, because mom has made rice and beans, and I don't understand why you don't like rice and beans anymore. You're demanding pizza, and you're demanding things I don't even know. And yet when we lived back home, you lived for rice and beans. So if that experience could be shared across the family so that parents don't feel like they're left out, the parents don't feel powerless...so you get this rift between the younger generation and the older generation. And yet in the midst of all this craziness, I'm expected to go to work, I'm expected to pay my bills and pay my rent, and take care of my children. It is overwhelming. But if you had more support such that you're going through this together...What if we could taste pizza together? What if we could eat hamburgers together? And we can have this shared experience of, "Oh, that's not too bad."

Generational divides become more pronounced as youth spend their days learning from and adapting to peer groups while their parents are either working in low-income jobs or caring for others at home. Parents feel left out and left behind when their children come home with new preferences and tastes that seem to push them further from their home country. According to Grace, facilitating activities as simple as sharing a first bite of pizza together could help to alleviate some of the distancing that adds to the emotional toll of resettlement on families.

Moreover, when children gain ease navigating the new language and culture and take on the role of interpreter and cultural broker in their family, it becomes difficult for parents to act as gatekeepers of sensitive or difficult information. They can no longer protect their children in ways they once had. Amara was eleven years old when her family arrived in Boise, and she quickly found herself as her parents' interpreter. Reflecting back on her experience, she noted how this role meant that she received unfiltered information about her family's situation, though as a child she lacked the necessary coping mechanisms to process what she was hearing. She said, "it's scary, because you don't have the resources of an adult." While such experiences of language brokering for youth like Amara are not unique to refugees (Dorner, Faulstich Orellana, & Li-Grining 2007), her newfound responsibility as the eldest child with the strongest English proficiency serves as another example of the many ways that resettlement has a displacing effect on refugees.

In addition to the linguistic and cultural barriers that reshape the relationship between parents and their children, parents feel stripped of authority when they are cautioned soon after arrival that certain types of discipline are illegal in the U.S. Central to this warning are U.S. laws concerning child abuse. For example, in a Cultural Orientation class in Boise, the instructor informed a group of newly arrived refugees, "If it's bad enough, children can be taken away and



you can go to jail. You need to learn new ways to discipline your children, other ways to teach them right and wrong. Have discussions with your children. You are all learning together and need to respect each other differently.” These messages equate using the ‘wrong’ type of punishment with incarceration or the loss of one’s children. Regardless of how refugees might discipline their children, such warnings instill fear among parents. More effort goes into telling parents what *not* to do than advising them on alternative strategies to use instead. Moreover, admonishments such as the example above rely on the implicit assumption that refugee families necessarily use physical discipline. At a meeting of refugee community leaders in Boise, a Congolese pastor shared his frustration with these generalizations. He said, “People think if you’re from Africa, it’s 100% physical violence. Not all families in Africa do this.”

Toussaint noted how warnings about physical discipline are also intended to protect refugees from non-refugee community members who may be quick to assume and report child abuse when they see or hear their refugee neighbors with children. Another Congolese community leader in Boise noted the outrageousness of suspecting refugee parents of mistreating or harming their children considering everything they had gone through in order to get their family safely to the U.S. He shared an example from the Congolese community about how reported abuse resulted in children being removed from their home and placed into foster care. He said, "these parents escape with their children as bullets are flying. They don't throw their kids away then. Then they come here and have their children taken away." Warnings from RAs and cautionary tales from the community about consequential and unfamiliar laws can make refugees apprehensive about how to parent without risking the integrity of their family.

These messages about discipline gets reinforced with youth at school and through peers, and the threat of reporting child abuse to the police can become weaponized against parents,

similar to how Abdi (2014) showed how Somali women may threaten their husbands with reports of domestic violence. Parents worry that their children could report them if they are too strict, and so they back down when conflicts arise. At a community meeting in Boise about refugee youth, a young Iraqi man shared how his uncle spent two days in prison after his cousin called 9-1-1 in the heat of a minor dispute. He said, "She had been told in school that she had authority." An Afghan community leader agreed and added, "Kids are being told to call 9-1-1 too easily." A Congolese community leader echoed this concern and elaborated on the general sense of fear that shapes how refugees view law enforcement in the community. He said, "One day in jail equals five years of stress, especially if jailed wrongfully. People, immigrants, and refugees are not free in the US, they're living in fear. The system here is too tight. Parents want citizenship to leave their kids and go back. What can we do to enjoy this freedom? How can we enjoy this freedom?" In order to avoid confrontation or unknowingly breaking the law, some parents may acquiesce as their children exploit this newfound autonomy.

Grace echoed how this threat of child protective services looms over refugee parents. She said, "Our kids go to school and they're told, 'If your mom spansks you, you need to call 9-1-1.' We live in fear of 9-1-1 because you're told don't spank your kids. We're told the don'ts but we're not told the dos." While parents learn and internalize early on that they cannot use physical punishments, they are not simultaneously provided with alternatives approaches that are culturally acceptable in the U.S., creating a vacuum of parental authority that some youth will abuse. During a casework meeting in Boise, the staff recognized how much resettlement complicates parenting. One caseworker noted, "From the minute they get here we take away the parental power. They've been parenting one way their whole lives, and then, boom!" Another caseworker added, "Things become so complicated with resettlement. Sometimes you lose

control of your kids because you have nothing to give them." In addition to the demands of resettlement, parents feel the weight of not being able to provide the same luxuries that their children's peers enjoy. Hafiz told me, "The children are growing up every day, and their demand is also growing up. Today's Samsung, tomorrow iPhone, right, and they're young. And we cannot say anything, because when they see their other class fellows, they have iPhones, so they're asking for one like that. But I cannot afford it."

As their children move through a new culture that at times seems unfavorable and out of reach, refugee parents feel a diminished sense of authority and control. Hafiz explained how the freedoms enjoyed by youth in the U.S. when compared to his upbringing in Afghanistan and Pakistan made him feel out of his depth. He said, "Here, the parents should take care of their children every time, and if they don't follow them, they will lose their children because of the freedom...if you're not involved, the children will lose their way because of the freedom, right? In our country, we don't have freedom." He cited dating as one of the behaviors that refugee youth learned from their peers that made him feel uneasy as a parent. Parents must navigate these issues all while contending with the daily demands of keeping their families housed and fed in a system that offers little support. Grace added,

I'm busy trying to make sure we have a roof over our heads, food in the fridge, clothes that you have to keep buying because of the weather and the kids are growing...so in the midst of that you have kids who are getting on social media. You probably don't even know what social media is and your kids are on social media. And you just feel so unprepared to be a parent in this culture. And, again, the messages that you get [are about] what you cannot do. But very few people tell you what you can do.

When it came to light in Boise that some elementary school students from refugee backgrounds were using school computers to watch pornography, it served as an example of the vast

technological gaps that can quickly develop. Parents in the refugee community were shocked by what these young children were capable of searching.

Advice that effective parenting can be achieved by simply spending more quality time with their children falls flat for refugee parents whose energy is exhausted on their family's survival in a new country. Hafiz worked in a support role in local schools and pointed out how refugee parents are provided with unrealistic strategies given both their employment in low-wage jobs and the larger family size common in the Afghan community. He told me how during a district meeting, after a parenting specialist espoused the merits of deeper parental involvement by engaging in conversations with children, he asked her how many children she had. The specialist had one child and regularly made use of their half hour drive home from school as an opportunity to connect and converse. He said,

Okay, you have one child, and you have 30 minutes. Let's see about myself. I have six children. How can I manage these things which you teach us with my six children? I'm working until 5:00 or 6:00, and my children are in the school, soccer game, and they are coming [home at] 8:00, 9:00, 10:00, right?...I am very tired. I will be asleep...Which time should I [use], in Saturday and Sunday? I'm working in Uber. I don't have time to sit with my children. So this program...is not for this community...Everybody has nine children, eleven children, eight children, seven children. Nobody has one or two, right?...How can you handle that? If I show them this PowerPoint, "See, sit with your children and speak with them and that and that," they ask me, "which time? Because the welfare every time told us to go work, to go do this."

The economic demands of resettlement combined with workfare requirements sap parents' time and energy, which further complicates their ability to parent.

In addition to youth gaining mastery of the language and culture, the balance of authority in families is further upset when children become important financial contributors. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, youth are often required to gain employment so that their families can meet basic expenses. Particularly in single parent families or when a parent is disabled,

youth may be able to secure employment more quickly and earn more than their parents, situating them as the primary income earners in their families. Though youth may enjoy greater independence, they are still young, adjusting to life in a new country, and may be reluctant to assume the burden of these familial responsibilities especially when it conflicts with educational ambitions. Grace said,

You also have in that situation, like you say, you have maybe an 18-year-old...So the system is looking at him as an adult – or her as an adult, and mom and dad are still like this is our kid. So they come and [the kid is] able to get a job where they're being paid \$12 an hour while mom is struggling making \$9 an hour. And this kid feels like, "I need to buy clothes...American 18 or 19-year-olds...go out partying...I want to live like an American kid." And yet the family demands – so then there's that clash and many parents don't understand it. I've had parents say, "Well, where does he disappear to every night? I want to know." So it definitely does create an imbalance, and the kids don't want to give the parents the money, because then it's the American concept of, you know, it's my money, I earned it.

Refugee youth find themselves caught between the needs of their families and the desire to fit in with their new peers, stuck between two worlds with different expectations.

Though resettlement may complicate the task of parenting, ensuring a safer and more promising life for their children is one of the fundamental motivators that makes resettlement worthwhile to refugee parents. Omar's (2022) concept of "foreclosed futures" points to how resettlement may be a conscious calculation for parents that ensures their children's future in place of their own. In the case of Syrian mothers in Canada, Omar found that "their future is inextricable from their children's; their primary focus is on securing their children's future" (2022:9), including one mother who asserted that it no longer mattered that her own life was over, because resettlement to Canada gave her children a promising future. As discussed earlier in this chapter and in subsequent chapters, resettlement can be associated with multiple losses, including the mourning of kinship networks, careers, and homeland. In such instances, the gains of resettlement have always been about their children. A young Karenni woman in San Diego

shared how her parents did not want to be resettled, but they went through with it for the sake of their daughter whose whole life had been in the context of forced migration. She was “born in the forest” as her parents were fleeing Myanmar for Thailand where they then spent more than a decade living in a refugee camp. She said, “Some people really wanted to go, but some people were scared to go, you know? It’s a big and new country, so they were scared to...My parents didn’t want to come. It was just me who wanted to come.” Another young woman who grew up in a camp in Thailand said that the hardships her parents endured during their resettlement were outweighed by the opportunities that became available to their children in San Diego. She said, “My parents are happy when we’re happy. So when they see us happy, when they know we're being helped, and when we know that people are willing to help us, that makes them happy. So even though they're struggling with financial [issues], they're still happy when we're happy.”

Hafiz articulated how, along with physical safety, resettlement afforded his children educational opportunities that would never have been possible if they had stayed in Afghanistan or become refugees in neighboring Pakistan. He said,

I know they have a good future. So in Afghanistan, you know, the children should work and they don’t have time to learn. But here, they have opportunity to learn everything. If they know about that, that’s a good opportunity for them. Because I learned in the schools in Pakistan during immigration under a tent, right, and on the floor...So for my children, I am very happy. It’s a good opportunity.

During our interview, Hafiz could not hide his deep pride for what his children had already accomplished in a few short years. One of his children was named student of the year and another was selected to give a speech. At one point he showed me a picture on his cell phone of another child’s report card with grades above 100%. Though he longs for his country, suffered the sting of deskilling, and barely made ends meet with multiple part-time jobs, what mattered was that his children had a better future. He told me about how one of his friends who had also

been resettled was working at Starbucks for \$10 per hour despite having been an engineer with the U.S. military in Afghanistan. Hafiz asked his friend, “What happened?” His friend replied, “Okay, I lost my career, but I won for my children.” Even if parents feel forever displaced, what was important was that they had succeeded in securing their children’s future.

While resettlement may be a final and ultimately favorable displacement, newly arrived refugees must still undertake the arduous task of making a life in the U.S., a country where they may never have anticipated living on a timeline over which they have little control. Once resettled, refugees are not simply “a closed case for whom solution has been found” (Kunz 1973:128), as resettlement carries its own set of hardships to navigate. By moving away from the framework of resettlement as a solution and time of integration, this chapter shifts the focus to the complexities and contradictions inherent in the “structure of refuge” (Rumbaut 1989; Portes and Rumbaut 2014) that shape refugees’ first months in the U.S. By contextualizing resettlement within the full scope of refugees’ lives and by examining issues of emotional wellbeing, family structure, and parenting, I demonstrate how displacement more accurately reflects the experience of arriving refugees.

## CHAPTER 2: MANAGING DISPLACEMENT

Reception & Placement (R&P) caseworkers are the go-betweens who translate the federal resettlement program into practice. On a daily basis, they must turn highly standardized policy into service provision that meets the immediate needs of their clients (Lipsky 1980). For each assigned case, their work begins before their refugee clients have landed in the U.S. and continues long after the official end of the 90-day R&P period. Considering how displacing resettlement is for arriving refugees, this chapter examines how R&P caseworkers take on the responsibility of managing refugees' displacement during these early months, performing work that is foundational to the U.S. Resettlement Program. As Chapter 1 demonstrates, resettlement is a fraught and messy endeavor for newly arrived refugees. By examining the everyday work of R&P caseworkers, this chapter illuminates the complexities of managing displacement, providing a more complete and accurate representation of resettlement casework as an occupation. With the exception of some literature that provide a window into the innerworkings of RAs (Fee 2019; Erickson 2020; Darrow 2015a, 2015b; Kreisberg, de Graauw, & Gleeson 2022), the full scope of caseworkers' responsibilities has been underexamined.

This chapter explores the formal and informal role of a caseworker and how caseworkers handle competing demands on their time. Caseworkers are responsible for the majority of required services provided during the 90-day R&P period, much of which is concentrated within a refugee's first weeks of resettlement. They are managing refugees' needs and expectations all while facilitating their institutional incorporation. Because caseworkers provide direct assistance, they occupy an unenviable position that makes them the easiest target of finger pointing when something goes wrong and the first ones to receive blame when resettlement falls short of expectations. A caseworker in San Diego knew how refugees arrived with high hopes that were



often let down once reality set in. He felt like caseworkers always had to break the bad news about the limits to financial assistance and support. He joked that as a caseworker his job was to shatter refugees' dreams.

While refugees may not anticipate the extent to which resettlement is displacing, seasoned caseworkers are well-versed in the hardships that await new arrivals. They are involved with nearly every aspect of a refugee's initial resettlement and witness this process unfold time after time. In order to manage a refugee's resettlement, caseworkers assume a considerable cognitive load with each new arrival. They are responsible for coordinating and providing the necessities consequential to refugees' wellbeing during those first critical days, such as food, shelter, money, transportation, weather-appropriate clothing, and access to an interpreter. In addition to delivering standardized core services, caseworkers must simultaneously anticipate and meet the individualized needs of refugees during this time of stress, upheaval, and dislocation. As formulaic as resettlement services are intended to be, each arriving case is distinct and requires tailored preparation, such as arriving at the airport with the appropriate child car seats or arranging medical care in advance for someone in need of immediate attention.

Because caseworkers are positioned at the forefront of service delivery and because refugees often lack social networks when they arrive in the resettlement destination, caseworkers can take on an outsized role in their clients' lives during these early months. When a caseworker in San Diego joked with a client about the RA office moving to a different location, his client replied that such news would bring her to tears and make her consider returning to Pakistan, adding "you're my only hope." Beginning with airport pickup, the caseworker comes to embody the USRP and is a refugee's direct link to services, support, and resources. Free cases in particular depend on their caseworker as they learn to navigate their new community. Though a

caseworker may be juggling multiple new arrivals, each refugee has only one caseworker upon which to rely. All questions and concerns are directed to that individual no matter the time of day or how trivial they seem, and caseworkers can receive phone calls of varying degrees of urgency at all hours. One evening, I had five consecutive missed calls from a recently arrived client after the RA had closed for the day. I worried it was an emergency, but the client was just looking for a ride to an appointment the following day. While such after-hours phone calls and constant requests can become enervating for caseworkers, one former caseworker told me how important it was for a caseworker to remember that she may be the only person the refugee knows in this country.

### **Service Management**

The following section walks through the responsibilities of a caseworker using an outline of a generic case in order to give a more complete picture of how caseworkers manage resettlement services. Once a caseworker is assigned to a case, typically about a week or two before the flight date, preparations begin. Along with the ongoing case management services for the rest of her caseload, the caseworker will start looking into housing options based on the case's family size and composition. She will call or pay a visit to building managers with whom she has successfully worked in the past to see if there are any units available at the right time, of the correct size, and at a reasonable price. If something is available and meets basic requirements of safety and cleanliness, she will likely try to negotiate a slightly lower price before reserving it. If nothing is available, she may have to search housing advertisements and cold call landlords, which often involves a lot of explaining, reassuring, and relationship nurturing, especially if they have never before rented to a refugee family. Some landlords may be receptive, while others may

end the conversation at the mention of the word “refugee.” Once housing is secured, other preparations start to fall into place.

In order to get the keys to the apartment, the caseworker will first have to submit check requests to the RA finance office to cover the security deposit, first month of rent, and maybe even an additional month of rent as a guarantee, which comes out of the arriving case’s R&P funds. Once the checks are ready, the caseworker will bring them to the landlord and arrange the details for move in. The apartment will need to be prepared according to a standardized supply checklist set by the Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), which includes furnishings, kitchen items, linens, cleaning supplies, toiletries, and other miscellaneous household goods. The caseworker may try to source donations for some of the items. Otherwise, she will place an order with local furniture company and schedule delivery for the short window of time between getting the keys and picking up the arriving case at the airport.

Once the keys are in hand, the caseworker can begin preparing the apartment, which may take place the day before or even the day of the refugee’s arrival. Along with facilitating the delivery of furniture, including mattresses, bedframes, a couch, a table, and chairs, she will also go shopping for required household goods and some groceries. Household goods are typically purchased at a big box store like Walmart in an effort to get everything as cheaply as possible. The caseworker will buy everything to outfit a functioning home, including cookware, place settings, lamps, sheets, pillows, and towels. This type of shopping trip often requires maneuvering multiple shopping carts brimming with merchandise around the store. The caseworker must also go grocery shopping to ensure that the case arrives to enough food to sustain them for a few days until the caseworker can take them to the grocery store. Without knowing the case’s tastes or dietary restrictions, she must be careful not to use up R&P money

on anything that will go unused. As with all of the decisions made in the days leading up to a case's arrival, the caseworker is operating off of basic biographical information about the case, such as the age and gender of the family members as well as any pertinent medical information. The caseworker will buy some produce, dairy goods, and inexpensive nonperishables, like bread, rice, jam, sugar, and tea. The caseworker may have already picked up donations of toiletry items kept in storage at the RA office so that arriving clients have access to basic hygiene products. Once the furniture is delivered, the apartment can be fully set up. Anything requiring assembly is put together, bedframes and mattresses are distributed among the bedrooms, beds are made, household items are unboxed and put away, and food is properly stored.

Once the apartment is ready, the caseworker makes some final preparations on the day of the case's arrival. The caseworker calls in and picks up a takeout order so that the family has a hot prepared meal to enjoy after getting settled in their new home. The caseworker must ensure that enough cars and volunteer drivers will be at the airport to accommodate the case and however much luggage they bring, as well as the appropriate car seats or booster seats for any children. If the caseworker does not speak a language in common with the arriving case, she will arrange for an interpreter to meet her at the airport. The caseworker will monitor the flight's status, coordinate when and where to meet the other drivers, and head to the airport either during or after a full day of work. She will then wait at the airport with the case's biographical sheet in hand, trying to match headshots with the faces of travelers streaming out of the doors of the arrival gate. She may also look for the telltale sign of a person carrying a large white plastic bag emblazoned with the blue logo of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The IOM bag is provided to every arriving case and contains their important immigration and resettlement documents. If the case has a U.S. tie or family or friends in the community, a small crowd may

have gathered at the airport to welcome the new arrival. In such instance, the caseworker will let families enjoy their long-awaited reunions before introducing herself and shepherding the clients to baggage claim to collect any luggage.

New arrivals with serious medical conditions may have traveled with an IOM escort, who then passes along instructions or medication to the caseworker before leaving. For refugees who need immediate medical attention, an ambulance may be waiting at the airport to transport the client directly to a hospital or appointments may have already been arranged for the coming days. Otherwise, once the new arrivals have collected their luggage, they follow their caseworker to the parking lot and, depending on the case size, are divided among the cars that will take them directly to their housing, which may be a furnished and stocked apartment, temporary housing, or a hotel. Though it may already be late in the evening when they arrive, the caseworker will do a walkthrough of their accommodations, a home safety orientation, and a brief introduction to the resettlement services that will follow in the coming days, all of which may be through the assistance of an interpreter. After addressing any pressing questions or concerns, the caseworker will leave the clients to settle in and enjoy their hot meal.

The following day, the caseworker will return for the 24-hour home visit to check in, provide a more complete description of resettlement services and financial support, review home safety issues, and complete corresponding documentation about how the clients are faring. The caseworker will also call to set up utilities in the clients' name. The caseworker will then take the clients to the bank to cash checks for pocket money set at \$50 per person followed by a visit to the RA office. The clients will bring along their IOM bag so that the caseworker can make copies of all of their important documents for their casefile. While at the office, the caseworker will walk the clients through various forms and documents to sign, including receipts for any R&P

funds that the caseworker has already spent. She will also retrieve and print their I-94 immigration document from a government website. The caseworker may have already sent documents ahead to the county welfare office and scheduled an enrollment appointment for later that day or in a few days so that the clients can begin receiving food stamps, medical insurance, and, in the case of San Diego, cash aid through the TANF program for families with young children. In the days and weeks to come, the caseworker will take the clients to the Social Security Office to apply for their Social Security cards, apply for their Employment Authorization cards, complete a service plan, take them grocery shopping, help them understand and sign their lease agreement, move into permanent housing if they first arrived to temporary housing, arrange initial medical visits, enroll children in school, enroll adults in English classes, refer adults to employment services, facilitate public transportation training, create family budgets and provide financial literacy training, provide them with or connect them to Cultural Orientation classes, conduct a post-Cultural Orientation assessment, and help them obtain a cell phone. As this outline of a generic case demonstrates, R&P services are numerous, and each task must be delivered within a corresponding timeframe that becomes logistically complicated when caseworkers have multiple cases arriving the same day or week. Moreover, this sample case does not account for all of the unexpected and individualized needs that inevitably arise as refugees go through the resettlement process.

### **Needs Management**

In the best of circumstances, new cases are assigned to and then assured by a local RA a few weeks before the scheduled flight date. In anticipation of a case's arrival, the RA's casework manager can be intentional about distributing cases to her team of caseworkers based on language proficiency or current case load. Once assigned, that caseworker owns the management

of the case through the first 90 days and sets in motion various preparations for housing and enrollment in other services within and beyond the RA. The housing challenges specific to single cases or large families make it particularly important for caseworkers to have time to prepare. Single cases arrive with only \$1,125 in R&P funding, which must be stretched to cover all of initial resettlement needs. Since the R&P funds alone for a single case are rarely enough to secure a studio or one-bedroom apartment, let alone other expenses, roommate arrangements may be necessary but take time to find and negotiate. Large families pose the opposite problem. Though they arrive with a substantial amount of R&P funds, it is challenging to find accommodations that are both large and affordable. Sometimes large cases must be split across two adjacent units, which is more difficult to find than a single vacant apartment. These early efforts to secure housing are important in order to avoid prolonged hotel stays which become costly and frustrating for refugees.

Unfortunately, advanced planning is not always possible, and it falls on caseworkers to find solutions at a moment's notice. A caseworker in San Diego told me about how during a particularly high surge in arrivals in 2016, when a single caseworker could get upward of 30 clients arriving in a single night, cases would come through at the last minute, forcing the RA to scramble for preparations. In one instance, due to an administrative error, the RA was never notified of an arriving family of eight. One evening, the caseworkers did an airport pick up where they greeted the cases they were expecting, drove them to their pre-arranged accommodations, and got them settled. Around midnight, one of the caseworkers received a phone call that a family was still waiting at the San Diego airport. The caseworkers had to quickly find a solution. While one caseworker drove around in the middle of the night looking

for an available hotel room, the other caseworker returned to the airport to collect this family of eight that had understandably grown quite upset.

Despite the USRP's standardization of R&P service delivery, each arriving case is unique and requires on the spot adaptations to best manage the clients' circumstances. Some cases require particularly intensive case management services, such as single parent families or arrivals that have been flagged as having experienced high levels of trauma. In these instances, casework teams do their best to prepare by distributing the caseload among caseworkers and thinking strategically about how to allocate resources. Though with no control over the pace of arrivals, RAs must adapt and respond to whatever comes their way, such as when the Boise RA had to plan for five consecutive cases of single mother families ranging from two to eight people. Since both large and small cases pose distinct challenges regarding housing and financial stability, the caseworkers had to be particularly intentional as they prepared for these arrivals. Moreover, some familial dynamics only present themselves after arrival. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 1, estranged couples may be resettled together, which requires significant last-minute maneuvering once they arrive, especially for housing and enrollment in public benefits.

Caseworkers also need to be attentive to and tactful with suspected domestic violence issues. For example, caseworkers in Boise noticed how a client always seemed to shut down when in the company of her husband and did better on the occasions when she came to the office alone. During one meeting at the RA, she sat hunched over in a big winter coat and looked particularly unwell. While her husband participated in the meeting, this woman could barely keep her eyes open, at times wincing and laying her head on the table. It was unclear whether she was suffering physically or emotionally. When asked if she was not feeling well, the woman replied that she was just cold. In order to keep a closer eye on her before jumping to conclusions,



RA staff encouraged her to attend a separate English class from her husband. If the RA staff did see signs of domestic violence, they would take the steps to refer her for support. An RA staff member in San Diego who works specifically with clients who have experienced domestic or sexual-based violence explained how such issues often get pushed aside as refugees deal with the immediate challenges of their resettlement. She said, “If I am an abused wife, and I just arrived to this country, and I’m seeing the rent and the utility and the language and all this, living with an abusive husband is the last thing I would worry about.” It therefore falls to caseworkers to be observant of their clients’ wellbeing amid the many changes and stressors of resettlement.

Housing is a particularly challenging task that is dependent on factors out of a caseworker’s control, such as case size, availability, and the cooperation of landlords. A caseworker in San Diego shared that he found housing to be the most challenging part of his job. He said, “the second I get another case assigned to me, you’re not comfortable until you find housing...It’s what you go home [with]. You’re anywhere, like think[ing] about it, like, ‘Oh, they’re coming. They’re coming. They need to find housing.’” With several years of experience, he was confident about his abilities to manage the other parts of his job, like working with clients or completing paperwork, but the uncertainty around securing housing was a source of stress that he brought home in the evenings. Beyond providing clients with the security of a home, housing provides refugees with a permanent address upon which other bureaucratic processes rely. Children typically will not be enrolled in school until the caseworker knows where the family will live, and so delays in housing translate to delays in school. In an extreme example, a family of seven in Boise had to wait three months for permanent housing, which stalled several aspects of their resettlement, including school for their five children. Beyond securing initial housing, casework staff also provide ongoing assistance when unexpected needs arise. A caseworker in

San Diego helped a family of seven find and relocate to a ground floor apartment after they got too many noise complaints from their downstairs neighbors in their second-story unit. When a landlord in Boise gave his tenants notice that he was going to tear down their building, it fell to the casework staff to rehouse this large case before they became homeless.

Securing housing also requires a significant amount of unrecognized work in between arrivals, such as courting new landlords or placating current housing partners so as not to lose them in the future. When a casework staff member in Boise shared with the rest of the office that they had moved forty-eight people into permanent housing within two months, she noted how this success was only possible because of eighteen months of effort building and nurturing relationships with landlords. She later told me about how they have to “work the relationship” and “do a lot of crazy stuff” for one of the main property management companies that they use because they cannot risk souring the relationship. Because refugees arrive without a credit history or proof of employment, not all landlords are willing to take on refugee tenants. Inquiring with new landlords becomes even more delicate when caseworkers explain that until refugees become employed, they will be using public benefits to cover their rent. When I helped a caseworker in San Diego reply to online advertisements in hopes of finding housing for an arriving family of six, a landlord abruptly hung up on me when I responded to his question about how the family would initially afford rent.

### **Administrative Management**

While providing resettlement services, caseworkers must also keep up with substantial administrative responsibilities. Paperwork and case notes add bureaucratic and clerical burdens to this highly complex and time-sensitive program. As a result, caseworkers occupy dueling roles, and paperwork competes with direct service provision. When a caseworker in San Diego

explained her job to a group of new interns, she told them, “we deal with clients and we deal with paper. It’s how they know we’re working.” Each resettlement case has an accompanying case file, which provides a written record of the case’s resettlement. Over the course of the 90-day R&P period, a typical case file grows by several inches with case notes documenting every interaction with the client, receipts and check vouchers enumerating all funds used for or by the case, R&P documents detailing each core services provided, service reports, lease and housing documents, school enrollment forms, proof of enrollment in social services, copies of identity documents, and copies of any information sent ahead of their arrival. Every transaction has a corresponding document to complete. In Boise, for example, caseworkers must fill out a special form when they give new arrivals donated winter coats and hygiene supplies. Paperwork requirements are duplicated when children over 18 years old are processed as single cases. Such administrative decisions can turn a family of seven with three children in their twenties into one case of four people and three single cases, leaving the caseworker to manage four separate casefiles instead of one. When a particularly complicated and sensitive case in Boise was split after the family arrived, the caseworker had to divide \$250 of shopping receipts across sixteen separate vouchers. He worried how the RA finance staff would react when he presented them with so much paperwork. In addition to building the casefile, caseworkers also have to input details about each case into a centralized computer program.

Paperwork and casefiles are exceedingly consequential for local RAs, as they are used during periodic audits to gauge compliance (Fee 2019). Errors, missing documents, or incomplete service delivery can result in sanctions to the RA or even office closure. On my first day of fieldwork in San Diego, a caseworker walked me through a casefile that he was reviewing while several more sat in an intimidating stack on his desk. He told me how they have to be

“100% compliant with PRM.” He was doing a full review of casefiles for clients who had recently reached the end of their 90-day R&P period. After his initial review, the files would go to his manager for another round of review, after which they would return to him for any corrections. Audits take a magnifying glass to the complex paper trail of each case, which feels both high stakes and accusatorial to caseworkers. This caseworker in San Diego told me how PRM “know[s] how to get us” by finding every mistake.

In the daily practice of casework, paperwork takes a backseat to clients’ needs, yet it is critical to the continued health of the agency. Just before 5 PM one afternoon, a caseworker in San Diego told me that he had opened a client’s casefile that morning to work on it. After a day of service delivery and impromptu client visits at the office, he was putting the casefile back into his desk drawer without ever having touched it. Caseworkers were advised to reserve one day per week to dedicate solely to paperwork, but new arrivals, client emergencies, or unexpected walk-ins inevitably upend any plans. At the end of a particularly stressful day of managing overlapping client crises in Boise, a caseworker told me how he wished he could pause time to take care of the neglected paperwork and vouchers that were piling up on his desk.

Paperwork requirements flatten how casework is represented in casefiles, offering a simplified record of the messy reality of resettlement (Fee 2019). In an effort to complete requisite case notes for his clients, a caseworker in San Diego relied on a template that used generic language to describe the delivery of each core service. He would lightly edit these stock responses to match the particularities of a case, such as the number of children or whether it was a free case or U.S. tie case, creating a “papereality” (Dery 1998) that omitted the complexities of casework for the sake of expediency. These templates made the sheer volume of case notes more manageable, though audits flagged his case notes as being too formulaic. While casefiles are

supposed to provide a written mirror of casework, in reality, paperwork is divorced from service provision and belies the complexities of resettlement. One caseworker in San Diego had fallen particularly behind on documenting a case's progress. Though the family had already been in San Diego for nearly three weeks and received many of their core services, the caseworker had yet to write any case notes. He joked that according to the computer system that logs R&P services, the family had never been picked up at the airport. Similarly, a caseworker in Boise told me that while he always provides the required services to his clients, he was not as diligent about completing the corresponding case notes.

Though case notes can be tedious, they are “proof of service” and an opportunity for caseworkers to document their efforts and due diligence, particularly when client refuses services. One elderly client in Boise who was dealing with health complications and a family tragedy refused to attend all of the required Cultural Orientation classes. An RA administrator advised the caseworker to record the refusal in the case notes as a form of protection, noting that “you can't force a woman to go to Cultural Orientation.” Case notes can also be a way to enumerate all of the work that goes into resettlement, assigning a value to the complex task of managing refugees' displacement. The Boise RA categorized a number of their clients as “high needs” cases, such as single parent families, cases that required extensive medical attention, or cases for whom the adjustment to life in the U.S. proved particularly overwhelming. The RA administration used casefiles and notes to quantify the intensity of these cases in an effort to show how some clients were more demanding of caseworkers' time. They hoped that by demonstrating to their national office the work that went into “high needs” clients, such cases could be better distributed among the network of local RAs. In talking with the RA staff, an

administrator cited this effort as another reason why it was so important to keep up with case notes, adding that “documentation matters.”

In addition to the USRP’s documentary requirement, caseworkers are also responsible for completing large volumes of paperwork to enroll their client in various social services. Welfare enrollment in San Diego County requires a thick packet of forms that must be completed ahead of a client’s enrollment meeting. A caseworker noted that because clients do not see him fill out this type of paperwork, they do not realize all of the time that goes into each new case. A caseworker in Boise confessed to me that he found paperwork to be the hardest part of his job because of the pressure to fill out all of the welfare forms correctly. One perennially problematic document is the Social Security Card application, which requires substantial translation, both linguistic and cultural. Clients must provide their full name, place of birth, and the full names of their mother and father, all of which can present complications. Because other countries use different naming conventions or list surnames before given names on official documents, it can take some effort to confirm that a client’s name is being recorded correctly. The accuracy of this form is exceedingly consequential because it is used to make new refugees legible to the state. Errors are not simple to correct and often result in refugees assuming an incorrectly spelled or inversed name for official purposes. In one instance, a refugee’s Social Security Card omitted her surname, which created a multitude of problems since the name no longer matched any of her other identity documents. Moreover, a refugee’s birthplace is not always straightforward in the context of complex migration histories. Children may have been born in flight or in refugee camps and identifying the English spelling of each place can prove complicated. Likewise, writing the full names of each client’s mother and father is not always simple. Elderly refugees or refugees who have long been separated from their families may have trouble remembering or

spelling both parents' names, and children in blended families may not share the same parents. Experiences of trauma can also obfuscate this process. One young woman who suffered from ongoing mental health issues was unable to complete her Social Security Card application as planned because at the time of her meeting she could not recall her parents' names.

### **Crisis Management**

The array of tasks described above do not fully capture the all-consuming role of being an RA caseworker. In reality, this occupation involves the constant juggling of multiple cases, a phone that never stops ringing, transporting clients to and from appointments, making house calls, and attending to current and former clients who stop by the office unannounced, all while attempting to complete the requisite paperwork and case notes required for each interaction. For example, while a caseworker in Boise was preparing to complete forms with a client who had just arrived the previous evening, he received a phone call from a taxi driver who could not find the client he was supposed to pick up for an appointment. This case worker proceeded to field multiple phone calls between the taxi driver and his client in an attempt to resolve the issue, at times using broken Spanish to communicate with his client, all while pacing through the office as he gathered and delivered a casefile and paperwork to the table where his newly arrived client was waiting patiently. As this chaotic scene unfolded, an interpreter leaned over and told me in an aside that caseworkers have the hardest job. By 3 PM one afternoon, a caseworker in San Diego had already accrued 31 missed calls on his cell phone, not to mention emails and calls to his office phone.

When unanticipated scenarios crop up during resettlement, it is the responsibility of caseworkers to support their clients as they simply try to get by, regardless of whether it falls within their job description. After a child got sick at school and her parents were unable to leave

work, a casework staff member had to pick her up and drive her home. When young children grow restless during long appointments, casework staff step in to keep them entertained so that their parents can concentrate. While a single mother in Boise tried to complete her welfare enrollment appointment, a casework assistant took her young children over to an office window to watch squirrels. Several staff in San Diego distracted five young children with a parade through the office while their parents engaged in a tense meeting with their caseworker. When the electricity was cut in an apartment just hours before a family was being picked up at the San Diego Airport, a caseworker used expert negotiating skills to successfully get the utilities turned back on as we sat in the airport parking lot. Casework encapsulates anything and everything that comes with a refugee's resettlement.

A caseworker in San Diego explained how setting a schedule for his day was futile. It was impossible to predict when an issue might come up, who might walk into the office for assistance, and how long appointments at other social service agencies would take. When I took a family to a clinic to get the children immunized ahead of school enrollment, we waited for over two hours before being called in. This inability to reliably schedule their days can grow frustrating for caseworkers as they juggle multiple time-sensitive demands. Though a caseworker in Boise had made an appointment to help a client pay his rent, the client showed up at the office two days early because of a last-minute change in his work schedule. The caseworker did not hide his annoyance at having to shift around his schedule without warning. Because newly arrived refugees are employed in industries with unpredictable work hours, it creates a ripple effect that negatively impacts their caseworkers. Managing displacement means accepting the instability that shapes early resettlement. A caseworker in San Diego explained how casework is “not about planning. It's about prioritizing what's most urgent.” On numerous occasions I



witnessed how quickly unanticipated tasks could consume an entire day. A home visit to one client's apartment would get prolonged when another client in the same building would ask for help resolving an issue or deciphering a stack of unopened mail. I would often set out with a caseworker in the morning to accompany him for a meeting and not return to the office until the late afternoon as we drove around for the several hours attending to unexpected client needs.

For example, after I joined a caseworker for a new arrival's 24-hour home visit and first grocery shopping trip, we stopped by the office of a property manager to drop off a check to secure a unit for a case arriving the following week. This property manager oversaw several apartment complexes in the neighborhood. She had a close working relationship with the RA caseworkers and rented many units to refugee families. When we walked into the office, the property manager told the caseworker that she was issuing a notice to a refugee family after their teenager was caught threatening to jump from a second story hallway into the building's swimming pool below. This notice would put the family one notice away from eviction. They were the caseworker's former clients, and he immediately offered to interpret and mediate between the property manager and the family, hoping to resolve any misunderstandings and spare the family the notice. We all drove over to the building where the family in question lived. The caseworker delicately navigated his role as interpreter, warning the client about the severity of her son's actions while reassuring the property manager that it would never happen again. The property manager was satisfied and tore up the notice. Though this caseworker wanted to spare his client, he was also motivated to resolve the issue so as not to lose this property manager for future housing needs. He needed to maintain his reputation as well as the reputation of refugee families as good tenants. Once this crisis was averted, we drove the property manager back to her office and planned to return to the RA. On the way, the caseworker spotted another former client

standing on the side of the road with two big boxes of food. We pulled over so the caseworker could speak to this older woman who he knew suffered from back problems. She had just spent the over four hours in line at a food bank and was now waiting for her son to come help her carry the food home. The caseworker helped her load the boxes into the car before driving her home. Once we got to her apartment, the caseworker intended to just carry the food in, but he got pulled into a longer conversation. When he finally returned to the car, he told me, “it’s never a ‘hi, bye’ conversation with clients.” What was supposed to have been a quick pit stop to drop off a check turned into crisis management between a client and property manager followed by an impromptu home visit with another client that consumed the rest of the afternoon.

On another occasion, after a busy morning, this same caseworker and I set out shortly after noon to pick up a family that had been waiting for a ride home from a required medical appointment. On the way back, we stopped by another apartment complex to visit a single case that had just arrived the previous day. The caseworker had to complete this client’s 24-hour home visit, so he decided to quickly take care of the appointment while I waited in the car with the family we had just picked up. Right after we parked, a former client who lived in the same apartment complex walked by and had a quick chat with the caseworker, letting him know that his family was moving to the Midwest the following day. When the new single client arrived, the caseworker conducted an abbreviated 24-hour home visit on the sidewalk and provided him with a donated cell phone. Once he finished, we took the family that had been waiting in the car to their apartment. The wife and children got out, and we took the father to the local elementary school to complete his children’s enrollment paperwork. After getting packets from the school’s secretary, the three of us sat in the grass outside of the school and filled out the numerous forms as quickly as possible. We finished the paperwork just as school was letting out and had to wait

until the crowds died down before submitting everything to the front office. We handed over their enrollment packets and the children's immunization cards, so that they could start the following day. By the time we drove the father home, it was after 3:30 PM, and neither the caseworker nor I had had time to eat lunch yet. As we drove back to the office, the caseworker told me how much he was looking forward to his belated lunch as well as some time to catch up on case notes for the rest of the afternoon. En route, the caseworker got a call from another client asking if he was still planning to give him a ride to the hospital to bring home his wife and newborn son who were about to be discharged. In the chaos of the day, the caseworker had forgotten all about it. As soon as we reached the office, the caseworker ran inside to retrieve an appropriate car seat. We then drove to the family's apartment complex to pick up the father and two of his children and bring them to the hospital. The caseworker and I waited in the car while the father and children went inside the hospital to help the mother and newborn. As we sat in the parking lot, the caseworker seized the moment to finally eat his lunch. By the time the family came out of the hospital, got situated in the car, and were dropped off at their apartment, it was past 5 PM. On our way back to the office, the caseworker told me how he needed two of the remaining three days that week to catch up on paperwork, but with a new arrival coming in just 48 hours, it was wishful thinking.

Caseworkers need to remain attentive to their clients and continually check in otherwise issues risk slipping through the cracks. In the wake of so much change and in trying to keep track of so many competing priorities, clients may forget about something that needs to be taken care of or an upcoming appointment. I was supposed to meet a client after her English class to take her to the welfare office to resolve an issue with her EBT card. When she forgot and went home instead, her caseworker told me, "They always forget. They have too much going on in their

lives.” Caseworkers need to make sure clients receive their first distribution of cash aid in a timely manner or that their food stamps card is properly activated. If not, they have to follow up with the welfare office to nudge the process along. When a caseworker in San Diego checked in on a family, he learned that the only employable member kept getting sent home from her food service job for week-long periods without pay. These imposed work leaves concerned the caseworker as it left this family without a much-needed income. The caseworker quickly helped his client find a new job.

Caseworkers often go above and beyond their prescribed duties, giving time and resources that far exceeded their job description. One caseworker in San Diego was always trying to save her clients some money, even if it meant giving them secondhand items from her own home instead of spending their R&P money. When she took one newly arrived family shopping shortly after their arrival, one of the sons said that he wanted to buy a watch. This caseworker decided to give him her son’s old watch to save them from the extra expense. On at least two occasions, she was reprimanded by her supervisor for giving clients money out of her own pocket. She told me how she had even bought a used car for a family that she was particularly fond of. Regardless of what she was doing, she always had her clients in the forefront of her mind. When she stopped by a bank one afternoon, she made sure to take some of the free candy so that she could give it to a case with young children arriving that night. The other caseworker in San Diego was no different. When a family who knew one of his relatives was set to be resettled, he paid upfront to secure their housing since their R&P funds would not come through in time. Because this family was an SIV case, they had the option of booking their own flights rather than having their travel arranged by IOM and paid for with a travel loan. Their itinerary routed them through Los Angeles, so to save them from having to pay for an additional

connecting flight to San Diego, which would be expensive for such a large family, the caseworker rented a van, drove two and a half hours to Los Angeles to pick them up, and drove them to their apartment in San Diego in the early hours of the morning. He estimated that he had spent about \$3,000 upfront to ease this family's arrival.

There is also a very unglamorous side to casework. Setting up apartments requires several hours of physically strenuous work, and airport pickups may go well into the night. A caseworker and I spent a sweltering afternoon in San Diego building donated Ikea beds for an arriving family of seven. When an arriving case was not on their scheduled flight into Boise, a caseworker and I waited at the airport until they finally arrived on another flight three hours later. As we sat at the airport, the caseworker grumbled that this was why he hated doing airport pickups. A caseworker in San Diego told me how he once spent all night in his car at the airport, waiting for a case that never arrived. The pace and all-consuming nature of casework can be exhausting, making caseworkers feel like they are always behind. One caseworker in San Diego drove around with a client's stool sample in his car for three days, unable to find a moment to drop it off at the lab. As previously noted, caseworkers must adapt plans at a moment's notice. After a child vomited in the back of the RA's van at the end of a long day of appointments with his parents, we made an impromptu visit to the car wash. The caseworker took the detour in stride, joking that this was "not in the job description of a caseworker." While taking a family home after a visit to the RA in Boise, a caseworker told me how he did not realize how much of his time would be spent driving clients around. As he stopped at a red light, a car rear-ended him. Once we checked to make sure the parents and young child in the back seat were unharmed, the caseworker muttered that this disruption was not what his day needed. After the caseworker and the other driver pulled over and assessed that there was no damage, the rest of the drive to the

clients' home turned into a constructive conversation with the family about cultural differences for handling minor car accidents. Despite the multitude of tasks that fill a caseworker's day, there is often a lack of understanding and appreciation for what the position entails. A caseworker grew frustrated as she recounted how a client had recently asked her for help with a task that fell outside of her responsibilities. When she told the client, "it's not my job," the client responded, "so what *is* your job?" The caseworker told me, "I was so pissed!" She felt like the client was belittling all of the work she had put into his resettlement.

Caseworkers also act as a buffer to intercept and mollify landlords' prejudice about refugees or xenophobia towards foreigners. This unintended role can be especially detrimental to caseworkers from refugee backgrounds. Caseworkers may receive backlash from prospective landlords who ascribe to stereotypes about refugees' dependence on public assistance. One caseworker in San Diego told me how a property manager let slip that she had nicknamed a particular apartment complex "Arabland" because it had a lot of refugee tenants. When a client in Boise could not find the remote to control his home's heating unit, it later came to light that a maintenance worker had decided to hide the remote based on assumptions that this refugee family was not capable of properly using the device. When a caseworker staff member communicated with the property manager, she chose her words carefully, framing this act of paternalism as a gesture of benevolence, saying that the maintenance worker was "so kind and worried about the clients misunderstanding how to use the heater [that] he set it aside." Caseworkers are dependent on the landlords and property management companies willing to rent to their clients, and so they must be tactful and nonconfrontational when conflicts arise in order to keep their clients housed.

## **Casework as Vocation**

As refugees are enrolled in various programs, they accrue numerous other case managers over time. Despite these other service providers' responsibilities to oversee distinct aspects of incorporation, such as ongoing welfare and employment support, refugees continue to rely on and turn to their R&P caseworker as their first point of contact regardless of the need or whether the 90-day R&P period has ended. As the face that greeted them at the airport and provided initial assistance, R&P caseworkers become the default caseworker when issues or questions arise. A caseworker in San Diego complained that when a refugee is advised to ask her caseworker for help, she always resorts to her R&P caseworker. He exclaimed, "Excuse me, which caseworker?!" Frustrated by how this inclination to rely on the R&P caseworker adds unanticipated work to his days, he rattled off the various other types of caseworkers that refugees could turn to instead, especially after his three months of services have technically ended. Regardless of whether returning clients were a source of added stress, I never saw caseworkers turn someone away. They would either provide assistance or help connect the client to the appropriate office. In addition to the intensity of initial R&P services, one of the ongoing challenges of caseworker is that cases are never fully closed.

R&P casework comes with long work hours and requires a deep reserve of energy. It is not unusual for caseworkers to clock twelve to fourteen-hour days when there is an evening airport pickup. They can receive phone calls at all hours from concerned clients who have no one else contact. During surges in arrivals, work can spill over into the weekends for grocery shopping trips or apartment set ups. Lunch breaks come and go as caseworkers drive clients from one appointment to the next. One caseworker in San Diego managed to balance a Tupperware of

spaghetti on the steering wheel so that he could sneak bites of lunch as he stopped at red lights while driving between appointments.

Yet in spite of their critical role and the burden of responsibilities shouldered, R&P caseworkers are poorly remunerated, earning annual salaries around \$40,000 to \$45,000. Caseworkers are also classified as exempt employees, so they do not qualify for overtime pay. Because the displacing effects of resettlement experienced by their clients do not fit neatly into an eight-hour workday, caseworkers are often compelled to respond despite being instructed by superiors to protect their nonworking hours. When caseworkers do log exceptionally long days, their only form of compensation comes in cutting back hours on other days. But when new arrivals are steady and certain core services must be completed within a specific timeframe, client needs and a growing pile of paperwork cannot be ignored. For example, I left one particularly involved airport pickup in San Diego at 3 AM as the caseworker finished getting the newly arrived family settled into their apartment. Even though the caseworker did not return home until 4:30 AM, he did not have the luxury of taking the following morning off, as he had to take other clients to a scheduled medical appointment. This strategy of trading hours often fails in practice and leaves caseworkers exhausted.

Good staff are vitally important to a well-functioning resettlement program. A former casework manager noted how, “it’s important to really be thoughtful about who you’re hiring and how you’re supporting them because the staff make all the difference.” But the persistent demands of the job can lead to high turnover. When an administrator at the Boise RA asked her casework supervisor to implement a new welcome event for arriving cases in an effort to add a more personal dimension to early resettlement, the supervisor quit. This administrator told me, “At that request, my case work supervisor quit [laugh]. Because she just said, ‘That is the straw



that breaks the camel's back. We are doing everything humanly possible, and you want us to do a social thing on top of it?' ...It was the thing that broke her." In the absence of additional resources, creative efforts to improve the resettlement experience for arriving refugees end up becoming extra work for an already overstretched casework staff.

For caseworkers from refugee backgrounds or who belong to the same communities as their clients, it can be difficult to separate their professional roles from their personal lives when they are at religious services, social events, or in their neighborhood. While caseworkers from refugee backgrounds have a more intimate understanding of resettlement and can often cultivate greater trust with their clients, this position also comes with added emotional labor that is rarely recognized. Because it is harder for them to leave their work in the evenings and on the weekends, one RA staff member in Boise believed that such caseworkers should receive extra compensation for the additional hours of work they performed. Moreover, caseworkers who speak the same languages as their clients do not benefit from the boundaries that are constructed when a caseworker communicates through an interpreter. This staff member in Boise noted how interpreters act as buffers to certain forms of pressure. Caseworkers who communicate directly with their clients are absorbing their clients stress in ways that otherwise get filtered by an interpreter. They are also saving the RA money since they do not require the assistance of an interpreter who is typically contracted on an hourly basis. The added labor performed by multilingual casework may never be fully appreciated by their monolingual counterparts. Additionally, because caseworkers are often the target of clients' dissatisfaction with the USRP (see Chapter 4), caseworkers from refugee backgrounds risk tarnishing their reputation in their own communities.

Though all staff at an RA play a role in making the USRP function, caseworkers bear the ire of clients when support falls short. When Nina and Joseph ran out of diapers for their toddler, as discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1, their caseworker had to inform them that not only could they not afford to buy more until their next disbursement of cash aid came through in a few days, the RA did not have any diapers to distribute beyond infant sizes. The caseworker was frustrated that his clients were in this situation and that he could not do anything about it. He later criticized his more highly paid colleagues in administrative positions who he thought could do a better job of ensuring that diaper donation requests included a greater range of sizes. All they had to do was send an email, while it fell to him to let his clients down and absorb their disappointment. Another caseworker in San Diego explained to a group of new interns that “resettlement is not an easy job. You have to deal with everything. Sometimes you have sweetheart clients. Sometimes you don’t understand what they want. Sometimes they don’t know what they want...Even if they get all the services, they want more. The office knows that I did my job, but the client doesn’t know...They rely on you.”

RAs do not control how many cases they will receive in a given year nor the pace of arrivals, yet both of these factors matter considerably for caseworkers’ ability to do their job well. RAs are funded on a per capita basis and often experience unexpected fluctuations in arrivals, making it difficult to maintain an ideal ratio of caseworkers to clients (Fee 2019). During particularly slow periods, RAs cannot afford to retain a robust casework team, but when arrivals pick up, often with little warning, efforts to hire are too slow to respond to a surge. For example, after a period of moderate and stable arrivals, the Boise RA had to prepare to welcome thirty-five people over a two-week period. When arrivals are particularly scarce, as they were throughout the Trump Administration (Fee & Arar 2019), RAs keep a lean staff. Caseworkers

are stretched thin, and the quality of R&P services deteriorate. Andre, a young Congolese man, arrived in Boise in the mid-200s when it was still a relatively small resettlement program. He believed that he benefitted from a depth of support that is no longer possible given the growth in arrivals in more recent years. He told me, “More cases, more people, and then things just come undone.” When caseworkers exceeded a certain threshold, the attention given clients suffers.

Newly arrived refugees need the support of their caseworkers as they navigate early resettlement, yet there is a balance to strike between providing enough guidance and doing everything for them. Managing displacement also requires giving refugees the space to take ownership of their lives, which is different for each case. Despite ongoing requests for help to complete tasks, caseworkers prefer to encourage clients to take initiative, worrying that doing too much for them cultivates dependency. When rent was due for a single mother in Boise, she needed to purchase a money order for the first time. There was some contention among the casework staff about whether someone should accompany her to walk through the process or if she should just go on her own. One staff member argued, “if you do it for her, she won’t learn.” Ultimately, I was assigned to help her this one time, after which she would be responsible for doing it herself. Caseworkers are also motivated out of self-interest to let clients figure out tasks for themselves. When the topic of food stamps recertification paperwork came up at a casework meeting in Boise, a staff member noted how “we can’t afford to spend our time doing things we’re not required to do.” While she added that she felt bad saying it, she believed in promoting client autonomy. A caseworker in San Diego worried that he had “spoiled” one of his recent cases by spending too much time assisting them early on and being too quick to offer additional help, like giving them rides to the RA when he should have encouraged them to take the bus. Several weeks after their arrival, he was having a hard time realigning expectations. When

caseworkers are stretched thin, they feel like their generosity is exploited. This caseworker in San Diego lamented how it could be a thankless job. At the end of a long day, he said, “God bless our clients. When you’re nice, they take advantage of you.” But, he added, “they talk shit about [you]” when you assert boundaries.

Though RAs typically have a variety of programs to support refugees’ longer-term resettlement, such as language learning and employment services, R&P casework is the backbone of a functioning RA. A former resettlement manager in San Diego said bluntly, “if you can’t do a good job of helping a family in the first 90 days, I don’t give a shit how many good development programs you have.” From an arriving refugee’s perspective, the caseworker has an exceedingly consequential role, as this stranger becomes the link to accessing services and necessities critical to wellbeing. This former resettlement manager explained, “it’s the start of every family’s new life here. You cannot mess it up.” Decisions about housing matter for refugees’ safety and financial stability. Attention to medical issues affect refugees’ comfort and health. Good casework involves so much more than the core resettlement services. It is incumbent upon the caseworker to do as much as they can to set their clients up for success. The stakes are high, as resettlement builds the foundation for refugees’ lives in a new country.

### CHAPTER 3: RESETTLED INTO POVERTY

Refugees resettled in the United States arrive in financial debt. Before boarding their flight, refugees sign a travel loan promissory note assuring that they will begin repaying the U.S. Government for the cost of their ticket six months after arrival. To put the size of this debt in perspective, a Congolese family of six arrived in San Diego, CA from Uganda with a travel loan of more than \$6,000. A family of seven from Afghanistan landed in San Diego with a loan of more than \$9,000. In exchange for safety, social services, and a pathway to citizenship, resettlement carries pecuniary expectations that shape a refugee's first months and years in a new country. The responsibilities that accompany refugees' rights are exemplified by this interest free travel loan, which is framed as an "opportunity" for refugees to establish a credit history and sets the tone for the ongoing relationship between resettled refugees and the welfare state. This chapter focuses on how the U.S. Resettlement Program's (USRP) dual goals of early employment and economic self-sufficiency produces inequality among newly arrived refugees. Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork as well as interviews with refugees and service providers, I examine how and why refugees are being resettled into poverty as well as the consequences of this approach on refugees' wellbeing. Prior research identifies how forced migration results in "displaced livelihoods" for refugees (Jacobsen 2014). By exploring how the USRP shapes the economic lives of refugees, this chapter argues that refugees' livelihoods continue to be disrupted after arriving in the U.S., as the displacing effects of resettlement extend to refugees' vocational pursuits.

While the U.S. has extensive *immigration* policies to regulate entry into the U.S., it does not have a comparable *immigrant* policy to address what happens after migrants arrive (Fredriksson 2000). Scholars have noted how refugees are alone in benefitting from an

affirmative integration program at the federal level (Waters and Pineau 2015; Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Rumbaut 1989). Unlike most immigrants in the U.S., refugees who come through the resettlement program arrive with social rights that grant immediate inclusion in the welfare state (Brown 2011), along with legal status and a pathway to citizenship (Bloemraad 2006). They receive refugee-specific services from their Resettlement Agency (RA) for up to 8 months after which they can transition to general public assistance programs. However, simply framing the resettlement program as exceptional can be misleading. Research has simultaneously shown that refugees encounter a distressing reality upon resettlement, where they are often confronted with substandard housing and low-income, minimum wage jobs, that leave little room for the development of skills (Tang 2015; Abdi 2015; Darrow 2018; Gowayed 2022; Ong 2003; Grace et al. 2017; Nawyn 2011).

Given that refugees are benefitting from these various services and forms of assistance, why are they experiencing economic insecurity? Migration scholars have demonstrated how immigrants' interactions with public institutions shape their incorporation (Bloemraad 2006; Marrow 2011). This chapter will critically examine how the USRP incorporates refugees into the labor market. I focus on how the USRP's two main objectives of early employment and economic self-sufficiency explain why newly arrived refugees are being resettled into poverty: the need for early employment pushes newly arrived refugees into low wage work while the goal of economic self-sufficiency uses poverty-level income as its benchmark of success. As other immigrant groups have been excluded over time from public assistance, refugees have continually been categorized as deserving of support (Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Brown 2011). Though refugees' deservingness has limitation, they are deserving of assistance insofar as it promotes their early employment and economic self-sufficiency.

Prior research on resettlement destinations claims that the USRP produces a “lottery effect” whereby some refugees are placed in cities and states with strong public safety nets while others end up in places with minimal assistance (Brick et al. 2010); San Diego and Boise reflect the logic of this comparison. While differences in state-based welfare affect micro-level factors in refugee incorporation, this chapter establishes how the USRP’s approach to employment is institutionalized and overpowering across the U.S., creating shared conditions regardless of destination. More generous approaches to Medicaid and the TANF program do create a stronger safety net for refugees in San Diego, just as the lower cost of living in Boise makes housing affordable on a minimum wage. Each resettlement destination will inevitably have its own balance of factors. Nevertheless, I demonstrate how incorporation into the low-wage labor market exists despite differences in the local context, and the macro-level outcome of resettlement into poverty remains the same. The retrenchment of the U.S. welfare state is the dominant force in shaping refugees’ initial economic incorporation. In recognizing that resettlement destinations have meaningful differences, my findings suggest that there are limits to the “lottery effect” of allocation decisions.

In addition to general public assistance programs such as SNAP or food stamps; TANF; Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC); Supplemental Security Income (SSI); and Medicaid, refugees benefit from resettlement-specific support through their first eight months in the U.S. as outlined in Table 5.

Table 5. Refugee-Specific Forms of Assistance

<b>Program</b>	<b>Description of Assistance</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Time Frame</b>
Reception & Placement (R&P) Assistance	One-time per capita grant provided to the RA for initial set up expenses	\$1,125 per person (amount at the time of fieldwork)	To be spent during the first 90 days
Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA)	Monthly cash aid typically used for single refugees, refugee families who do not qualify for TANF, refugees not enrolled in Matching Grant, or non-minor children in families enrolled in TANF	Per person per month, varies by state and family size San Diego: Single case: \$345 Case of two: \$561 Boise: Single case: \$382 Case of two: \$514	Through the first eight months
Matching Grant Program	Monthly cash aid and employment services for particularly “employable” refugees, carries six months of ineligibility for RCA and TANF	\$355 per person per month, including family members, plus funds for transportation	Financial assistance for four months, employment assistance for six months
Refugee Medical Assistance	Medical insurance administered by the state	N/A	Through the first eight months

## The Politics of Resettlement

There is a disconnect between the priorities for resettlement and the expectations of early employment and economic self-sufficiency soon after arrival, making the resettlement process that much more challenging for refugees and service providers. Resettlement is framed by both the UN Refugee Agency and the US government as a life-saving tool of humanitarian protection for vulnerable refugees. According to the UNHCR, resettlement is “the careful selection by governments...for purposes of lawful admission of *vulnerable refugees* who can neither return to their home country nor live in safety in neighboring countries.” (UNHCR 2017) (emphasis added). Similarly, the U.S. Resettlement Program “provid[es] critical protection for *the most vulnerable refugees*.” (The President of the United States 2021) (emphasis added). Yet this chapter demonstrates how this offer of refuge largely ends after landing in the U.S., as the



priority to support vulnerable refugees quickly gives way to a program focused on job placement and financial independence. Though many vulnerable refugees are indeed motivated to work and capable of employment, I argue that this quick shift from humanitarian protection to retrenched neoliberalism creates programmatic whiplash for newly arrived refugees that adds stress, frustration, and hardship to an already difficult process.

The Refugee Act of 1980 established that the objectives of resettlement are “to achieve economic self-sufficiency among refugees as quickly as possible” and “ensure that cash assistance is made available to refugees in such a manner as not to discourage their economic self-sufficiency,” (U.S. Congress 2012) clearly framing successful resettlement through the dual goals of early employment and economic self-sufficiency, which shape the services provided to newly arrived refugees. A former employment specialist in San Diego noted this contradiction. She said, “people from the State Department [are] talking about how the goal is to protect the most vulnerable. And I agree, but then when they actually arrive, the goal is early self-sufficiency. And if it's a single mother with four kids, how is that woman going to be employed?” It is in this sense that the politics of refugee protection are misaligned with the politics of resettlement. Refugees are not selected for resettlement based on their employability, yet their success depends on it once they arrive.

I will begin by discussing how the goal of early employment shapes refugees’ economic incorporation. Next, I will explain why the goal of achieving economic self-sufficiency sets refugees up for financial insecurity. Lastly, I will show how these dual expectations of the USRP can have a traumatizing impact on newly arrived refugees.

## **Early Employment**

One important way that welfare state policies shape the relationship between society and the economy is whether programs of relief allow for de-commodification. For a welfare state to be truly de-commodifying, an individual's wellbeing must not be dependent on active participation in the labor market. The state recognizes a standard level of economic rights disassociated from the market (Esping-Andersen 1990; Orloff 1993; Somers 2008). De-commodification is curtailed in liberal welfare regimes through means tested benefits and workplace contributions, tying benefits to employment rather than making it a right (Orloff 1993). While scholars typically study de-commodification by examining what happens when people transition out of the labor market and into social welfare programs, the case of refugee resettlement inverts this process. Refugees always begin with public assistance and are quickly transitioned off of it and into the labor market. To prevent refugees from becoming dependent on the state, specialized workfare programs and ubiquitous narratives of economic self-sufficiency encourage immediate entry into employment at the expense of language learning and strengthening transferable skills (Gowayed 2022). While refugees do have access to a variety of social services, these assistance programs all work towards commodifying refugees, motivated by the goal of labor market incorporation. The USRP is mandated by the federal government to take refugees through a process of commodification, pushing them into the labor market and quickly weaning them off of social service support, discouraging dependence and the use of federal and state support early on.

From the moment refugees arrive in the U.S., successful resettlement is predicated on early employment and economic self-sufficiency, which shapes the nature of refugees' interactions with their RA and other service providers. In contrast to countries such as Norway

and Canada that provide newly arrived refugees with ongoing financial support to prioritize language learning and acculturation (Gowayed 2019), the USRP supplies minimal up-front assistance, which necessitates employment as quickly as possible (Lanphier 1983). Given the quick accumulation of expenses and limited monetary assistance, a caseworker in San Diego quipped that when refugees arrive in the U.S., “[they] start \$500 behind.” Though considering the travel loan, refugees actually arrive with significantly more debt. While refugees have access to benefits in the form of refugee-specific and general social services, these assistance programs all work towards the singular goal of labor market incorporation. Many refugees are unprepared for how the structure of the USRP sets them up for commodification. This transition can be particularly jarring for those who have spent years living in refugee camps where they had to primarily subsist off of international aid and informal labor. A Congolese community leader in Boise told me, “If you stay in the camp 20 years, it means you were jobless for 20 years. And if you take this person who doesn’t have any experience of working and put this person in this U.S. life, that is the difficulty that we are facing.” Some refugees arrive after having spent their entire adult life outside of a formal labor market and face overwhelming hurdles when they arrive in the U.S.

An employment specialist in Boise explained just how unaware refugees may be of the realities of U.S. resettlement:

There are these expectations that arise when a refugee arrives to the United States, where they assume they’re going to have a house that is ready for them, they’re going to have a car, they’re going to have some sort of a stable life. And then when they don’t have that it’s a huge shock, when they realize how much of cultural shift that it is, and how the economic conditions here are so fast paced, and propel people to constantly work, work, work. It’s something that takes time for them to actually understand and realize that yes that I am in a safer place, and I am in a place where I can be free, but they also start realizing what the cost of those freedoms are.

Whether their expectations are based on rumors in the refugee camp, ideals created in the media, or stories from family or friends resettled before them, refugees are seldom prepared for the financial realities that confront them upon resettlement.

Because the R&P funds allocated to each refugee may not stretch much further than initial set-up costs, immediate employment becomes imperative for refugees to meet their ongoing expenses. Nina and Joseph had been in San Diego for a mere sixteen hours before they faced the harsh reality of their family’s financial situation. This Congolese family of six arrived at the San Diego Airport on a fall evening with one small suitcase and two backpacks, relieved to have made it out of the refugee camp where they had spent the past several years. The following day, their caseworker and I visited them for their 24-hour home visit. As we sat around the kitchen table in their sparsely furnished two-bedroom apartment, their caseworker walked them through the alarming economics of resettlement. While this family of six had received \$6,750 in R&P funds (\$1,125 per person), only \$580 remained after their caseworker had secured their housing, furniture, household goods, and some food on their behalf prior to their arrival the previous evening (see Table 6).

Table 6. Nina and Joseph’s Reception & Placement Spending Prior to Arrival

<b>Expense Type</b>	<b>Expense Amount</b>
First month of rent	\$1,385
Last month of rent	\$1,385
Security deposit	\$1,000
Monthly water fee	\$100
Housing application fee (\$30 per adult)	\$60
One month of cell phone service and activation fee (for donated cell phone)	\$40
Furniture (4 beds, futon, kitchen table and chairs)	\$1,244
Household goods (linens, cookware, etc.)	\$480
Groceries	\$133
Hot meal upon arrival	\$43
Checks for pocket money (\$50 per person)	\$300
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$6,170</b>

These parents of four young children were concerned about how little money remained, as they had arrived in San Diego with no other funds or means of support. Their caseworker explained that they would soon be enrolled in public assistance programs where they would receive about \$900 per month in food stamps, about \$1,100 per month in cash aid through the TANF program, and Medicaid health insurance. Though their status as refugees meant that they qualified for these various forms of public assistance, their level of cash aid would not be enough to cover their rent, making immediate employment a necessity. Their caseworker tried to reassure them that the RA would provide employment assistance, but they would have to be willing to take any job available. While it would not be dangerous work, it might not be ideal or near their home. With little grace period to acclimate, this family was jolted by how the USRP propels refugees into the labor market. Less than a day after arriving in the U.S., they were given no choice but to obtain employment as quickly as possible. Nina voiced fears about her family's financial future. At one point during the visit, her eyes began to well up with tears. She spoke about how bad life had been in the refugee camp and how happy she was with their apartment. She did not want her children to lose this new home. Despite the stark reality of their precarious financial situation, their caseworker tried to reassure them. He told Nina and Joseph that after new families arrived, he often thought to himself, "oh my God, how are they going to be able to make it?" But he was not concerned about their family. He was confident that they would do well in San Diego.

This pressure to find employment commodifies refugees into a particular segment of the labor market. Because all cash aid programs, with the exception of SSI, share the same goal of early employment and because cash aid alone is rarely enough to cover expenses, the priority of RAs is to get their clients employed as quickly as possible. These are typically entry-level jobs,

such as hotel housekeeping, janitorial work, dishwashing, or factory work. Even if these jobs are poorly remunerated or have little opportunity for upward mobility, RA staff become confined to this approach to resettlement, as it is the best way to ensure that their clients gain some financial stability once the ticking clock of formal resettlement services ends. In her desperate efforts to secure jobs, one former employment specialist in Boise felt compelled to market her clients' labor to prospective employers. She said, "I feel like we kind of always sell the refugee and I'm like, these are not a product to be sold. This is a really beautiful human being...I had to reduce them to a product." Even though refugees arrive with skills and competencies, the URSP favors their physical labor.

In addition to being quickly obtained, these types of entry-level jobs were also accessible to refugees who arrived with limited English proficiency and minimal formal education. A former employment specialist in Boise shared how constrained his job placement options were for these new arrivals. He said,

It's really hard to hire somebody that doesn't speak English...It was difficult finding places where people had to work without talking...It's limited. So, a lot of restaurants, housekeeping, hotel business, and a lot of—even construction, you wouldn't sometimes—you couldn't get jobs because of safety issues...Some of the clients were even illiterate. They can't read or write. So, it's kind of hard to find a job for somebody that can't speak English, that can't read, or that can't write.

Refugees typically begin English classes soon after arrival, though it can be challenging or impossible to continue attending once employed. The USRP is based on the presumption that language learning and cultural integration take place on the job. For refugees hired for positions that do not require English proficiency, it is difficult to imagine how employment provides opportunities for language learning. Consequently, research shows how this logic ultimately disadvantages the language learning of men who are often the first in their families to take on

full time employment and are unable to benefit from English language classes (Gowayed 2019).

When I asked a young Burmese woman in San Diego if her parents had the chance to learn English in the seven years since their resettlement, she replied bluntly, “No, they don’t. They work.”

When refugees are not provided with the time or space to improve their English or acquire new skills before or after they begin their first job, they risk getting stuck in these professions. Amara, a young Ethiopian woman, told me how her parents had only ever worked as custodians in the eighteen years since their family resettled in Boise. She said,

Sadly, that is still what they’re doing...when we first came, that was all that was available to them, and my parents are not the kind of refugees that came with educational credentials. I think both of them, the furthest they’ve gone at home is high school...You know, I can’t fault them for the way their life turned [out]. I think they were very resourceful if you ask me, but yeah, now they’re still in the same field that they started off with, but that was what was readily available to them.

Consequently, refugees are typically funneled into minimum wage, manual labor jobs where they get stuck at or below the poverty line. A former employment specialist in Boise explained how difficult it was to break the news to refugees who arrived thinking they would be taken care of only to inform them that they were actually being “resettled into poverty.” Another former employment specialist in Boise recognized the weight of these early employment decisions, as they carried lasting consequences. She said, “I think it is unfair that [we] send people here to live in poverty and stay in poverty because we know that poverty in this country is systemic and it’s cyclical and it’s really hard to climb out of.” Not only are entry level jobs more easily obtained for refugees with limited English proficiency and varying degrees of formal education, RA employment specialists develop relationships with certain employers over time, creating a reliable pathway for future job placement. These jobs are paid at or slightly above

minimum wage, which at the time of fieldwork was \$7.25 per hour in Boise and \$11.50 per hour in San Diego. While a meat packing plant just outside of Boise provided a more lucrative option for refugees at \$12 per hour plus overtime, it was not without risks. The work was physically demanding and dangerous. A former client lost use of one of his arms when he was cleaning a machine that had been improperly turned off. An employment specialist explained how they only make referrals to this plant after they “talk to the client about what it will do to their body.”

Even if the work is not dangerous, refugees may still be placed in jobs for which they are physically unfit. Like many new arrivals, a young Burundian mother first found work in housekeeping which quickly took a toll on her body. Her husband told me, “She never had [in her] life doing hard labor...Honestly after one month she wasn’t able to walk. She couldn’t even carry the baby anymore.” Such manual labor jobs are even more problematic for refugees with chronic health conditions or injuries that do not exempt them from employment. A former employment specialist in Boise explained how alternative employment options did not exist for less able-bodied refugees. She said,

When you don’t have a lot of formal education, you don’t speak the language, you don’t understand the culture, you have a lot of trauma affect your mental health, and then on top of it you have physical health issues, where you can’t walk,...you can’t lift a lot. Your back is just messed up from everything you’ve gone through...There was close to no options for them. So some of them just had to push through.

Some of her clients ended up in dry cleaning jobs that were a poor match for their physical health. She noted how the quick pace, unnatural body movements, heat, and unrelenting noise of this occupation made it particularly difficult for refugees who were not in peak physical condition. Some quit at the risk of ending up in a homeless shelter. Another former employment specialist in Boise echoed this same unfortunate reality, though his hands were tied given the strict parameters of the USRP. He said,



Most of the people that we help, unfortunately, have some sort of physical or mental illness or something like that. So, it's really hard when it comes to that because there's nothing else we can do... And also, you're not physically able to do some of the work that could pay you more. Most of the time, it's like single parents that needs, really, to find a job that pays well that can pay the bills. The agencies can't help more than eight months. So, it's really hard, sometimes, when it comes to that.

He, too, noted that the alternative in these situations was often homelessness or moving in with another family, resulting in overcrowded apartments.

Hafiz, an Afghan father of six in San Diego, suffered a debilitating injury while working for the U.S. military in Afghanistan. He had trouble finding employment because of his physical limitation. He told me how he barely met his family's monthly expenses working two part-time jobs in addition to driving for Uber on the weekends, "because all works in United States need the physical. You should be physically fit." While refugees over 65 years old or with a disability qualify for SSI, many refugees' health issues were not considered severe enough, and thus they were compelled to take manual labor jobs. A man in his early 60s from the Central African Republic arrived in Boise with several medical issues and was awaiting news about whether he needed surgery. He was informed by an RA staff member that if surgery was not necessary, "we'll have to talk about employment."

Some refugees obtained a doctor's note in hopes that they would be exempt from such physically demanding work. Unfortunately for those refugees with limited English proficiency, other employment options did not exist. In one instance, a Congolese woman in Boise gave her employer a doctor's note saying that she had to be placed on "light duty" for her hotel housekeeping job. Her hours and income suffered because there was not enough light work for her to do. Another Congolese woman in Boise brought a doctor's note to an employment specialist explaining that she could not continue her hotel housekeeping job due to the pain in her

legs and feet. The employment specialist was frustrated by the lack of alternatives available. As a single mother, this client needed to maintain a paycheck and the RA did not have jobs that were less physically demanding. This employment specialist added that clients believe these notes are a “golden ticket” to get less strenuous work, but in reality, it was a choice between manual labor or homelessness.

Beyond the physically demanding nature of these jobs, refugees may also have to deal with long, complicated commutes, especially if they are working evening shifts or on the weekends when public transportation is less reliable. An employment specialist in San Diego told me how they had been successful at placing many clients in agricultural jobs, though these employers were approximately forty miles away from where most refugees lived, setting them up for tiring and logistically complex journeys that were particularly burdensome for single parents. Neither San Diego nor Boise are known for their public transportation systems. Refugees in San Diego often had to take multiple buses or trollies to cover the large distances between their homes and jobs. While Boise is a smaller city, minimal bus routes could not always get refugees from point A to point B, plus the bus system did not run overnight or on the weekends. Though Rosine’s mother’s housekeeping job was less than ten miles away from their apartment in San Diego, her commute added an extra hour and a half each way. In order to work her 2:30 PM to 10:30 PM shift, she would leave for work around noon and get home around midnight. Not only was this arrangement draining, it also put strain on the entire family as she was a single mother.

Employment prospects are seldom better for refugees who arrive with strong English proficiency and professional backgrounds. Research has shown how refugees in the U.S. have comparable economic outcomes, regardless of variation in human capital (Tran and Lara-García 2020). Shortly after resettling in San Diego, an Afghan man who had previously been employed

by a major international organization began working the overnight shift at a 7-Eleven earning \$1,500 per month. With rent at \$1,800 per month, this job did not even cover housing costs for his young family. The urgency of an income filters such refugees into the same low paying, easily accessible jobs, and they risk getting stuck in these occupations. Firas, a young man in Boise, knew how difficult it was for his father to go from being a successful medical doctor in Iraq to working for minimum wage in the U.S. He said, “I am feeling so sorry for my dad. From a college teacher with a Ph.D., a doctor owning his own business to a laundry. Just imagine. From [being] considered a rich person back in your country. We had like two houses, a car – and we were actually rich – to...\$7.25 per hour laundry, no English.” A former employment specialist in Boise was aware of just how disheartening this new reality was for many of her clients. She said, “I think expectations with highly skilled workers was definitely one of the most difficult devils to work through. Breaking people’s hearts over and over again like that, just was so hard.”

One woman who founded a program in Boise for highly skilled refugees grew frustrated by this inevitability. She said, “How do we give people pathways out of poverty?...I really decided I can’t come to work anymore if I meet doctors and teachers and business people, and I’m like, ‘Oh, okay. We got you a great job. It’s so good. You’re going to be washing dishes.’” It was often challenging to convince these clients of the merits of entry-level work. Employment specialists emphasize the value of gaining experience with U.S. workplace culture to give undesirable jobs more value. They also use the promise of subsequent career development assistance to make entry-level work palatable, framing it as a temporary necessity. The same woman explained how her program became a bargaining chip with the highly skilled, “because first, it’s like okay, I have to get you a fast job. So if I tell you about Global Talent Idaho...that

might distract you...There was the same messaging...of okay, you're going to get a survival job...Maybe you can get a job where you're going to be using lots of English. I know it's not your favorite job, but we're gonna keep working on this professional stuff." Such "survival jobs" were framed as the first step in rebuilding careers, though doing so was not guaranteed. Yonas, a young Ethiopian man in Boise explained how rebuilding one's career in the U.S. is easier said than done, as refugees fall into a trap of deskilling. He said,

I have seen some people get back to their profession, but very few...Mostly the people that have that level of education have already established a family, with the life standard they had back home. When they came here, they are supposed to provide, and they don't have time to go through that process [of recertification]. Required to go to some training, or classes, and sometimes, it's time consuming and you'd rather just go to work and afford to support your family...And later on in a few years you don't have the energy and the need, and the courage to go back to that. There are really few that get back into career and work in their profession.

Familial obligation and programmatic expectations make earning a paycheck quickly more important than working towards rebuilding a career. Once these refugees have landed on their feet, a combination of inertia and exhaustion prevent them from turning back to these former professions.

Particularly for refugees arriving through the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Program, the reality of job opportunities clashes with their prior status and presumed employment trajectories. These refugees become eligible for resettlement after working with the U.S. Military in Iraq or Afghanistan. When compared with other refugees resettled in the U.S., SIVs tend to have higher levels of education and strong English proficiency. Moreover, the importance of their work in Iraq or Afghanistan creates expectations that their skills and experience will be equally valued upon arrival in the U.S., which inevitably breeds tension and disappointment. When they are confronted with the reality of their employment options, SIVs feel belittled. While they may have served as the interpreter to a high-ranking U.S. general in Iraq, their experience seemingly

carries no value, leaving them with little more than a dishwashing job. The discrepancy between these refugees' prior status and the reality of their new employment prospects is difficult to reconcile. Not only are they dejected that their experience holds little weight in the U.S., they also feel slighted after having put themselves and their families at risk to support the U.S. Government. In discussing what he felt like was an inequitable exchange for his thirteen years of service in Afghanistan, Hafiz said, "when I support you 100%, please support me 10%. I'm happy with the 10%. I don't want 100% from you. I need 10%, even 5%, and this is not 5% when they give us from welfare." Due to the urgency with which they need to begin earning an income, these refugees did not have the luxury of time to undergo the lengthy job application process for professional jobs or gain necessary recertification. Consequently, even these more highly skilled SIVs were pushed into the same entry level jobs as other refugees.

Whether highly skilled or not, some refugees resisted how the USRP sought to commodify them, asserting their agency in the face of a system that discourages claims-making (Brown 2011). However, acts of non-compliance subject refugees to disciplinary measures by the RA and other social service providers. Refugee-specific and state-based programs of cash aid come with terms and conditions that require participation in job readiness activities. By not following through with required English or employment classes, refugees risk punitive actions. In Boise, financial assistance through Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA) and Matching Grant is distributed during a monthly "check day" during which RA staff review compliance notes on each client which may result in warning letters or sanctions. The threat of discipline caused significant anxiety for one refugee in Boise who told his caseworker that he had trouble sleeping at night because he was so nervous about accidentally missing an English class and jeopardize his Matching Grant checks. Upon enrolling in these various cash aid programs, refugees sign an

agreement to take the first job opportunity available. A former employment officer from the San Diego County TANF Welfare-to-Work program explained, “If they are not willing [to take the job], we have to motivate them to be willing.” Her colleague chimed in, “[we] coerce them.”

Acts of non-compliance carry real consequences. Because services beyond the 90-day R&P period were contingent upon participation in employment programs, turning down a job offer put employment specialists in the difficult position of terminating assistance. A former employment specialist in Boise explained how “some women just flat out said no [to a job], and you’re like, ‘okay, we’ll help you as much as we can, but also by turning down a job, unfortunately, legally, I have to stop helping you.’” An Iraqi engineer in San Diego recounted how his employment specialist found him a position at a 7-Eleven one month into the Matching Grant program. Though he was open to the job, he wanted to postpone employment by a couple of weeks while he figured out how to get his children to school. His employment specialist sanctioned him for refusing the job, cut off his remaining cash aid from Matching Grant, and sent a letter informing the county welfare office. When he went to the welfare office in hopes of enrolling in benefits, they turned him down because he had been sanctioned for refusing the job offer. He told me, “I arrived in July 21<sup>st</sup>, enrolled in Matching Grant in August 1<sup>st</sup>. In September, they sanctioned me, mid-September. So I basically got one month of Matching Grant, and then done.” After being sanctioned, he was left to find his own employment without the safety net of cash assistance in the interim.

### **Economic Self-Sufficiency**

The goal of economic self-sufficiency is what ties the USRP to the US Welfare State. Self-sufficiency is defined as earning enough income to no longer qualify for cash assistance, though a refugee can still receive food stamps or Medicaid health insurance. In most states, the

threshold to no longer qualify for cash aid is well below the poverty line. So despite its implications, self-sufficiency as constructed by the resettlement program is insufficient for economic stability, and refugees’ economic incorporation is constrained by this definition. When the measure of a “successful” resettlement is tied to the benchmarks of a retrenched welfare state that perpetuates economic inequality, it sets refugees up to exit the resettlement program while still living in poverty. Resettlement services and benefits assume and promote a low-income standard of living for refugees, which may clash with their expectations, prior frames of class belonging, and professional backgrounds. Poverty becomes the starting point from which refugees must rebuild their lives in a new country.

Comparing the income threshold for receiving cash aid in San Diego and Boise with the federal poverty guidelines (see Table 7) reveals how refugees may technically be self-sufficient while still living in poverty. This is most shocking in Boise where a family of 4 must earn below \$389 per month to qualify for cash aid through the TANF program. A hotel housekeeping job in Boise typically paid around \$9/hour during my fieldwork. At 40 hours/week, that comes to an annual income of less than \$19,000. For any family larger than a single parent with one child, this income level puts them below the poverty line in Idaho.

Table 7. Income Threshold for TANF Cash Aid in San Diego & Boise vs. Federal Poverty Guidelines

	San Diego	Boise	Federal Poverty Guidelines
Family of 2	\$1,242/month	\$309/month	\$1,451/month
Family of 3	\$1,539/month	\$309/month	\$1,830/month
Family of 4	\$1,826/month	\$389/month	\$2,208/month

According to the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, “Economic self-sufficiency means earning a total family income at a level that enables a family unit to support itself without receipt of a cash assistance grant” (Code of Federal Regulations:351). While refugees may have

technically achieved the government's criteria for economic self-sufficiency, they may nonetheless be living at or below the poverty line. One former employment specialist in Boise found the definition of self-sufficiency to be misleading. She explained, "I just get stuck on us letting people [live] in poverty and not doing much about it. I think one thing that I would change that is really tangible to me is the idea of self-sufficiency...Because the idea that if someone makes their bills and has zero dollars left over is self-sufficient, that is ridiculous." When refugees are self-sufficient but have no savings, progress becomes impossible. Such was the case for a Syrian family of six in San Diego that was getting by on the income earned by the father and eldest child. The family wanted to move from their two-bedroom apartment to a small house with a garage so that her father could set up a carpentry workshop to supplement the income he earned driving for Uber. But with no savings, the family could not afford the security deposit needed to rent a new home. Since the cash from their current apartment's security deposit was inaccessible until they moved out, they were stuck remaining in their two-bedroom apartment. Moreover, by barely making ends meet at the end of each month, families have no cushion in an emergency or to absorb unexpected expenses.

The objective of self-sufficiency is inculcated soon after refugees arrive through tools such as a service plan, family budgets, and cultural orientation. The service plan reviews a refugee's background, including education and employment history, English language proficiency, and short-term and long-term goals. In addition to gathering information about the refugee client, this meeting also helps set expectations. During the service plan meeting for a young Congolese family one week after their arrival in Boise, an RA staff member explained to the husband, "I know it's nerve wracking to have strangers find your first job. Our priorities are that it's close to your home and a bus, with a good manager who treats you with dignity and



respect and pays enough to meet your bills. I can't promise your dream job now." Budgets are created for new arrivals, which outline their minimum basic monthly expenses and provide a reality check for what clients will soon be responsible for paying themselves.

Cultural orientation is a moment to reinforce the importance of employment and the goal of self-sufficiency. During a Cultural Orientation class in Boise, the instructor told a group of new arrivals, "learn how to become self-sufficient. This is different than showing up and expecting everything to fall in your lap. You have all the resources to do it...Our goal is to get you to the place where you're self-sufficient." The following day, she further moralized this programmatic goal and told the same group that "there are some things Americans admire, like being independent and self-sufficient." After completing Cultural Orientation, refugees take an assessment to verify that they are equipped with basic knowledge for their lives in a new country, such as where the closest grocery store is located, how to keep children safe at home, and which medical issues require a trip to the emergency room. There are also questions that promote financial independence. Clients are asked "once your financial assistance end, how will you make money?" and "what are two things you can do to become employed?" Messages promoting self-reliance are omnipresent once refugees arrive in the U.S., which all work towards laying a foundation for economic self-sufficiency.

Because of the barriers faced by older adults, youth often encounter substantial economic responsibility upon arrival. While young children are immediately enrolled in school and adults are expected to gain employment, older adolescents face competing priorities. For those arriving in their late teens, earning enough credits for a high school diploma in a couple of years may not be realistic, particularly when they have limited prior formal education. From a financial perspective, they can be a valuable and often necessary source of income for their families,

especially in single parent households or in families where manual labor jobs are too physically strenuous for parents. A former employment specialist in San Diego referred to these young people between the ages of 16 and 24 as the “lost generation.” She elaborated:

I think a lot of responsibility ends up falling on that age group...[the family] needs another source of income. So, then it's up to the oldest child who didn't finish school. So, they kind of just get stuck on supporting the family...And then employers prefer the 18 or 20-year-old than the 60-year-old man. And that's the heartbreaking part that they just then have the weight of the family's success on their shoulders. That population kills me, because...all they want to do is study, but also catching up to the level of what they missed...if you're 18 and you have all of these education gaps,...it's really hard to catch up and you can't do it while you're working.

Despite dreams of gaining an education and learning English, some youth instead bore the burden of their families' economic stability. Those who managed to balance high school with employment often encountered obstacles at school. Though doing their best to satisfy competing demands, they would fall asleep in class after having worked an evening shift or get labeled as truant. RA staff did their best to explain to schools that these young people were trying to be the very best students they could under the circumstances. While some managed to earn a diploma, others dropped out.

Esin, a young Afghan woman in San Diego, was the only member of her family of four who could earn an income. Her younger sister was enrolled in school and her older sister had an incapacitating illness that required constant supervision yet did not qualify for SSI. While their single mother cared for the oldest, Esin became solely responsible for her family's economic wellbeing. As I drove Esin to her first day of work washing dishes at a restaurant for \$11.50 per hour, she told me how she was “crazy about school” despite only having had one year of formal education as an eleven-year-old. Though the job was good, she desperately wanted to improve her English. She had no choice but to take full responsibility for her family's economic stability.

Financial obligations stood in the way of the educational ambitions of young motivated refugees like Esin. Maxime was resettled in San Diego with only his sister, so their stability rested squarely on their shoulders. Even though he was fluent in English and highly driven, he had only managed to take some community college courses part-time. He said,

I'm a Congolese. I've been here for three years. I speak great English. I love school, but I haven't been able even to attain a degree in these three years I've been here. I think this is because of some of the challenges, because I live, me and my sister, and we have to pay rent. We have to pay rent, we have to work...I don't really have enough time to be a full-time student in school because I have also to work.

Despite the odds, some youth managed to make the impossible work. Pascaline, a young Congolese woman, and her sister both worked the overnight shift as home healthcare providers in Boise so that they could be full-time students during the day. Their mother's poor health kept her from working, so it was up to Pascaline and her sister to support their household. They had managed to secure low-income housing, which helped, but they still had to cover their reduced rent and other expenses. While it seemed like Pascaline was somehow doing it all, she felt like people rarely understood how maintaining this precarious balance was a constant challenge. She said,

When you leave Africa, they make it look like, oh my gosh, it will be so easy there. You find there the biggest houses where like everything [is] paid for, but it's not. That's not the truth. Like it's hard coming here and just standing on your own and everything. Like even now, my mom still doesn't work, like they, for some reason, they stopped giving us our food stamps years ago... We buy our own food and then we have to get around to jobs and school, so we all have cars...and my mom doesn't help because she doesn't even have the income, so it's us taking care of ourselves. And people see that, then they come to our house, like, 'Oh my gosh. You have such a great house.' Or, 'oh my gosh. Your car is so nice,' but really like, we struggle, you know? Like it's not easy and people don't see that.

For other youth, dreams that had once been deferred were eventually achieved with time and persistence. Nour was twenty years old when her family arrived in Boise eight years ago. She

was part way through college when they fled Iraq, but as the only one in her family who could work, she had to put her education on hold. She told me, “And my family, I was the only one, like my mom, she can’t work. She’s sick and old. And my sister was 16, she can’t work, too. I was the only one.” Though she began working as a cashier three months after their arrival, she eventually graduated from college with a degree in engineering and was pursuing a career in her field.

Some young people felt like RAs put pressure on them to work regardless of their educational ambitions, and they struggled to convince their caseworker that they should enroll in high school. At 18 years old, Patrice, a young Congolese man in Boise, was adamant about going to school, otherwise he did not see the point of his resettlement. He said,

I was the oldest when I came...So, my mom started working a month after we got here, and then, at first, they told me because I was 18, they just told me not to go to school, so I could support my family, and my mom. Then I kept pushing, telling my mom I wanted to go to school and that’s the reason I came here. So, if I don’t go to school, I don’t see the reason why I came to the United States...My mom went into the office and [she] started pushing them in the office to get me into school.

Patrice graduated from high school and then went on to a four-year college, working summers to help support his family.

Sometimes the pressure to work came from within families. Hafiz works in San Diego schools to provide support to other refugee parents and shared two examples of how financial need can derail students’ educational progress. He said,

Yesterday I had a parent-teacher conference...And I saw a mom, single mom with three children...She’s crying to me, and she told me, her daughter was in high school, and that school told [her] to stay for one year more for 12<sup>th</sup> grade as a senior...to just complete the credit. But the mom says, ‘No, I need money to pay rent.’ And she just sent her daughter to the beauty parlor to clean the beauty parlor [for] \$10, \$11 [per hour]...And that’s not close to their house. It’s like two hours in the trolley...And her daughter is going to La Jolla to clean beauty parlor and coming back, so pay monthly, receive \$1,200, \$1,000 from beauty parlor.

Though the high school offered for this student to return for an extra year in order to earn enough credits to graduate, her mother could not afford for her daughter to go another year without working. Instead of earning her diploma, she began commuting across San Diego to clean a salon in order for her family to meet their expenses. He then told me about another family where the daughter had been excelling in school, receiving As. Circumstances pushed her to start working the evening shift at Walmart. She would get off of school at 3 PM and then work from 4 PM until 10 PM. He told me, “Right now when I’m checking her grade, all of them, C.” Though not all youth acquiesced to their parents’ needs. In response to her father’s pressure to drop out of high school and begin working after he lost his job, a young Burmese woman instead decided to move out in order to graduate. Though in other instances, youth assumed this economic burden by choice. Because of familial dynamics or their parents’ age, they believed it was now their turn to be the provider. The two oldest sons in an Afghan family of five wanted to relieve their single mother of the need to provide for her children. After she had kept the family alive for more than a decade in conditions of extreme poverty in Pakistan, these brothers wanted to give her the opportunity to rest.

The economic pressure for youth to work can bring added stress to families as they try to cope with the USRP’s expectations for economic self-sufficiency. Yara, a young Syrian woman in San Diego, enrolled in a work-study program that helped nontraditional students obtain their GED while holding part-time employment. She attended classes two days per week and was put on work assignments three days per week. While this program allowed Yara to work towards her degree while contributing to her family’s finances, her evening work schedule followed by a long commute home caused anxiety for her parents. She said, “My parents would be really stressful, like they can’t sleep until I get home.” Though Yara’s parents may not have been comfortable

with their daughter commuting home at night, this arrangement provided critical income. Children also pick up on the financial stress that their parents are trying to manage. Hafiz told me about how two of his children hesitated to continue their studies knowing how difficult it was for him to support the family. He said, “they see me, I am going to Uber 10:00 at the night and coming 10:00 in the morning. I know they are children. They have a feeling about that.” When children see their parents work difficult shifts and jobs, they may feel compelled to alleviate their parents of this burden.

While the majority of refugees I encountered in San Diego and Boise followed the typical employment trajectory into low-wage work, there were exceptional cases of refugees who secured professional-level employment or started their own businesses. Many first worked “survival jobs” before finding positions with more prestige. These refugees did successfully translate U.S.-based job experience and English language gains made in entry-level positions into an asset for upward mobility. Others underwent the long process of professional recertification, earned advanced degrees while working, or pivoted careers. For example, an Iraqi surgeon first began working as an interpreter when he was resettled in Boise. Five years later, he established a mental health agency that provides culturally sensitive services to refugees. One young Ethiopian man in Boise worked at a warehouse and for a cleaning company before he got a job working in an educational center.

Gaining employment at RAs or other social service organizations was a way for some refugees to break out of the cycle of entry-level jobs where their migration experience and linguistic and cultural background became an asset. Refugees are hired as RA caseworkers, employment specialists, interpreters, and support staff. In this sense, the USRP creates jobs for refugees in the social work sector (Fee 2019; Shaw 2014). Though these jobs are considered

more highly skilled and carry more status, they are not necessarily better remunerated, as discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. One caseworker from a refugee background in San Diego joked that he was earning the same salary as he did when he worked at Burger King.

Regardless of what RA staff might personally believe to be the most effective approach to resettlement, the USRP's singular focus on economic self-sufficiency constrained them. In addition to understanding the urgency with which their clients needed employment, RA staff were also bound by the parameters of top-down policy. An employee of the Idaho Office for Refugees explained, "our funding is so stringent and so limited...Our funding is strictly for employment services only...There is no anything else...we have to go by exactly what our funder does. So, I think that is our challenge...I think if there's a change, it has to come from the top, not from us." Because of RAs' dependence on federal funding (Fee 2019), there is little flexibility in their approach to service provision.

RAs find themselves near the end of a chain of compliance monitoring, and so they must assume this disciplinary role towards their refugee clients. Just as RA staff are monitoring refugees, RAs are being monitored by state-level offices, their national office, and the federal government. After an RA gave financial assistance to clients despite their noncompliance with program regulations, it had to return about \$30,000 to the entity that manages Idaho's resettlement program. RAs undergo regular high-stakes audits to check compliance with program objectives, including job placement and self-sufficiency rates, which creates an additional incentive for RAs to get refugees into the labor market within the specified timeframe.

Though RAs help their clients attain the USRP's bar for economic self-sufficiency, refugees feel stuck despite having had a "successful" resettlement. Yara was frustrated by how her family's life had stagnated 3 years after their resettlement. She said, "When we came here,

it's just like, okay, we have to work... We're really willing to work. We want to work... But then you're in the same place. Like you're not moving. You're just working to pay the rent, and that's it. You're not doing anything else to improve yourself." A caseworker in San Diego observed this pattern unfold with many of his clients. He said, "They're basically living the same life as they were at the beginning, trying to figure out how to collect enough money at the end of the month to be able to pay their rent, and there is no savings for them. No thinking about anything extra, because they cannot afford it." By the standards of the USRP, this outcome of barely affording monthly expenses is considered successful resettlement.

Because of the U.S. welfare state's reliance on means-tested benefits, progress feels impossible. Whenever refugees' earnings increase, their benefits get cut, leaving them no better off. Hafiz likened this approach to giving someone just enough water to keep them from dying but restricting it in such a way that they cannot fully live. He said, "it's like [a] scale. When you find money, the welfare is going down. When you lose money, the welfare is going back. They just give you that so you will not live, not die. Like somebody tells me, you will not get one glass of water, just only a little bit of water so you'll not die." Shortly after his arrival in Boise, Patrice traveled to rural Oregon for a job milking cows during his summer break from school in an effort to contribute to his family. He said, "I had to do anything possible to help out my family... Because I knew my mom was sick... she couldn't work that much so I had to support, so that's why I went to Oregon." He was drawn to the job because it paid better than the minimum wage job that the RA had found for him. Though as a result of this new income, Patrice lost his benefits, including food stamps.

Rather than feel successful, refugees who do achieve economic self-sufficiency may instead feel like they have been abandoned. Firas explained,



We received the support that we needed for eight months and then after that, we simply had to go by our own. By the seventh month...my father found a job...And after that eight months Medicaid got cut. Food stamps and everything else. I understand, but the transition from babysitting you to now you are in the wild and go live. There should be a balance...Eight months babysitting, and then bam. You call for an appointment, it's hard. No one would help you. No one would make an appointment for you. No one would do anything for you. No one would help you to find a job. While in those eight months, whatever you ask, there's someone to help. After this eight months, whatever you ask there's no one to help...Then after all that is gone, now we have to take care of all of that all of a sudden, and no one taught you how to do it.

He noted how it was only after his family's resettlement services had ended and a bill arrived in the mail that they learn that their eight months of health insurance through the Refugee Medical Assistance Program had also ended. All of a sudden they were without regular support and benefits. When successful resettlement is measured against a bar set by the U.S. welfare state, it belies all of the ways that refugees continue to struggle. Just because refugees can meet their bills does not mean that all else in their lives has fallen into place.

### **The Trauma of Commodification**

The speed with which refugees must begin employment and the reality of their financial precarity after arrival risk damaging their mental health. Several of the employment specialists I interviewed in San Diego and Boise noted that if they could change one aspect of the USRP it would be lengthening the timeframe before refugees must earn an income. Even for families in Boise whose R&P money stretched further and covered several months of rent, immediate employment was imperative to begin saving money for future months when a salary alone would not meet their basic expenses. One former employment specialist in San Diego explained, "I just don't think employment can be pushed so quickly...just everything is bombarded at the same time...In the eyes of the government to think that someone who...doesn't speak English, has

never lived...outside of a refugee camp to [have] the expectation that they'll be completely independent and self-sufficient [in] let's say eight months...is ridiculous.”

By the time refugees are resettled in the U.S., they may have experienced persecution, war, torture, violence, and drawn out migrations all of which take a toll on their wellbeing. Resettlement does not undo the years of trauma they have endured. Kazem knew the fragility of his mental state well enough to know that he could not remain at the home healthcare job his employment specialist had found for him shortly after arrival. Kazem arrived in Boise alone, carrying with him the enduring weight of the emotional and physical abuse he had suffered as a young man in Iran, escaping the country when it became clear that he would likely be imprisoned. He had too much anxiety to work alongside other people, and he told me how RAs should not put depressed people in depressing work. He wished employment services considered refugees' mental health before placing them in jobs.

Reflecting back on the short time he spent as a home healthcare provider in his early days in Boise, he said, “I needed care giving for myself...I said, ‘man I am feeling sad, this person makes me feel so demotivation, I can't help it no more.’ So, I left the job...emotionally I couldn't take it.” He ultimately quit his first two job placements. Three years later, after a failed attempt to start fresh on the East Coast, Kazem was back in Boise doing manual labor for a landscaping company. His housing situation was precarious, and he was barely getting by. Financial insecurity further strained his mental health. He said, “I have to always think about money. So, I don't like it. It's direct me to dark ways. I tell you; it's drove me to think of suicide...I can't take it sometimes.” He told me how he felt like he was resettled from one hole only to be put into another hole in the U.S. where he suffered from “economy stress and job stress.” He added, “I don't feel any safe[ty] of my situation. I always worry about my food, about my work. So, I have

to be in this stress of not having you know the regular needs of my life...I'm not happy in that manner that I'm more worried about my food. They put me in a bigger hole, you know but what can I do?" Kazem had difficulty sleeping when he had a lot of anxiety, and when he spent the whole night awake, he could not work the next day. Early employment and the principal focus on economic self-sufficiency combined with ongoing mental health challenges and trauma can create a vicious cycle that makes it harder to refugees to fulfill the very goals of the USRP. Kazem reflected on the U.S. approach to resettlement, saying "I don't know why they take the refugees here in the first place anyways. [If] you want to give them a miserable start, just don't take them...they think they are coming here to be fine and it's a different world."

Some new arrivals are overtly traumatized by the realization of the how little support they would receive, the insecurity of their financial situations, and how quickly they were pushed into employment. A former employment specialist in San Diego confessed that she questioned whether the USRP was ultimately doing more harm than good. While her supervisor reassured her that resettlement at least provided safety, she still wondered "are we re-traumatizing them...now [that] there's...another struggle because they can't pay rent?" A couple of months after an Afghan family of eight was resettled in San Diego, their caseworker spoke to a friend of the family about how the father was faring. The friend told the caseworker, "this guy, I think, is going through a depression now, because he feels...he's basically fighting in a war [that is] just him, his family, and then against everything else: rent, work, employment, and all that." The caseworker responded that this family's problems could be alleviated by a second income. Though with six young children, including a newly born baby, no one else in the family could work.

As noted earlier, children pick up on their family's financial insecurity. Ashina felt distressed and helpless as she watched her mother supported their family in Boise. Not only did she experience deskilling and poor working conditions, Ashina's mother had to commute by bicycle while suffering through the pains of a manual labor job. Ashina said,

My mom, she was a business woman in Congo, so it was really hard for her to work for somebody else. So, she worked in the restaurant for one year...I don't know what she was doing, but they were jerks, so she didn't like that. She was always coming home saying her back was hurting and she couldn't do it anymore. I would cry every night. I would see my mom suffering, but at the same time I couldn't help her because I was like 16. I couldn't work. I didn't have like transportation. My mom would ride a bike to work. So it was really hard.

Six years later, her family had gained stability in Boise, and Ashina recognized all of the hard work that got them to this point. She added, "[My mom] works so hard, and if she wants something, she just goes for it. So, she learned how to ride a bike. I'm like wow, at the age of 35, 36, 37, that's not easy. I was really inspired by her."

The traumatizing effects of resettlement unfolded for Nina and Joseph less than two weeks after their arrival in San Diego. Considering how little of their R&P money remained, stress of their financial situation loomed over the family and their caseworker. In discussing this family's case, their caseworker commented sarcastically that in order to cover their expenses, they should have been employed a week ago. On a sweltering afternoon following a long day of appointments, their caseworker informed the family that their next rental payment was coming due in a week. Panic filled Nina's eyes as she feared that her family would be evicted. To make matters worse, they had just run out of diapers for their toddler and had no money to purchase more. Following a tense exchange, their caseworker figured out that the remaining \$580 of their R&P money combined with their first disbursement of TANF cash aid in a few days would cover their rent just in time. In hearing this solution, the alarm slowly faded from Nina's face.

However, they would need an income to afford the following month's rent. After escaping war in the DRC and raising four children in a refugee camp, Nina and Joseph's initial resettlement provided little welcome. They were immediately thrown into the harsh and distressing reality of the USRP where employment became the only solution to their problems.

Several of the employment specialists I interviewed noted how the speed with which refugees are pushed into the labor market was indeed traumatizing. One former employment specialist in Boise noted the "lack of kindness" in the process. She wished the USRP offered "more time, more grace." She added, "I think the initial resettlement period is way too short. I think it sends people into a panic. I think its traumatizing for people." Another former employment specialist who had worked for a different Boise RA elaborated on how this trauma unfolded on a regular basis:

So many of the things we did, I know we re-traumatized people...For some people it creates a freeze reaction where they aren't able to forget. And so that was really hard too as we had people where they're having more mental health issues come up...Being empowered to heal from trauma, you need choice. And all of your choice is literally stripped away from you, and you're once again put in a situation where someone else is controlling your situation. And you're told you have the choice to choose to get help or not get help, and those are your only two choices. And that's not a very empowering situation. It's a very unhealthy situation for everybody.

A mental health provider in Boise explained how prior experiences with trauma, or "something that threatens your core wellbeing," change how people react in subsequent stressful situations. She described how after experiencing a "big T trauma, so a trauma that threatens your ability to survive, your core wellbeing, there's no more little T traumas." "Little T traumas," which are stressful but otherwise manageable events, are experienced as if they, too, endanger one's core wellbeing. Refugees may develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after experiencing war, violence, and torture (Johnson and Thompson 2007). Once they are resettled in the U.S., they

encounter the stressors associated with poverty (Rohde et al. 2016; Kopasker et al. 2018), such as financial instability and housing insecurity, which may prompt a trauma response.

It was the fifth of the month, and Esin was late in paying her family's \$1,250 rent. She had reached the end of her landlord's five-day grace period, after which her family would incur a penalty. Esin's caseworker convinced the RA finance office to quickly cut an RCA check for Esin so that she could pay rent by the end of the day. With the check in hand, I drove the family to the bank so that she and her mother could cash their checks. Next, we went to a local market to buy a \$1,250 money order for the family's rent. Esin first asked the cashier to charge \$500 from the family's EBT card that stored the TANF cash aid that they received for her younger sister. Esin then stood in front of the cashier counting out the bills from the recently cashed checks. She was \$60 short. Esin began to panic and recounted the cash. She looked through her purse and pulled out smaller crumpled bills that had been tucked away in different pockets. She guessed that only about \$40 of TANF benefits remained on the EBT card. As Esin grew more anxious, the cashier eventually figured out that they had a TANF balance of \$70. Esin charged the \$70 and paid the rest in cash, putting the leftover bills into her purse. She let out an audible sigh of relief once she had paid for the money order in full.

For many refugees, initial resettlement becomes characterized by economic insecurity and an absence of agency. When refugees first arrive, they lack options and the control to shape the trajectory of their lives in a new country. An RA representative likened the resettlement process to a "conveyor belt." Because of the necessity of early employment, refugees are placed on this conveyor belt of service provision from the moment of arrival which offers little reprieve or accommodation for individual circumstances. Decisions are made on refugees' behalf based on the singular goal of self-sufficiency. Structural factors put RA staff in a situation where they

are overworked, underpaid, and have limited alternatives at their disposal. A former employment specialist in Boise reflected on her experience, “I mean the agency workers are burnt out. They’re tired because they’re constantly having these crappy conversations. They’re underpaid...And then you’re having these horrible conversations, like, ‘Hey, I might just have to let you go and not help you. So don’t become homeless.’ It’s just a hard situation for everyone involved, and particularly the people who come as refugees.”

The mental health professional in Boise noted how the lack of agency makes the USRP inherently traumatizing. She recognized how service providers felt trapped in perpetuating this dynamic, as they “feel like that’s my responsibility to ensure you’re okay and...the only way I know how is to take the control from you and do this for you and force you into this role.” As I accompanied an employment specialist and his client to a job interview for a hotel housekeeping job in Boise, I asked him about the particularities of the case. He replied that while he would like to learn more about his clients before finding employment, he did not have the time. What mattered was where they lived, if they could get to the job by bus, and if they had any language or literacy barriers. The employment specialist’s priority was to secure an income for this single mother of seven, despite knowing little else about her. This tendency to usurp control was not lost on the refugees. During a meeting regarding his family’s living arrangement, a young Congolese man pushed back, accusing the RA of doing things on his behalf without asking and making decisions for him.

## **Conclusion**

By examining how the U.S. Resettlement Program’s dual goals of early employment and economic self-sufficiency shape newly arrived refugees’ incorporation, I explain how and why refugees experience economic insecurity despite benefitting from programs of relief. The

mismatch between pre-resettlement selection and post-resettlement expectations makes the resettlement process that much harder for refugees and service providers. The speed with which refugees are pushed into employment combined with poverty-level wages as the threshold for successful resettlement means that refugees are resettling into the working poor. Prior research has shown the longer-term outcomes of refugees' economic incorporation, resulting in a cycle of dependency (Abdi 2015), declining employment (Kreisberg, de Graauw, & Gleeson 2022), and low income levels (Tran and Lara-García 2020). This chapter contributes to this scholarship by examining how the need for early employment drives refugees into easily obtainable jobs while the objective of economic self-sufficiency uses the retrenched U.S. welfare state as its benchmark of success. Moreover, I demonstrate how this model of resettlement carries traumatizing consequences that are detrimental to refugees wellbeing.

Through ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with refugees and service providers, I show why this approach to resettlement is problematic as refugees work to rebuild their lives in a new country. Amara, a young Ethiopian woman in Boise, summed up how the USRP hinders the very goals of resettlement. She said,

Especially with people that come to America, I mean, to tell you that we thought like everything was made out of gold...So it's a big like fall to go from there to like, 'Oh, you have to work. Oh, by the way, you know, your credentials, they mean nothing here.' And just understanding that that in and of itself is trauma. Like when a doctor can no longer practice, that's huge...it's one thing to tell someone to be a proud American, but when you're struggling, like what do you have to be proud about? You know, it's all you think about is like how am I going to make it? So it's in our advantage of Americans to be supportive, because when someone is able to take care of themselves, usually – I can't say all the time – but it translates into them wanting to do better for themselves and their new homes.

Alongside the lingering traumas of war, loss, and difficult journeys, refugees arrive in the U.S. only to confront the stressors of deskilling, housing insecurity, and poverty.



Hafiz, who had supported the U.S. Military efforts in Afghanistan, pointed to the lack of hospitality he felt when he arrived in San Diego. He likened the USRP to being invited over to someone's home only to have the host abandon you once you arrive. He said,

Here, you accept me as immigrant because I worked with American [troops]. I support American [troops] 13 years. I got injuries. I lost my foot, right? When you accept me, you should have some space for me here. When you don't have space, why do you accept me?...And it's very difficult to restart from here...Like say you invite me to come to your house, right? You open the door for me, and then you go back to sleep. Where can I sleep? Where should I eat? Where should I sit my children in your house? You just opened the door for me and just went back to your bed. And in the morning, you're asking me, 'Hey [Hafiz], how are you? How were you last night?'...If you don't have space, why do you invite people?"

His years of service with the U.S. Military made this cold welcome that much more disheartening. Struggling to support his family with several part-time jobs, Hafiz planned to apply to work as an interpreter in Afghanistan again once he gained his citizenship. The high salary outweighed the risks of returning to Afghanistan. He said it was "only the good way I can take care of my children...Otherwise, in this situation, it's very difficult for me." He was tired of having to cobble together enough money at the end of each month just to make their rent. He was not the only former SIV I met during my fieldwork who planned to return to Afghanistan to work, drawn by good salaries that were out of reach in the U.S. that could make it possible to support their families.

Despite the social rights that provide refugees with special access to programs of relief, these benefits come with norms and behavioral frames that shape refugees' incorporation. Within days of arrival, refugees are confronted by the retrenched U.S. welfare state, which propels them into low-wage employment where they get stuck living at or below the poverty line. Program requirements and the urgency with which refugees need employment strip them of their agency. By resettling refugees into poverty, the USRP sews economic inequality and turns refugees into

low-income new Americans. Despite the humanitarian objectives associated with refugee protection, the politics of U.S. resettlement offers little humanitarianism in practice. Even in the contrasting social service environments of San Diego and Boise, refugees encounter similar realities upon arrival. Regardless of resettlement destination, RAs work under the same constraints and directives to get their clients employed as quickly as possible. As a highly standardized top-down program, the USRP mandates this approach to resettlement on a federal level, and local RAs must follow suit. Refugees in San Diego and Boise found themselves in comparable positions. Though the balance of factors such as cost of living and public assistance levels may be different in each city, the outcomes largely remain the same. Newly arrived refugees are barely able to get by, commodified into a system that offers few alternatives.

RAs are not in a position to rectify the inequality produced by the USRP, especially in the wake of the devastating cuts incurred under the Trump Administration (Fee & Arar 2019). RA staff operate under daily conditions of crisis management where they are bound by constraints that limit their discretion (Fee 2019). Nonetheless, they perpetuate the problematic priorities of a retrenched welfare state. Though the refugees I met throughout my fieldwork were eager to contribute to the country that had welcomed them, early employment and economic self-sufficiency come at the expense of refugees' financial security and dignity.

## CHAPTER 4: GAINING TRUST, LOSING TRUST

This chapter examines the role of trust in the resettlement process and how it evolves over time between refugees and Resettlement Agency (RA) staff. Refugees' relationship to the U.S. Resettlement Program (USRP) wavers between trust and reluctant dependence. The USRP requires a certain amount of faith from refugees as they arrive in a new country reliant on their RA for food, shelter, and resources. Though refugees entrust their future wellbeing in this program, they are nonetheless constrained by limited options and must depend on the humanitarian programs available to them. Overtime, however, unmet expectations and disappointments can erode refugees' trust, making them wary of their caseworker and decisions being made by their RA. Given the power imbalance between refugees and service providers and the extent to which newly arrived refugees need the USRP for services and resources, refugees' misgivings have practical limitations. Though refugees may continue to rely on their RA, mistrust becomes an assertion of their agency and dignity in the face of a system that limits their choices and assumes their compliance.

Concurrently, RA caseworkers are appraising their refugee clients. As refugees deviate from the trope of the "good" or "acquiescent" client, RA staff may begin to question a refugee's deservingness and become wary and suspicious of what their client tells them. Drawing on ethnographic observations of interactions between refugee clients and RA staff as well as interviews with refugees and service providers, I show how the situations that breed mistrust are inherent in the structure of the resettlement program and, in particular, stem from the distribution of financial assistance. In an environment of resource scarcity and false expectations, caseworkers manage limited finances within strict institutional guidelines while refugees assert their agency by pushing the boundaries of claims making. Though similar dynamics exist in both

San Diego and Boise, the less hospitable state-based environment in Idaho led to administrative decisions that made issues of trust particularly challenging.

### **A Presumption of Trust**

The USRP expects a significant amount of trust from refugees before they even arrive in the U.S. Once refugees have applied for resettlement, they give their cases over to a system that filters them through a long, drawn out, and impenetrable bureaucratic process in hopes of gaining a more secure future for themselves and their families. When refugees are approved for resettlement, they board an airplane, often for the first time in their lives, for a destination they may have never heard of in a country with an unfamiliar language where they know few people. Shortly before their departure, refugees are provided with a flight itinerary, which may be the first time they are informed of their resettlement destination. Travel will likely last several days, and refugees are told that someone will guide them at each layover, as they may not be able to effectively communicate in connecting countries and airports.

When refugees eventually reach their resettlement destination, they must trust that someone from the resettlement agency will be at the airport to greet them, transport them, and provide them with food, shelter, and assistance. In particular, refugees considered to be “free cases” (as opposed to “U.S. tie cases” joining a family member or friend) are arriving in a city where they likely know no one. Their wellbeing depends on their travel going as planned, since they may be without money or a cell phone. The stakes are high, and refugees have no choice but to trust that someone will be waiting for them across the threshold of the airport arrivals gate. So much of their immediate safety and security rests in the hands of a stranger. Joseph, a Congolese father of four, travelled to San Diego wearing an official identification card around his neck that detailed his family’s flight itinerary should there be any issues with their travel. Fortunately, their

travel went smoothly because the only contact information listed on the card was the office phone number of the receiving RA's executive director, which would have been useless outside of business hours. The relief on refugees' faces when they finally arrive in their destination after the long journey is therefore understandable. When an Iraqi single mother slowly made her way through the exit of the arrivals terminal at the Boise Airport with her young son beside her, her face and shoulders visibly relaxed when she realized that the small group waiting just beyond the glass doors was there to welcome her.

Refugees are expected to arrive with confidence in this bureaucratic system of humanitarian protection despite prior experiences to the contrary. Many refugees have encountered corruption in their home country, country of asylum, or during the resettlement process. One resettled refugee explained how corruption had infiltrated the approval process as his family's awaited resettlement in Pakistan. When his family's application stalled in their country of asylum for several years, he learned that their case had likely been "sold." The family was then introduced to a man who supposedly had UNHCR connections and charged thousands of dollars to help refugees move their applications to the top of the approval list. This refugee family could not afford his services, and soon after, the man was caught for his corrupt business of swapping the photos of approved cases with those of his paying customers, guaranteeing their speedy departure. This refugee cited how prevalent this sort of corruption was in urban areas.

This presumption of trust in the resettlement process is unidirectional, particularly at the application stage. The resettlement bureaucracy does not afford the same confidence in refugees, beginning with their screening interviews in the country of asylum. Applicants, including children, undergo multiple interviews with U.S. immigration officials to collect background information and stories of persecution to determine eligibility and approval. According to Pascal,

a young Congolese man resettled in Boise from a refugee camp in Tanzania, the tone of these interviews was "almost like an interrogation." These interviews look for inconsistencies in stories of persecution and fraudulent claims of forced migration, as well as corroborating details for refugees' initial claims made years earlier. Children may be asked in separate interviews to confirm important dates or if the adults they are with are their real parents. Interviewers repeatedly probe refugees on details of their lives before and during migration in an attempt to catch inaccuracies. The consequential nature of these interviews coupled with the trauma of recalling one's forced departure creates a stressful environment for refugees. A young Iraqi woman in Boise recalled the mental energy required during these interviews. She said, "you need to make sure you say the same answer, and sometimes you get tired and this is bad." Pascal recounted how challenging these interviews were:

So many people, many families, failed on that [interview], because it wasn't really easy, and sometimes, when you are running, you lose track of places, track of...time, and years, even, many things. And so, once they're...sitting, still sitting [at] a table and [they are] looking at you and, you know, intimidating you, you forget about every single detail...It's not like they [the refugees] woke up and said, "We're going to abuse this."...You're trying to take time to think. They're not that patient with you, if they say, "Okay, tell me...Tell me now!"...But by the time you start thinking, you forget what you think, and what you experienced, a traumatic event, and, you know, you lose even memories and stuff of events.

As Pascal noted, the asymmetrical power dynamics and interrogation-like tone of the interview can contribute to refugees' poor performance at such an important moment. Parents would rehearse responses with their young children beforehand in hopes of providing the interviewers with consistent accounts. One young Somali man resettled in San Diego as a teenager had internalized the consequential nature of these interviews. He told me, "if you fail that test, you will never get anything from the IOM [International Organization for Migration] because they say to you [that] you're lying." This "test" has a gatekeeping function that puts the onus on

refugees to prove the veracity of their claims for resettlement and calls into question the authenticity of their trauma and suffering.

Once refugees successfully make it through the resettlement application process and arrive in the U.S., their caseworker takes on an exceptionally critical role at the beginning, particularly for free cases. The caseworker is a lifeline for refugees during the first few weeks, and refugees have no choice but to entrust this stranger with their family's wellbeing and security. A former caseworker in San Diego noted how the caseworker may be "the only one the refugee knows in this country," and it is exceedingly consequential for caseworkers to fulfill their job responsibilities. Especially during the initial days, the caseworker is a refugee's source of food, money, shelter, transportation, and information. Fortunately for Joseph and Nina, whose family arrived in San Diego late in the evening, their caseworker was both experienced and thoughtful, and he took them to a safe, furnished, and fully stocked home that he had prepared earlier that day. Joseph and Nina knew no one else in San Diego and, like many refugees coming from years spent in a refugee camp, had no financial resources. His family arrived with two backpacks and one small suitcase containing only a couple of changes of clothes for each family member. Their caseworker drove them to their new home where they were greeted by a warm meal and freshly made beds to sleep in that night.

However, not all refugees benefit from a reassuring welcome, and the system of support into which refugees place their trust can betray them. Grace's failed resettlement from Kenya to New England in the early 2000s prompted her family to relocate to Boise less than a month after their arrival. The caseworker assigned to Grace's family was inattentive and largely absent during their first weeks in the U.S. The housing provided to them was substandard, and they were left to their own devices to procure diapers and formula for their baby. The RA provided them with a

food stamps card but not instructions on where the grocery store was located. This family of three arrived in early winter, and the changing weather added to their inhospitable reception. Reflecting back on her early days in the U.S., Grace explained, "the thing that was really, really disheartening is the lack of support from the agency there...We had issues with the house...it felt like it was one thing after the other. We didn't have a phone in the house, so I had to keep going to a pay phone to call anyone, to get in touch with anyone." When I asked what she would have done in an emergency without a phone easily accessible, she responded, "We would have had no idea what to do." Less than two weeks after their arrival, Grace thought to herself, "I'm done. I cannot do this." Another refugee in a neighboring apartment building warned her, "You guys need to get out of here...If you guys have somewhere else to go, go." This neighbor offered her family's experience as a cautionary tale. She even bought a calling card for Grace, instructing her to "call and find out where else you can go." Fortunately, Grace's sister was an international student in Boise at the time and helped connect them with a local RA. Her sister paid for their flight with the money she had saved to travel to New England over the holidays. Other refugees, such as Grace's neighbor, have no alternative and are left instead to cope under conditions of poor service provision.

As the resettlement program unfolds, RA staff make decisions for new arrivals at times without consultation and give recommendations even when it is contrary to their clients' wishes. As refugees find their bearings in their new surroundings and move beyond the early days of jet lag and disorientation, a subtle tug-of-war develops between what refugees want for their lives and what the resettlement program expects of them. Issues such as housing arrangements, employment and educational pursuits, and, most importantly, finances become flash points of contention. Over time refugees gain information, expand their networks, and rationalize their



experiences, all of which can erode their trust in the resettlement program. In the first part of this chapter, I examine how a latent tension builds between refugees and their caseworkers as refugees begin to doubt decisions being made on their behalf, though they may continue to depend on the RA for resources and support. Consequently, voicing their mistrust becomes a way of asserting their agency in spite of a process that affords them little control. In the second part of this chapter, I show how refugees' attempts at claims-making and securing resources may in turn damage their relationship with RA staff as they begin to deviate from the trope of the acquiescent client and the grateful refugee.

### **When Refugees Lose Trust**

When I asked Bernard, a young Congolese man, what could have been helpful for his family when they were resettled in San Diego eight years earlier from a refugee camp in Tanzania, he noted that refugees should be included in the decisions affecting their lives, such as which groceries are purchased and which apartment is rented. He felt like his family's early days in San Diego did not take into account their preferences. He told me, "I think if you talk to someone and let them decide what they want...I don't think it's fair to decide for you what you want. They should ask you what you want." Later in our interview he elaborated, "They never told us [that] we are going to spend your money...They never asked us, 'what do you guys want to do? This is how much money you have.' And then we decide." In particular, the lack of consultation about where the family of nine would live continued to bother Bernard years later. They did not feel safe when they were brought to their three-bedroom apartment the night of their arrival in San Diego. On their second night in the U.S., a shooting occurred in a neighboring unit of the apartment building. This was not the life that Bernard's parents had envisioned for their family after finally leaving the refugee camp where they had spent fifteen

years. Bernard added, “We had no option [to move]. We didn’t have an option for basically a year... We didn’t know how to look for an apartment. We told them we don’t want [to live] here, but nobody even cared.” They had to wait out their twelve-month lease before relocating.

Housing is one way that refugees may become disillusioned with the USRP. In an effort to avoid costly hotel stays, caseworkers try to secure housing before clients arrive. The need to quickly procure an apartment in advance of a refugee’s arrival meant that casework staff chose where and how arriving refugees would live without first gaining their approval. Several factors are weighed in housing decisions, such as cost, size, and location, favoring the cheapest apartment that is within occupancy limits for the case size, is reasonably accessible to public transportation, and meets basic standards of cleanliness and safety. Caseworkers tend to secure apartments on six- or twelve-month leases, often with property management companies with whom they have a preestablished relationship. As discussed in Chapter 3, the low-income standard of living into which refugees are resettled may clash with refugees' prior frames of class belonging, including what constitutes acceptable housing. A caseworker in San Diego recounted how distraught some of his clients were when he brought them to their new home for the first time. He recalled how one client objected to her “suffocating” apartment, telling the caseworker, "I need something with open air or I’ll die. Why did you bring me here only to die? You should have let me die in Syria instead." Given the financial constraints imposed by the resettlement program, refugees are put in a position where they are expected to sign a lease regardless of their dissatisfaction.

In addition to being told where to live, refugees are also told how to live. Because caseworkers must ensure that housing will be affordable to clients once resettlement assistance ends, it is typically expected that bedrooms will be shared. Moise, a young Congolese man, was

resettled in Boise from a refugee camp in Tanzania a few weeks before the rest of his family. Because he was over eighteen years old, he was processed separately as a single case and was the first in his family to receive approval and travel to Boise. When news came that the rest of his family would soon join him a few weeks later, the RA's housing team presented Moise with living arrangements for the family of eight once they were all reunited in Boise. Given the size of the case, the family would be split between two neighboring two-bedroom apartments. Though five could legally live in a two-bedroom apartment in Boise, the RA proposed dividing the family so that four members would live in each unit. Prior to meeting with Moise, the housing team had already mapped out who would sleep where. Moise would share a bedroom with two others, a teenager and another adult, while his mother would sleep in the other bedroom. The remaining four family members would share the other unit. Moise opposed the plan and pleaded several times during the housing meeting that putting three people in one bedroom was too much. He argued that even "in Africa" three adults in one bedroom was too cramped. He added that perhaps these sorts of close quarters were normal in a hospital or a jail, but not in a home. Moise protested how the RA was making intimate decisions on his family's behalf, and his frustration intensified during the meeting. At one point he pushed back and said that the RA "does things without asking us and makes decisions for us." He wanted to wait for the rest of his family to arrive in Boise so that they could discuss the living arrangements and make the decision together. Determining not only where Moise's family would live but also *how* they would live was another way that Moise was left out of consequential decisions regarding his family's new life in Boise. Moise asserted himself and his preferences as he questioned the choices being made for his family, which felt degrading.

In addition to living accommodations, service providers make decisions that shape the educational and career trajectories of recently arrived refugees. As discussed at length in Chapter 3, the various social service programs available to refugees come with terms that require them to take the first job opportunity available, which are typically entry-level manual labor jobs. This requirement, combined with the need to secure an income as quickly as possible, means that refugees have little control over their first job placement. This reality was particularly difficult for older youth who felt like the RA favored their employability over their educational advancement. When youth arrive at seventeen or eighteen years old with gaps in their formal education and limited English proficiency, RAs and school district staff may doubt their likelihood of obtaining a diploma before aging out of public high school. Additionally, they can be important wage earners within their families. Some of these youth were discouraged from enrolling in high school despite dreams of pursuing education in the U.S., making them feel like they were not in control of consequential decisions in their lives.

Some youth managed to counteract the pressures to abandon high school, but it took effort and persistence. Education was important to Bernard who arrived in San Diego at the age of seventeen. After having spent fifteen years growing up in a refugee camp, he was eager to focus on high school. He felt unsupported by both the RA and the school administrators who tried to convince him otherwise. By the time the school year began, Bernard had already turned eighteen. He said, “at the beginning, it started out [a] little scary, like ‘oh you are not going to finish it, your age is already [too old], you know, you are supposed to finish high school when you are 18 and you don’t speak English.’” A friend from the refugee camp who had previously been resettled in the U.S. came to visit Bernard shortly after his family arrived. This friend encouraged Bernard to trust his ambitions. Bernard told me, “They said I had to get a job...like

the people here, they decide for you, you know?” He did not want to miss the opportunity to further his education, so he enrolled in high school despite advice to do otherwise. After successfully graduating, Bernard was working an overnight shift to contribute to his family’s finances while also taking college classes part-time.

Even if there is not enough time to earn a diploma, there are still educational and language learning benefits to enrolling in high school as an older youth, but discouragement and deliberate inaction can close off this pathway for some young people, particularly when school districts are unmotivated to support less traditional and administratively complicated students. Two Congolese brothers were resettled in Boise from a refugee camp in Uganda with their family. At nineteen and twenty years old, they were both eligible to enroll in high school before they would age out at twenty-one. I joined the RA’s youth caseworker as she brought these brothers to meet with a high school counselor and English Learner education staff to discuss their enrollment. They had attended school in the refugee camp but arrived without any records. Everyone seemed determined to get the nineteen-year-old enrolled, and they devised a plan for him to earn enough credits over two years, including summer school. At one point a district administrator said, “we’ll do pretty much anything to help him be successful.” Once the meeting moved on to discuss the older brother, the tone of the conversation quickly shifted. He would only be able to complete one semester of high school before aging out. His goal was to learn English as quickly as possible. Though the RA’s youth caseworker favored high school over full-time employment for her clients and thought that one semester of high school might be more effective for learning English than taking only two hours a day of adult ESL classes, the school administrators could not be bothered and tried to dissuade his enrollment from moving forward. Despite being legally entitled to that semester of high school, the staff saw him as a problem and

a liability. Referring to other students in similar positions, one of the school staff members said, “knowing they won’t get credit, students don’t come to school, don’t do the work.” An administrator chimed in, “it causes behavior problems. They sit in the parking lot and wreak havoc.” This twenty-year-old was skilled in car repair, and the high school administrator decided that she would take it upon herself to find him a job at her relative’s auto mechanics business instead. Regardless of this young man’s preferences, people in positions of authority and power acted as gatekeepers, shepherding new arrivals in the direction they saw most fit.

In addition to decisions made by service providers about refugees’ housing, employment, and educational pursuits, the management of financial resources played the most significant role in weakening refugees’ trust in their RA and caseworker. Refugees commonly arrive in the U.S. without any savings or monetary resources, especially when resettled from a refugee camp. As a result, they are completely reliant on the financial assistance that comes with their resettlement. Reception and Placement (R&P) funds, colloquially referred to as “welcome money,” are thus imperative to meet refugees’ needs during the first few weeks of resettlement, including housing, food, furniture, utilities, and household goods. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, federal R&P funds are allocated to the RA on a per capita basis, providing \$1,125 for each refugee arrival to cover initial set up expenses until the client is enrolled in a refugee-specific or general public assistance program and begins employment. Despite expectations about the welcome money that awaits them in the U.S., refugees only receive a small portion of R&P funds directly as cash. Checks for “pocket money” are generally capped at \$50 per person at a time (i.e., \$300 for a family of six) to cover any minimal expenses that might occur shortly after resettlement. Refugees receive their first pocket money check within 24 hours of arrival and are immediately taken to a bank to cash it.

Refugees are aware that financial assistance will be provided to them upon arrival in the U.S. Information about resettlement support, both accurate and erroneous, circulates within refugee camps and urban areas and is transmitted by previously resettled family and friends. Rosine, a young Congolese woman whose family was resettled to San Diego from Kakuma camp in Kenya, told me how “a lot of times people used to have high expectations, like when you get to America you will never have to work for the rest of your life. You will get free money every month.” An Afghan refugee in San Diego explained how the stark juxtaposition between conditions in the country of asylum and in the U.S. initially make refugees feel like they have arrived in “paradise,” creating first impressions that travel back to other refugees awaiting resettlement. He noted how the poor housing available to refugees in Pakistan made everyday items such as carpeting, a refrigerator, a stove, and furniture seems like luxuries. In the absence of thorough pre-departure orientation, rumors of free money and images of paradise gain momentum in countries of asylum.

The pre-departure Cultural Orientation program provided to refugees shortly before they travel to the U.S. risks reinforcing these perceptions. Pre-departure Cultural Orientation is based on a generalized curriculum about life in the U.S., which covers topics ranging from housing to cultural adjustment. Beyond providing refugees with basic information to help prepare for resettlement, these classes also shape expectation. The curriculum is not destination-specific, and according to some of the RA casework staff in San Diego and Boise, it can also contain inaccuracies, creating or fortifying unrealistic expectations that are immediately betrayed upon arrival. As the USRP is made up of many complicated, interconnected programs that differ across states and even across RAs within the same city, it is ripe for misunderstandings. The classes may contain outdated information or be taught by instructors who are unknowingly

perpetuating false ideals. An RA staff member in San Diego from a refugee background shared how his family received pre-departure Cultural Orientation from an instructor who had never been to the U.S. and thus could only rely on information that had been provided. An Ethiopian man in Boise echoed this limitation and told me, “The orientation was given by people who had never been to the United States. They would tell you information, and the documents and books that they use are very old. When you come here it doesn’t match. It’s totally opposite. That’s what most people get confused.” Another casework staff member in San Diego noted how in some places the absence of instructors in certain languages resulted in refugees teaching the course to other refugees. A young Burmese woman resettled in San Diego explained how her parents were fed false expectations about large homes and an easy life during their Cultural Orientation class in Malaysia.

A Congolese community leader in Boise shared how these “twisted and different” perceptions created by pre-departure Cultural Orientation generate confusion among refugees when they arrive. A caseworker told me about once such instance. After a Somali family arrived in San Diego late at night, their caseworker took them to their prepared apartment. The father refused to stay, insisting that this was not his home. Following much late-night arguing, the caseworker took the family to a hotel so that her supervisor could resolve the issue the next day. It turned out that this man had been shown images of a home during pre-departure Cultural Orientation. While these pictures were supposed to give refugees an idea of the types of accommodations available in the U.S., this man was under the impression that the home he had been shown was the very home that would be waiting for him. Consequently, he was trying to convey to his caseworker that his family had been brought to the wrong home. In particular, any mention in Cultural Orientation of specific dollar amounts sets refugees up for disappointment. A



young Congolese man whose family was resettled in Boise from a refugee camp in Tanzania explained how “in the seminar, they told us, ‘you guys will get to the America. They will give you...kind of like \$1,000 to help yourself buy those kinds of stuff.’” Improperly informed instructors contribute to reinforcing inaccuracies and solidifying unrealistic expectations.

When refugees arrive with specific notions of how much money they will receive, they may quickly feel as though they have been cheated, which creates a domino effect that erodes the trust between refugees and the RA. Rather than giving clients a sum of \$1,125 per person upon arrival, caseworkers carefully budget and manage this money to cover initial expenses. During one of the monthly “check day” meetings in Boise, three Congolese brothers came to the RA to receive their monthly assistance through an employment program. One of them inquired about the status of his R&P funds. He said, “about our welcome money, until now we didn’t get [it].” The caseworker presented the brothers with a ledger that documented how their money had already been spent on rent and other necessities. She tried to quickly dispel the rumors that circulated about welcome money. She said, “did we deliver furniture? We bought household items...We need to use R&P money to pay the first month of rent. This idea that R&P money is welcome money that we give to you is misleading. You probably heard from others that they [the RA] will give you money.”

Over time, the Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, the federal office that manages initial resettlement services, has grown increasingly strict about the purpose of R&P funds, the documentation associated with its spending, and most importantly, how much of it can be given directly to refugee clients in the form of checks for cash. Previously, in the absence of such rigid guidelines, RAs had more discretion regarding the distribution of R&P funds to their clients. A caseworker in Boise explained how they used to just

give clients a big check for any leftover R&P funds at the end of the 90-day R&P period. When this practice came to light in an audit, they were told to stop giving clients so much cash. Now the Boise RA will send any remaining money to the client's landlord as a down payment on future rent, or, occasionally, they will provide clients with prepaid gift cards to stores like Walmart or Target. Figuring out what to do with leftover sums of R&P funds was less of an issue in San Diego. Since housing was so much more expensive and property management companies required an additional month of rent upfront along with the first month of rent and a security deposit, caseworkers in San Diego rarely had to manage the distribution of excess R&P funds.

Due to these increasingly strict regulations from the federal government, refugees will typically only receive a few hundred dollars of their R&P funds as cash. Particularly for refugees with young children or minimal personal items, this pocket money is quickly depleted. Newly arrived refugees are rarely familiar with the strict federal regulations governing the distribution of R&P funds and typically assume that the money is theirs to use. Caseworkers manage these funds and prioritize it for critical expenses such as rent. Thus, the doling out of pocket money creates tension between caseworkers and clients, which risks becoming infantilizing for refugees who must justify requests for more cash that is provided to them in small increments. Six days after a young Congolese family of three arrived in Boise, the husband asked his caseworker for \$300. The caseworker responded that he first needed to know what the money would be used for. The husband simply wanted to have some cash on hand as he had already spent the money provided the previous week. Caseworkers are put in a position where they become financial gatekeepers, requiring refugees to ask permission for funds that they had been under the impression belonged to them.

Post-resettlement Cultural Orientation becomes a way to correct false expectations about the purpose of R&P funds. During a Cultural Orientation class in Boise, the instructor explained to a group of new arrivals, “when you first arrived, the money used comes from the federal government...IRC can't legally give you the money to resettle yourself. It's used for pocket money, a meal when you first arrive, furnishings. Legally some things have to be new, like beds and mattresses. Kitchen items, a deposit and rent, cleaning supplies, hygiene items, utensils, and basic food...IRC is required to purchase and provide these for you, including a car seat and bus pass.” A young Congolese man in the class had grown suspicions based on his family’s experience and spoke up. He said, “we are five in the family. When I compare what the agency bought for us, I'm not convinced the money was all spent for me. What happens to the balance left?” The instructor replied, “It's a good question...Sometimes IRC has to dip into emergency funds for one person. Sometimes when there are many people in the family some money is left over. IRC can't keep it but can pay rent in the future. Say \$100 is left. They would apply \$100 to the next rent or power bill. Your caseworker keeps a budget, and you have the right to see that.” In addition to strict federal regulations, caseworkers hold on to a client’s R&P funds in an effort to safeguard their wellbeing given the economic precarity of early resettlement. Because the budget for newly arrived refugees is so tight, any mismanagement of R&P funds or other forms of cash aid may result in a client being unable to cover rent soon after arrival. In San Diego, even if only a few hundred dollars in R&P funds remains following initial resettlement, that money could be the difference between affording the second month of rent or coming up short. In Boise, R&P money is conserved to supplement future rental payments, particularly for single mother families that may need to get by on one minimum wage income. Recalling Joseph and Nina’s distressing experience in Chapter 3, the family of six only managed to make their second month

of rent because their caseworker had reserved the \$580 in leftover R&P, which was combined with their first disbursement of TANF cash aid. Though the family had other intentions for this money, it was imperative that they remain housed.

The worst-case scenario unfolded when a Pakistani family of four in San Diego came due for their second rental payment. The RA had covered their first month of rent with R&P funds before the family arrived. Very little money remained after their caseworker had secured their apartment and purchased the bare minimum in household goods and furniture. The family needed to rely on their first installment of TANF cash aid to cover rent until one of the parents gained employment. By the time their rental payment was due, they came up short. The family had recently spent about \$250 on transportation expenses. After their caseworker inquired further, she learned that they had been taken advantage of by an Urdu speaker in the community who had offered transportation to the family at an extremely inflated rate. Because caseworkers must ensure that their clients can pay rent, they are put in a position where they assume control and management over R&P funds and other financial benefits, as there are few alternatives should the money be spent elsewhere.

The use of R&P funds for initial set up expenses combined with caseworkers' efforts to protect the money for future use means that welcome money largely bypasses the hands of refugee clients. Caseworkers make purchases for furniture and household goods on behalf of their clients, and, in Boise in particular, rent is paid for with checks furnished by the finance staff that are made out directly to property management companies. While this practice of managing clients' money is intended for their benefit, it leaves refugees with little agency over financial transaction made on their behalf or confidence in how funds were spent. A young Congolese man was still unsure what had happened to his family's R&P money when they were resettled to

Boise eight years earlier. He told me, “the people that came before we came, they say when you get to the United States, there’s money that they give you to help you out...they call it welcome money. But then we came here they never gave us that welcome money. So, the agency...they spent it on something else, I don’t know. Because they told us they bought couches and bunk beds and stuff like that, but then when you calculate everything and the money we were supposed to get. The money doesn’t come up.” Caseworkers act as the conservators over what refugees believe to be their money, spending it in ways that are counter to refugees’ expectations.

In spite of refugees’ perceptions of the purpose of R&P funds as well as their concerns that they are not fully benefitting from them, RAs often overspend on clients’ initial resettlement. Particularly when there are delays in finding housing, caseworkers must rely on hotels until a lease is signed. Even short hotel stays can quickly add up and deplete R&P funds, especially for single cases. Though a caseworker in San Diego managed to secure housing for a single young Iranian man four days after he arrived, he had already spent \$400 of his R&P funds. In one extreme example, a family resettled to San Diego during an especially high surge in arrivals spent more than a month in a hotel, costing the RA \$8,000 beyond the family’s allotted R&P funds. A former caseworker in Boise explained how these hotel stays were at times necessary but risked further feeding clients’ suspicions about the mismanagement of their financial assistance. This former caseworker said, “people would be put in hotels...and those are expensive. And yet we don’t have any other funds to pay for that, and helping people understand that can get extremely challenging and could add another layer of mistrust on.” Upon learning that their R&P funds had been spent on their hotel stays, she said clients would then ask, “So why didn’t you

just put me in a house if you knew that I was coming? Why didn't you find a house for me?" A Congolese community leader in Boise echoed how this dynamic unfolds. He said,

And with the money that they get from the federal government, they've been paying the hotel for those refugees. Some of them spending three months at the hotel. And once they get their own place, [the caseworkers] say no, we have no money left. Only \$500, whoops... Where is my welcome money? So we have all those complaints. Oh, the resettlement [agencies] are getting money from refugees. How come you're accepting people to come and you don't prepare for them, for their arrival, instead of them staying at a hotel? And oh, they'll explain now, the hotel is costly, that's why. So we receive this complaint a lot, and some of – the trust – the breach of trust is there. So that no, I don't like them. They took my money.

In such instances, not only were clients upset that they did not receive their welcome money as expected, they also felt like they were paying for the carelessness of their caseworker.

Beyond the frustration of feeling left out of decisions about how their R&P money was managed, some refugees doubted that they had benefitted from all of the funds that had been allocated to their case. Though caseworkers maintain detailed records with receipts, some clients continued to mistrust the transparency of this process. After a couple of clients inquired about their finances, a casework staff member in Boise told me that there is “always an issue of clients not trusting money.” A former employment specialist in Boise shared how challenging it was to explain the fine print of resettlement assistance to new arrivals, which she found became an ongoing process that took at least eight months of “consistency, transparency, and repetition.” Yet despite continued efforts by RA staff, some clients walked away from their resettlement experience believing that their caseworker had withheld, or even stolen, some of the R&P funds. A young Congolese man in San Diego felt like the RA that helped his family operated less like a social service agency and more like a business and was not forthcoming about his family's R&P funds. He told me, “they will just steal your money and everything, and they don't give you a receipt.” A Congolese community leader in Boise surmised that some of this suspicion was

because new arrivals were not accustomed to some of the expenses that went into housing, such as a security deposit, that used up sizeable portions of their R&P funds. They did not understand how else this much money had disappeared so quickly.

Other refugees accused their caseworker of “eating,” or misappropriating, their money. A former caseworker and interpreter in Boise from a refugee background explained how unfulfilled expectations about R&P funds led refugees to this conclusion. She said,

We were very transparent about this is how much you’ve received in your welcome money...I think the picture in their head is that they’ll come here and everybody will be handed their money, and, you know, go play with it. And then now turning around and telling them, ‘Okay, this is how much you receive per person for you’...But it’s the same money that we’re using to rent a house, and the deposit, and get furniture for the house, and all of a sudden people will say, ‘The case manager ate our money.’ And I’m thinking why would I jeopardize my job, my life, my reputation by eating your money? But it’s a whole thing of just the way the picture is painted. So, I know that we were very transparent, and we would share and would have the receipts and everything...if there’s any money left over you’ll give it to them and say, ‘Hey, this is what is left over.’ But I’ve interpreted in cases where people are saying, ‘No, they ate our money. This is how much we’re supposed to [get].’

A young Congolese man whose family was resettled to Boise from Kampala, Uganda still believed six years later that he had been cheated out of his R&P funds upon resettlement. Since his arrival, he has become a leader in Boise’s Congolese community and has worked closely with local RAs. Despite his proximity to and knowledge of the resettlement process, he still maintained that his caseworker withheld funds. He told me,

I don't know what they do with the money...they give you nothing in the end. And I'm like, you [are] supposed to give me this money. And then at the top of that, I need help...But no, that money never even showed me, you never see the money. I was lucky that my mom was aware of it and she guided me. I got half my money. All my friends who came here, nothing. I remember [my friend], I kept telling him the same thing and after that he told me he got 75 dollars out of the 900.

Even with more intimate knowledge of the work of local RAs, this young man held on to his conviction that caseworkers had deceived new arrivals.

This notion that refugees do not receive all of their welcome money and that caseworkers withhold R&P funds circulates within refugee communities and fuels suspicions. Once a community member plants seeds of doubt, it can be difficult to regain a client's trust. A caseworker in San Diego explained how after a family of seven was warned by someone that they were being cheated out of money, it shaped all subsequent interactions with the RA. No matter what their caseworker did, the family was convinced that he was personally profiting off of their resettlement. Caseworkers in both San Diego and Boise noted how they found this mistrust at the community level to be particularly prevalent among the Congolese, and they were wary of what clients might hear from neighbors soon after arrival. When a newly arrived Congolese family learned early in their resettlement that their friend also lived in San Diego, their caseworker told me that this news was both good and bad. While this friend could be a form of support, he could also be a source of misinformation. In another instance, five days after a Congolese family of eight was resettled in San Diego as a free case, they informed their caseworker that they had a relative in California. They wanted to move out of the already furnished three-bedroom apartment that their caseworker had arranged for them so that they could join this relative. The clients asked their caseworker for their money, stating that their relative would help them instead of the RA. Their caseworker was caught off guard as the family had initially seemed content with their arrangements. As she grew frustrated with her clients' change in tone, she responded, "Money? I have no money!" Later in the day, the casework staff discussed what had transpired as this family had appeared happy only a few days earlier. They



concluded that their relative had likely vilified the RA and was the cause of this sudden change in demeanor.

Shortly after a Congolese single mother was housed in an apartment complex in Boise that had other Congolese tenants, her neighbor warned her that the RA “ate” all of the welcome money that her family of 10 was supposed to have received. In reality, this large family had cost the RA about \$6,000 beyond their allotted R&P funds, yet the family still believed that they had been cheated. When the single mother shared her concerns with one of the RA’s interpreters, he tried to explain how the R&P funds were spent in an effort to dispel any doubt created by her neighbor. A Congolese man who was among the first refugees from the DRC to be resettled in Boise more than a decade earlier explained how a preexisting community in the resettlement destination can at times complicate the task given to RAs. Because there was no Congolese community to welcome him, he was not subjected to such advice and rumors. He noted how the efforts to connect new arrivals with other refugees can backfire when people share their negative experiences. He said, “Now you are learning everything you need to learn from these Congolese that were here, that have experience with the [RA] before. If these Congolese had a bad experience with the [RA], guess what? They want to tell you all the bad stuff about [the RA].”

An Ethiopian man in Boise told me how refugees come to understand the resettlement process based on their individual experience, which does not account for changes in the cost of housing, the irregular availability of donations, or the use of hotels on a case-by-case basis. He said,

The whole thing around that is how you get the information really...The people that came before from me, were giving me the information that you will get this much money. Then now you’re not getting this much money. Some of it is just because of the change of the prices...if a refugee came here ten years ago that price was probably half, and they have more money left. That makes it hard to understand...Now refugee[s], they will stay in [a] hotel for two weeks. Hotels are

an average of \$50-\$150 a night...That money will go away, and they will ask where the money go, and they will show them on paper. But that's not going to make sense. Those things are really an issue to understand, and of course creates confusion and mistrust between the agency and the refugee.

Community members may suspect that new arrivals are not receiving all of their R&P funds because they received more with their own resettlement. The circumstances of each case are unique, yet this variation sows doubt about the trustworthiness of RAs.

Unrealized expectations about life in the U.S. may also cause refugees to lose trust in their community. Lofty expectations set refugees up for disappointment, and as a result, they lose trust in those who they feel misled them to think that life in the U.S. would be easier. A

Congolese college student in Boise explained,

there's a lot of refugees that still aren't doing good...and they're not trusting of the system. Whether that's something that they heard from somebody else or they're able to experience themselves. There's more kind of like that distrust that has been engrained as well...you're coming here and you have this whole mindset and vision that Americans are going to be like that, but then once you get here, it's not like that, so you have those kind of depressed notion and feeling...So you begin to distrust people, even the people within your own community. Stop trusting because you're like, "oh yeah, they lied to me. They told me it was going to be like this, but it's not like that." So yeah, there is a lot of distrust.

Though the USRP is a highly standardized program, each case will have its own particular characteristics that affect resettlement circumstances, such as cash aid, housing, and employment. Consequently, community members risked giving advice to new arrivals that was not reflective of their situation. Aware of how information can get distorted and feed feelings of mistrust, caseworkers warn clients not to discuss the details of their assistance with other refugees. During the 24-hour home visit with a Congolese family of four in San Diego, their caseworker told them twice throughout the meeting not to discuss their cash aid with other refugees, since not everyone was enrolled in the same programs or had the same family composition. He said, "for benefits, you can't compare yourself with your neighbors." Later on,

the caseworker reiterated, “make sure you never talk about your benefits with other people.” Nearly a month later, after this family had befriended another recently arrived Congolese family in the neighborhood supported by the same caseworker, the fathers of the two families walked in to the caseworker’s office asking him to explain their finances again. The families had exchanged information about their respective benefits and wanted to know why they were not receiving comparable assistance. In addition to differences in family size and initial housing circumstances, one family was enrolled in the TANF Welfare-to-Work program while the other was enrolled in Matching Grant. They were both receiving the assistance that was best suited to the family, but the complexities of resettlement services and public assistance made them doubt that they were receiving all available benefits.

As exemplified by the itemization of Joseph and Nina’s initial resettlement expenses in Chapter 3, Table 6, R&P money can disappear quickly. Caseworkers must adhere to strict federal guidelines on the mandatory items provided for each arriving case. In addition to city-level occupancy guidelines, there are also resettlement-specific rules that govern who and how many people can share a bed, which dictates the purchase of furniture. These regulations are set by PRM and do not take client preference into consideration and may include items that refugees feel they do not want or need. For example, RA staff in both San Diego and Boise cited how this lack of flexibility meant that families who preferred to share mealtimes seated on the floor nonetheless had to receive a kitchen table and chairs paid for out of their limited R&P funds. While caseworkers are able to make use of donations for some of the items, others, such as mattresses, must be new. Table 8 below shows the list of items required by PRM for new arrivals. A former employment specialist in Boise noted how clients would get upset when they learned that not only would they not receive their welcome money as expected, but that it had

already been spent on items that they neither wanted nor needed. For example, she cited how clients found the purchase of double shower curtains (inner liners with outer curtains) to be a waste of their money. A caseworker in San Diego has had to decline clients' requests to return items purchased from the list. As I assisted a caseworker in San Diego on a shopping trip for an impending arrival, she explained how she tries to be economical, since clients tend to complain about the use of their R&P funds. She swapped out the bottle of laundry detergent I had put into the shopping cart because she knew that a different brand was slightly cheaper.

Table 8. Required furniture and household items

Furnishings	
	Mattress(es) - Twin/Double
	Box Spring(s)
	Bed Frame(s)
	Set of drawers, shelves, or other unit for storage of clothing
	Kitchen table
	One kitchen chair per person
	Couch or equivalent seating in addition to kitchen chairs
	One lamp per room unless installed lighting is present
Kitchen Items	
	One place setting of table ware per person (fork, knife, spoon)
	One place setting of dishes per person (plate, bowl, cup)
	Pots/pans, including saucepan, frying pan, and one baking dish
	Mixing/serving bowls
	One set of kitchen utensils
	Can opener
	Baby items as needed
Linens and Other Household Items	
	One towel per person
	One set of sheets and blankets for each bed
	One pillow and pillowcase for each person
	Alarm clock
	Paper, pens and/or pencils
	Light bulbs
Cleaning Supplies	
	Dish soap
	Bathroom/kitchen cleaner
	Sponges or cleaning rags and/or paper towels
	Laundry detergent
	Two waste baskets

	Mop or broom
	Trash bags
Toiletries	
	Toilet paper
	Shampoo
	Soap
	One toothbrush per person
	Toothpaste
	Personal hygiene items as appropriate

For refugees resettled with a U.S. tie, typically a family member or close friend resettled before them, the RA will rely on the U.S. tie to procure as many of the required household items as possible in an effort to share some of the burden of work and conserve limited R&P funds. U.S. ties may make use of community donations or duplicate items that they can give to the new arrival. The RA will then supplement whatever the U.S. tie is unable to provide from the required list of items. In Boise, U.S. ties would deliberately omit some of the items either because they thought it was unnecessary or they thought they were saving money that would instead go to the refugee family. This practice frustrated the casework staff because of the mandatory nature of this list. During a casework team meeting, one of the staff members complained that they will go check on clients assisted by their U.S. tie only to find out that “it’s a [shit]hole.” It creates more work for the casework staff who then have to figure out which items are missing before going to purchase them. Another staff member explained how consequential this list was for the RA, saying, “an auditor comes and visits the family, and if everything isn’t there, it’s on us, not the U.S. tie.”

Beyond dissatisfaction about R&P money being spent on unwanted items, clients may also insist that they never received goods that their caseworker claims to have bought for them. An extensive documentation process accompanies every purchase a caseworker makes. Original itemized receipts are included in casefiles, and clients must review and sign for all purchases

made on their behalf. A caseworker in San Diego shared how frustrating it was when clients insisted that they never received certain items listed on a receipt. Once refugees begin to question the use of their R&P funds, doubt sets in about how the money was spent. Helene, a Congolese mother in Boise, arrived at the RA on check day to collect a rent check for her family of seven. Several of the receipts in her family's casefile were missing signatures, so the staff member meeting with Helene began a review of the receipts, beginning with a Walmart receipt for about \$300 that included items for their new home such as pillows, hangers, and an alarm clock. Helene contested the purchases, claiming that her family had not received anything from Walmart. Because of difficulties in securing housing for this family upon their arrival, they had spent their first several months living with friends who had previously been resettled in Boise. Helene was adamant that their friends had personally provided most items for their new apartment. She said, "[The RA] didn't buy anything for me. When we came, we stay with a family. After I moved, I told them not to buy anything because that family bought everything. Just a couch and mattresses from [the RA]." In particular, Helene disputed a \$196 charge for mattress covers. An RA staff member explained how it was RA policy to purchase mattress covers for each mattress to prevent bed bugs. Despite her concern Helene agreed to sign off on the receipt. Next, they reviewed another Walmart receipt for kitchen supplies, towels, and more mattress covers. Helene objected, "these mattress covers keep coming and coming. How many mattress covers?" Recognizing the delicacy of this conversation, the staff member asked the housing specialist who had helped prepare this family's home to join the meeting.

The housing specialist immediately pulled the supporting documentation from the family's case file. She explained to Helene,

Sorry this came as a surprise to you. Maybe this wasn't explained clearly enough. When you come, [the RA] is told by the governing body that we will supply all

the things to make a home with the R&P money. I know this sounds crazy because you should choose, but they standardize it, and they make this list. You and I talked a lot through this process. I asked what your community could provide and gave you this list. They moved everything into the apartment for you. When I came over, I went through everything and marked down what was provided and I got everything else from Walmart or from donations. I tried really hard not to spend money I didn't need to spend, but I followed the rules. I'm the same. When I go to Walmart, I think "what did I buy?!" This is what we provided, and I brought it to your house. I know your moving in was a long process, and I'm sorry for that. Did that help clarify? We don't want you leaving feeling bad. I know a standard family of seven would have cost a lot more. If you're okay with that, you can sign.

This housing specialist not only tried to remedy any misperceptions about the purpose of R&P funds, she also strategically passed any culpability off onto PRM. The RA was simply following the rules, even if they seemed counterintuitive. Before signing, Helene inquired about whether they had any leftover R&P money. None remained. She signed despite her misgivings. Once she had left the office, one of the RA staff members shared with me that the RA had actually overspent on this family's case, but he decided not to mention it to Helene for fear that it would only complicate the situation. Even though clients like Helene ultimately sign off on how their R&P funds were spent, their casefile belies ongoing doubts about the use of their financial assistance.

A young Congolese man resettled to Boise six years earlier from a refugee camp in Tanzania shared with me how even though he mistrusted the RA's administration of his family's R&P money, he felt pressured to sign the requisite documentation, as he was under the impression that the RA would withhold his remaining assistance if he did not sign. He signed out of obligation, not agreement, all while continuing to harbor the conviction years later that his caseworker had withheld a portion of his family's money. He explained how he had no choice but to sign off on the documentation included in his case file. He said, "They will give you this kind of paper to sign. Even if you don't sign, you know, they will not give you the last check,

maybe to pay the bill. So then you become in dilemma. You don't know what to do...So you're upset. So then after that, you are focused working. After that, you know, after, you forget your debt. Life goes on." Because RAs hold the purse strings to refugees' much-needed financial assistance, trust gives way to reluctant dependence when refugees lose faith in the transparency of how their welcome money is spent.

RA staff were aware of the prevalence of mistrust around financial matters, which seemed to persist in spite of efforts to address it. When I shared preliminary findings about the mistrust of R&P spending to a few RA staff members in Boise, a member of the casework team reacted by dramatically dropping her head down on the table in an exaggerated display of frustration. She said that they had put so much effort into dispelling misinformation about R&P spending. Another staff member blamed PRM for their increasingly rigid rules on not giving cash to clients. A couple of months later during an interview, this staff member elaborated on the challenges of client trust. Their office had been counseled by a program designer that this mistrust was inevitable, telling them "every time you introduce the distribution of money into a service program, it switches the relationship into a transactional mode, and within that transactional mode, it is deeply difficult to create that sense of human trust." The fact that these transactions involved money that the clients cannot "see, choose, or touch" made maintaining trust all the more challenging. Refugees are given no ownership over the money that they arrive believing belongs to them. Instead, it mostly passes through a complex bureaucratic system without ever touching their hands. Despite this staff member's belief that "families should have cash" and that "there's a lot of evidence showing that people make choices that are most aligned with their needs when they have total control over it," programmatic directives from the federal



government left no room for flexible implementation. Giving out large sums of R&P funds to clients as cash could jeopardize their standing as an RA.

However, administrative choices made by RAs may at times contribute to the mistrust that develops around welcome money. RAs are given some discretion over how to allocate the \$1,125 in R&P funds. While PRM requires that \$925 must be spent on the arriving client, RAs have the option to reserve up to \$200 per arrival as flex funds to create an emergency reserve for particularly needy cases in the future. Since initial set up costs were so expensive in San Diego, the RA could not afford to withhold any of the R&P funds, and so all \$1,125 were spent on each arriving case. Additionally, as described in Chapter 3, public assistance programs, such as TANF, were available to provide some level of ongoing support for challenging cases, such as single mother families. As refugees in Idaho do not benefit from the same reliability of a public safety net, the Boise IRC office made the decision to systematically withhold \$200 of R&P funds per refugee to build up a reserve, which was often used for emergency rental assistance. The RA had to figure out a way to fill the void left by a weak welfare state.

In this sense, refugees in Boise were not incorrect in asserting that they had not received what had been promised. Moreover, this decision is left up to each individual RA, and other RAs in Boise opted not to reserve these flex funds. As a result, refugees resettled by other RAs in the same city did benefit from the full \$1,125 in R&P funds. An IRC Boise administrator was aware of how this decision had the potential for creating misunderstanding, but she also had to ensure that she was in a position to help clients, particularly in instances of housing insecurity. She told me, “It was our decision, because we have some families with extreme need, and we do pool the flex and push it towards them, single moms that we want to pay more months of rent towards...and there’s probably mistrust of, you know, ‘It was supposed to be \$1,125, and what

I'm getting is \$925.'" In the absence of a strong welfare state in Idaho, RA leadership had to make decisions about how to carefully conserve funds knowing that it risked further damaging their clients' trust.

When refugees lose trust in their caseworker and the RA, the already difficult task of resettlement service provision is further strained. This mistrust also jeopardizes the ongoing relationship between RAs and their clients and may affect the likelihood of refugees returning to the RA for future services. One of the Boise RA staff members who worked in the immigration department explained how they wanted clients to make use of their office's services once they become eligible to apply for a Green Card one year after arrival, rather than seek assistance elsewhere in the community. The RA's national office expects that former clients will return to their local RA for this service, and it reflects poorly on the RA when they do not. This staff member knew that the RA risked losing clients' future business if they felt like they had been cheated during the resettlement process.

### **When Caseworkers Lose Trust**

As refugees are judging the trustworthiness of their caseworkers, so too are caseworkers appraising their clients. The punitive nature of resettlement services coupled with the high stakes monitoring of RA compliance makes caseworkers and employment specialists hyperaware of clients who may be misrepresenting themselves in their claims for assistance or may be falling short of program requirements. When clients elicit suspicion or doubt about the information they are providing to the RA, it damages their credibility in future interactions and makes caseworkers less willing to make exceptions for their clients' benefit. RA staff thus do not always trust the veracity of what their clients tell them. For example, when clients spend their pocket money quickly, it may raise suspicions for caseworkers that their clients are either

spending cash irresponsibly or not being honest about where it is going. When a single Burmese man in San Diego told his caseworker that he had already spent \$100 of his pocket money as well as \$200 from his U.S. tie in less than a week and needed more, his caseworker began to doubt what his client was telling him.

In Boise, before each monthly “check day,” RA staff equipped themselves with compliance notes with detailed attendance records for English and job readiness classes as well as any other issues of concern. RA staff used these notes to confront clients about spotty attendance, relying on their written record as proof should a client try to deny their absences. A Congolese couple in Boise met with an RA staff member on check day to receive their next rental check and disbursement of pocket money through the Matching Grant program. The staff member began the meeting by addressing an issue with their attendance at English class. She told them, “I know you’re here for your check, but first I need to cover a few things. You were only at three classes last month. Same with your wife. Is there a reason you’re not going?” The client responded through an interpreter that he had never missed a class. The staff member continued, “[you’re] only marked for three days. Everyone else is marked.” The client explained how he signed his name in the class’s attendance book. The staff member cautioned him, “I’ll give you a warning. If your attendance isn’t marked better next month, you’ll be sanctioned in Matching Grant. If you go to class, make sure the teacher marks you present.” This client received a warning based on the presumption that he had missed English class rather than giving him the benefit of the doubt. Though a warning is only a verbal reprimand, any future missteps put this client at risk of being sanctioned, which carried more severe consequences.

In addition to attendance records, clients may also be confronted about rumors that they have begun working. Because most refugee-specific and general public assistance programs are

means-tested, benefitting from both resettlement assistance and unreported income puts clients at risk of committing fraud. The Boise RA heard on several occasions that two brothers had begun working while continuing to receive their Matching Grant benefits. Though these young men denied their employment, the RA moved forward with sanctioning them and withholding their benefits. The RA planned to send a staff interpreter to speak with the clients' younger sibling in hopes of revealing the truth.

When clients are deemed to have misrepresented their situation or needs, they risk tarnishing their reputation and creating doubt about future requests and their deservingness. Etienne, a young Congolese man, relocated to Boise after he was originally resettled in the Midwest eight months earlier. He was ill when he first arrived in the U.S. and struggled with expectations for early employment given his poor health. He told me how his original RA pressured him to take a job at a car factory. After three weeks on the job, he suffered a terrifying medical scare. Then winter set in. He was still unwell, and the extreme cold caused him pain in his muscles and bones. He did not leave his apartment for three months. He lost weight and thought he was going to die. He knew that he had to move. Through social media he reconnected with a friend from the eleven years he spent in a refugee camp who had been resettled to Boise with her family. She invited him to come to Boise and stay with her family while he got settled. Etienne hitched a ride with a long-haul truck driver from his church whose route was going through Idaho.

After three days on the road, Etienne settled in at his friend's apartment. He then reached out to the Boise RA for services. He wanted help with financial assistance, finding permanent housing, and securing ongoing medical care, but the RA had no resources to support him. A refugee's case can only be officially transferred to another RA if it is done within the refugee's

first thirty days in the U.S. Since Etienne was well beyond this period, he was considered a secondary migrant and not a part of the Boise RA's formal caseload. Etienne pled his case to the RA. He was concerned about overstaying his welcome with his friend's family who would be moving at the end of the month. He wanted help from the RA to find a new apartment and roommates. He felt like his health was still too fragile to begin working, so he wanted financial support to pay rent. The RA made the administrative decision not to use any of their emergency reserve on Etienne. They had to conserve the limited funds for their own clients, particularly single mothers. According to the RA's hierarchy of deservingness, young single men were at the bottom, even with health issues. The RA assigned a caseworker to Etienne to help him enroll in the food stamps program. Since he had already been in the U.S. for eight months, he was ineligible for Refugee Medical Assistance, and he did not qualify for Medicaid in Idaho because he was not yet working. Over the next several weeks, Etienne continued to make requests of the RA. He needed a place to live and resisted the idea of employment until he felt stronger.

After a month of Etienne's attempts at claims-making, which were premised on no longer being able to stay in his friend's home, he accidentally sent a text message to one of the RA's interpreters that had been intended for his friend. The text message was about strategizing how to convince the RA to give him money for an apartment. This error did not go over well with the RA staff. The interpreter who received the text message had been suspicious of Etienne from the beginning, sensing that he was trying to manipulate the RA. This slipup only confirmed his assumptions. The casework staff felt deceived after having spent weeks working to come up with temporary housing solutions out of fear that Etienne would become homeless. Etienne lost credibility and made the RA staff question the urgency of his claims. Eventually the RA helped Etienne gain employment and find housing. One of the casework staff members surmised that

Etienne probably just did not want to work and was not in as much need as he had initially made it seem. Regardless of the reality of Etienne's circumstances, his actions made the RA doubt the extent of his deservingness.

While living in refugee camps and urban areas in countries of asylum, refugees develop survival strategies in order to get by and keep their families alive under dire circumstances. What may have been a necessary approach prior to resettlement risks clashing with normative expectations for fair assistance in the U.S. An RA staff member in San Diego told me, "I've been betrayed so many times" by clients who, according to him, had overstated their need. In response to desperate pleas for assistance, this staff member had given one family \$200 of his own money and created a fundraiser for another that netted \$1,200, only to find out later that both families had deceived him. Though he had been misled, he nonetheless rationalized such instances and concluded that these refugees were just trying to figure out how to get by, bringing with them strategies that may have been necessary in corrupt or resource scarce environments.

Even if refugees are not deceiving the RA, they may inadvertently elicit doubts of their deservingness by not playing the part of the archetypal grateful refugee. A couple of months after a Congolese family of four was resettled in San Diego and housed in a one-bedroom apartment, the mother began pressing her caseworker about moving their family to a two-bedroom apartment. She was pregnant, so before long, they would become a family of five. This request for a larger apartment along with other appeals and ways of dressing drove their caseworker to assume that the family must be from a "rich" background, surmising that only people who came from money would ask these kinds of questions. They had also been resettled from a city rather than a refugee camp, which the caseworker took as another indication that they were likely better off than other clients. These requests for more comfortable accommodations were considered

incongruent with how a refugee *should* act, as if wanting a two-bedroom apartment for a family of five was an extravagance. By making demands for better circumstances, this family did not fit their caseworker's expectations of a grateful refugee and acquiescent client. Though class background and past experiences of wealth are irrelevant to claims of refugee status, they nonetheless shaped how service providers formed opinions of their clients' deservingness.

## **Conclusion**

As the resettlement process unfolds, the accumulation of decisions made on behalf of refugees begins to alter their relationship with their caseworker. Newly arrived refugees are also learning the terms of their membership and growing more comfortable asserting themselves and their wishes. RAs were aware of this erosion of trust and how it risked damaging their credibility with clients as well as the efficacy of service provision. The Boise RA knew that building rapport early on was important and that they had room for improvement. The RA's director tried to institute a relaxed gathering between new arrivals and caseworkers over tea outside of formal resettlement tasks. Clients could share their hopes, ambitions, and expectations for life in the U.S. in a setting where they felt acknowledged and heard, which was often absent in the daily implementation of the resettlement program. The goal was to create an opportunity "to get to know you as a human being before all the crap" of required services. Though this initiative had good intentions, it put an additional strain on an already overburdened casework staff. She explained,

I proposed it first to a former case worker, supervisor, you know, that every new arrival, before they hit the food stamp interview, before we start going through check, check, check, check, test, test, test, test, [we] should have tea with the family, and we brought a special tea set for it...Like we did some design work to kind of make it feel like a space that isn't clinical, that doesn't force you into a really sterile, unhuman [environment].

Though given the unrelenting pace of required services, this practice did not last. When resettlement agency staff are overburdened, underpaid, and dealing with the daily stressors of managing refugees' initial resettlement, efforts to change the status quo feel insurmountable, and refugees' trust in the resettlement program suffers.



## CHAPTER 5: INTERROGATING REFUGEE STATUS AS IDENTITY

Just because early resettlement is displacing does not mean that refugees do not eventually find a sense of rootedness in the U.S., and like other migrants, they become ensconced in their communities over time. From this more settled vantage point, they grapple with what it means to be or have been a refugee. While refugee status was integral to the mechanisms that offered them protection and brought them to the U.S., it is unclear the point at which someone stops being a refugee. Refugee status is conferred and recognized by international humanitarian organizations and governments, yet there is no comparable system in place to determine when one ceases to carry this label. Becoming a refugee involves much more than crossing a border. It is also a profound rupture with one's sense of home and homeland as well as one's identity and belonging. I question the intransient nature of the refugee label, which can slip from a legal bureaucratic status to a social category that remains long after resettlement. This chapter problematizes the indelibility of refugee status by examining refugees' perceptions of and experiences with the refugee label and demonstrates the heterogeneity of experiences that follow resettlement in the U.S., as this label can become both a source of pride and stigma. Becoming a refugee is a deeply personal process and feelings about being a refugee after resettlement are highly subjective. While some felt like being a refugee was still an inextricable part of their identity years later, others adamantly rejected any continued association with the refugee label. Though they had obtained a new legal status in the U.S., it did not necessarily erase the socially constructed qualities of being a refugee, which they may have associated with for the majority of their lives.

By centering on refugee voices from multiple countries of origin, including Afghanistan, Burma, DRC, Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia, this chapter highlights the varied and complex ways in

which people relate to their histories of forced migration. I find that there are dual layers to the refugee label: one of self-identification and another of external perception. Flores and Schacter (2018) demonstrate how migrant illegality has been socially constructed in ways that extend beyond legal status. Similarly, the term “refugee” comes to imply more than the circumstances under which someone migrates. Regardless of their self-described relationship to this status, refugees are also at the whim of labeling by those around them who may permanently “other” them as foreigners and racial minorities. Particularly in cities like Boise without a history of recent immigration or ethnic and racial diversity, refugees arrive with a conspicuousness that makes shedding this label even more challenging. Whether they are still seen as refugees is not entirely within their control, as they may remain a perpetual refugee in the eyes of their new community in the U.S.

This chapter draws on interviews with sixty refugees in San Diego and Boise who had been resettled for at least one year in order to better understand the extent to which being a refugee is still a part of their identity. The post-resettlement period serves as an opportune moment to interrogate perceptions of refugeehood. By the end of their first year in the U.S., federal Reception & Placement services provided through the U.S. Resettlement Program have ended, and refugees are often employed or enrolled in school. Moreover, refugees must adjust their status to Legal Permanent Resident after one year, at which point a Green Card replaces their refugee-specific documentation. Though this new legal status does not negate their experiences of forced migration.

Only a few studies have examined how it feels to be a refugee at various stages of the forced migration trajectory (Pearlman 2019; Ludwig 2013; Brown 2011). Pearlman’s (2019) study of displaced Syrians concludes that following forced flight, Syrians did not immediately

feel they were refugees. Rather, over time they underwent a process of *becoming* refugees, as the act of forced migration did not always neatly overlap with their understanding of their identity and their relationship to this label. As Pearlman (2019:305) notes:

becoming a refugee...means forging a new relationship to one's own prior sense of self. This idea points to the fact that forced migration does not only signify displacement from a specific physical place, but also dislocation from the aspects of one's identity which were built in that place and can be difficult (or impossible) to recuperate elsewhere.

Becoming a refugee involves much more than crossing a border. It is also a profound rupture with one's sense of home and homeland as well as one's identity and belonging. For those refugees who arrive in refugee camps, becoming a refugee can also strip them of their independence and dignity.

Two scholars (Brown 2011; Ludwig 2013) have previously examined perception of the refugee label in the U.S. resettlement context yet have arrived at contradictory findings. Both studies focused on Liberians resettled to the U.S. and raise important questions about the variety of ways in which refugeehood is embodied. Brown (2011) finds that among her respondents in California, Liberians continued to strategically assert their refugee status as a means to signal their deservingness of public assistance. By embracing their refugee identity, these Liberians differentiated themselves from negative stereotypes of welfare dependence in the U.S. In contrast, Ludwig's (2013) study in Staten Island, NY concludes that Liberians reject the refugee label once they arrive in the U.S., signaling a rupture between the dependency that defined their lives after fleeing Liberia and the newfound agency they have embraced in the U.S. For Ludwig's respondents, resettlement became the moment when they could finally rid themselves of the refugee label.

Based on interviews with thirty refugees in San Diego and thirty refugees in Boise, Brown and Ludwig's contradictory findings are not surprising, as interview respondents spoke to the multitude of relationships that exist with the refugee label. Not only is becoming a refugee a deeply personal process (Pearlman 2019), feelings about being a refugee after resettlement are also highly subjective. Respondents expressed a heterogeneity of sentiments that follows resettlement in the U.S. Some felt like being a refugee was still an inextricable part of their identity years later, whereas others adamantly rejected any continued association with the refugee label. Consequently, the refugee label can be viewed as a source of pride or stigma depending on who is asked. By centering on refugee voices, this chapter highlights the varied and complex ways in which people relate to their histories of forced migration. Beyond questioning the point at which someone stops being a refugee, this chapter also asks who gets to determine whether someone is still a refugee. I find that there are dual layers to the refugee label: one of self-identification and another of external confirmation.

Approximately half of the top fifty cities of resettlement over the past fifteen years are considered new immigrant destinations (Marrow 2011) where refugees make up a larger proportion of the foreign-born and total population. This split effectively creates two realities of resettlement. In large cities that have traditionally welcomed different immigrant groups, refugees join a diverse and already robust foreign-born population. In contrast, when refugees are resettled in new destinations, their visibility is heightened. This amplified visibility in new destinations can have both positive and negative consequences. While it can spur community support and volunteerism, it can also incite hateful backlash, a dichotomy which Hein terms "small town hospitality and hate" (2006:79). As this chapter demonstrates, standing out in new immigrant destinations can also come at a price. Even years after resettlement, several

respondents in Boise expressed how they continued to feel marked as others, unable to assume the indistinctiveness afforded to their counterparts in more diverse cities. This visibility meant that regardless of their achievements or feelings of integration and belonging they were forever viewed as refugees, continually reminded of their past and forced to bear an identity that they would have rather discarded.

This chapter begins by showing how the refugee label befalls migrants in crisis with little warning, upending their life in a way that may take time to accept (Pearlman 2019).

Subsequently, I examine how years after resettlement respondents either felt that being a refugee was still part of their identity in various ways or, conversely, rejected any continued association with being a refugee, a status that they framed as incongruent with attaining U.S. citizenship.

Lastly, I demonstrate how it is not always within a refugee's control how she is perceived by others. Despite one's own identification with the refugee identity, the receiving community may ultimately stand in the way of discarding this label.

### **The Suddenness of Becoming a Refugee**

Becoming a refugee can happen abruptly and without warning, as circumstances push people to flee for safety and survival. Given that their migration was driven by compulsion, it is only after crossing an international border that forced migrants face the reality that they have become refugees. It takes time for refugees to come to terms with this new identifying label which has come to describe their place in the world amid the chaos and trauma of war and displacement (Pearlman 2019). Raphael, a Congolese single father in San Diego, explained the seemingly indiscriminate and arbitrary nature of becoming a refugee. He said, "there is no way you can stop being a refugee. It comes by accident and you need to leave on that condition."

When confronted with escalating violence and life-threatening circumstances, civilians reach a point where they must leave without having premeditated on what it may mean to flee.

The unpredictability of war means that people like Pascal may leave with a moment's notice. The day Pascal's family fled the DRC started out like any other. He recounted, "There was a normal day like this, we were sitting, no one had an idea of what's going to happen, then all of a sudden, boom! And stuff started happening, and it was a time of war. Well, we are going to leave. And so, that's life." Options are constrained, particularly in situations of violent conflict. Survival pushes people from their homes and across borders, and they become refugees along the way. Similarly, Didier, a young Congolese man, pointed to how actions beyond his control ultimately turned him into a refugee. "It's just unfortunate that we became refugees. We didn't become refugees by choice. We became refugees just because of all the evil people around...I'm going to have to accept this fact I'm a refugee here." Didier has learned to accept the events that upended his life and brought him to Boise 13 years later.

### **Maintaining a Refugee Identity**

The range of ways in which respondents expressed their feelings of being or having been a refugee speaks to the deeply personal nature of experiencing forced migration, displacement, and resettlement. Respondents' feelings towards the refugee label varied across country of origin, years in the U.S., age, and citizenship status, pointing to the subjectivity and intimacy of this experience. Though being a refugee is still an irrevocable part of who she is today, Idil, a Somali college student, was always very private about her refugee background as she adjusted to life in San Diego. Having been born in a refugee camp in Yemen, Idil explained, "I didn't really talk about being a refugee. No one asked. I never told anyone...I think I found that very personal to myself, especially going to school and stuff like that." Despite still feeling connected to her

refugee background, Idil kept this identity to herself as she acclimated to the sixth grade. Indeed, there are many ways to be and have been a refugee. In the varied sentiments that follow in this chapter, respondents like Idil express what the refugee label has meant to them. Among respondents who maintained a refugee identity, some actively embraced their past while others simply accepted that it was a part of them that would never fade away.

For some, holding on to a refugee identity was a way to appreciate and find pride in how hard they had worked and how far they had come, despite the obstacles they faced prior to and during resettlement. Paw Eh, a young Karen woman in San Diego, explained how at times her refugee background made her feel out of place at the private university she was attending at the time of our interview. Not only did she have gaps in her formal education from her youth spent in a refugee camp in Thailand, she felt like she stood out at the racially homogenous school. Moreover, she was acutely aware that her family belonged to a different socioeconomic status than her peers. As discussed in Chapter 3, the U.S. Resettlement Program incorporates refugees into low wage employment and gives them poverty as a starting point in a new country. Ten years after arriving in San Diego, her parents were still barely making ends meet. Paw Eh recounted,

I go to a private college...It's like 95% white and people are there really high class and stuff. I was telling my friend yesterday I feel like I don't fit in because I'm not a high class and my family barely made money to live every month and stuff to pay rent. They have like Mercedes Benz...Like wow, people are so rich here and I'm not... Well I was a refugee. Should I be ashamed of this? And yesterday my friend gave me...clarity. I shouldn't be afraid of being [a] refugee, it made me who I am. It shaped me to think about what it's like to live outside of this prosperous country. I know what it's like to struggle. I know what it's like to look for food in the jungle. I shouldn't be ashamed of where I come from.

With the help of her friend, Paw Eh came to understand her refugee identity as a mark of her success rather than a sign of deficiency. Similarly, Hanad, born in Ethiopia to Somali parents,

relied on his past to fuel his ambition when he arrived in San Diego at fifteen years old and entered high school speaking no English. Despite dropping out of school in Ethiopia in the fourth grade to work as a cart pusher to support his family, Hanad worked hard to learn the language and graduate from high school. At the time of our interview, he had just begun classes at a local community college. Hanad explained, “I want to remember the past to go back and, like, to motivate me why I’m here...I want to be that refugee who have hard time and then motivate me to...do good, to not get lazy.” Hanad’s youth as a refugee in Ethiopia was still a part of his life in San Diego, which he actively called upon as motivation and recognition of how far he had come.

For others, living through conflict, displacement, and the resource scarce environment of a refugee camp served as a reminder of the opportunities that accompany resettlement to the U.S. Being a refugee means not losing sight of these opportunities, not only because of what their life had been like before, but also because of what life was still like for those who did not get resettled. Cawil was born in a Kenyan refugee camp a few years after his family fled Somalia. He experienced firsthand how the lack of resources in a camp can have grave consequences. One of his siblings began suffering from epilepsy at a young age but received no medical care until the family arrived in San Diego ten years later, leaving her permanently impaired. Additionally, Cawil’s father sustained a moderate injury in the camp for which he was unable to seek proper treatment. His injury grew infected and ultimately turned fatal. For Cawil, being a refugee was inextricably linked to his life as a college student in San Diego:

I still feel like being...a refugee is part of me daily. Yes, because I still have the memories back home. I was born in a refugee camp. These struggles that I had would never leave my mind...Every time I see that I’m not taking my education very serious, I look back, and I’m like, “Oh, my God. If they had the opportunities you have, they would have taken that as advantage,” so they motivate me to be a better person.



Cawil's refugee background served as a constant reminder to not squander what resettlement had offered him.

For Abel, a leader in the Sudanese community in San Diego, embracing his refugee identity meant continuing to recognize the freedom he enjoyed in the U.S. as well as the ability to provide a more secure future for his children:

I was able to get a lot of opportunities here in the United States. Several of my kids are going to good schools. I've invested in my children, and...I enjoyed the freedom of being able to say anything. You can even curse the president and you are not going to go to jail, which cannot happen everywhere...For people who have never lived as refugees, there's a lot of things that they take for granted, like the fact that you can go from one place to another freely without being harassed by military or police and all this kind of stuff.

For Abel, being a refugee meant never losing sight of what he and his family had gained with resettlement.

Several respondents expressed how accepting the refugee label served as a means to honor their past. Even after several years in the U.S., referring to themselves as refugees was a way to avoid forgetting about their experiences of displacement and all that they had endured. Though Pascal initially struggled to reconcile how his newly found American identity fit with his refugee past, he came to see how important it was to remember his background. Pascal explained:

It's still a part of my identity, because wherever I go, I have to mention it, you know? And it does teach us, too. Like, if I can put it aside, you know, I'm trying to undermine my history, how I got here, and how to be Americanized and forget about my past. But my past, because of the scars that remain on my body to help me learn about life and shape my understanding of life, what life is...So, I cannot really rest that past, so it's part of my identity everywhere I go, even though I have that intention of saying, "I want to be called an American," but another part of me is saying, "Why are you forgetting this? It's your life. It's a scar of your life that you have to carry everywhere, that shapes your understanding of life, and what life is all about."

Pascal was a teenager when his family fled the DRC for Tanzania where they lived in a camp for six years. Now, nine years later, Pascal was a leading voice in Boise, speaking at community events about his experience of displacement and resettlement. Though the scars of his past were painful, they were nonetheless an important part of who he had become.

For Farah, an Iraqi woman in San Diego, recognizing and embracing her history was a source of dignity, which she believed was complementary to feeling American:

When I introduce myself, [I say] I was originally from Iraq. It's always going to be part of my identity. Then all the things that I went through, I grew up in a war zone. I cannot forget. I cannot deny myself this pride of who I am and where I came from. It actually makes me a better American. Then I appreciate everything here. I know that now I feel I'm American more than anything. Also, I was made in Iraq, so I can't change that.

Farah was granted refugee status because of her work as a translator with the U.S. Military in Iraq. For Farah, being Iraqi, being a refugee, and being American were not mutually exclusive, as they all made up important parts of her identity.

Not only did Karam feel like being a refugee was still a part of his identity, he also felt obliged as a father to pass this pride along to his children:

I'm proud to be a former refugee. That's how I am...No, "refugee" term has never been a shame for me. I teach my kids that thing, and they always say, "We are from Iraq. We came here as refugees. Yes, we are US citizens, but no, we are refugees, or we were refugees, and we're proud of it. We're proud that we made it." You know? It's a survival thing.

Karam began to choke up as he told me about how his young children speak knowingly of their familial history after having been in San Diego for several years. Not only was Karam proud to be a refugee, he wanted to ensure that his children never felt stigmatized by their past.

However, a refugee identity is not necessarily static or always positive, especially for young people arriving in a new country. While the respondents above embraced being refugees, others expressed a less straightforward relationship with this label. Though Henri now feels like

being a refugee is a part of his identity more than a decade after coming to the U.S., he did not always welcome this label while growing up in Boise. Henri arrived in Boise at the age of 10 and became Americanized more quickly than his parents and older siblings. Without a strong accent to mark him as foreign-born, Henri felt pressure to hide his Congolese family's past from his peers. He recounted:

I think I'm not as offended by it now as I used to be, because I...considered [being a refugee] as a taboo. I just never really liked talking about my past or just like my differences. I still consider...being a refugee as my identity but at the same time I still know that I'm from a different background. I speak different. Everyone in my culture is different. I act different. I might dress the western way, but that's just a little bit of my other identity coming through, my assimilation. But at the end of the day, it's like I have a whole different world that makes me who I am and for that I cannot be ashamed about it. I'm more proud about it. Knowing that hey,...I'm still actually learning more about this that it just makes me more happy. And to be more accepting of it.

Henri's relationship with being a refugee was not linear. Living between two worlds, Henri saw his refugee background as a source of shame when he was younger. Now a college student, he had developed a greater sense of comfort and ownership over his culture, his past, and his family's experience with resettlement. For young people coming of age at a time when their families are also coping with change, it can be difficult to understand where one's refugee past fits. Henri, like Idil, felt the need to conceal this part of himself. Only recently did he develop a newfound ease about his identity.

Though some respondents still felt they were refugees, they expressed an ambivalence about what that meant. Several of my respondents still felt their refugeehood as an inevitable shadow that forever remained by their side. As Serge, a middle-aged Congolese man who was resettled in San Diego two years earlier with his wife and two young children, explained, "I don't find it easy, but still until now I'm a refugee. But the refugee...it's not a good name you applaud. But we accept it because it happened." For Serge, being a refugee was not something to

celebrate. Displaced from his home in the DRC as a child, he spent the majority of his life in a refugee camp in Tanzania. Unable to shed this past, Serge had instead grown to accept that being a refugee will remain with him.

While Serge had learned to tolerate being a refugee, others continued to be plagued by their past, unable to either accept or distance themselves from it. For these refugees, the burden and trauma of persecution and displacement were not always remedied with resettlement. While resettlement can provide political rights and safety from immediate dangers, it does not erase past suffering, the effects of which can linger for years. Being a refugee therefore becomes an encumbrance from which they can never truly be free. Such was the case for Kazem, a young man who has been unable to escape the effect of years of mental and physical abuse in Iran and the various forms of insecurity he experienced both after fleeing to Turkey and since arriving in the U.S. Kazem was resettled in Boise alone with no preexisting ties. He left Boise within a year and sought to make a life for himself on the East Coast. He returned to Boise two years later, dejected, hopeless, and in debt. Despite his best efforts, Kazem's repeated attempts to build a life had failed, reporting that he had been scammed and treated poorly in multiple cities along the East Coast. When I asked if being a refugee was still a part of his identity, Kazem responded, "it's here right now. Of course, it's here. I am probably going to be [a refugee] forever, as long as I don't have anything secure. I am definitely going to feel like a poor person, a wretch. I am the kind of guy waiting, I am waiting, ready to die...I am just waiting to get rid of this life permanently." For Kazem, being a refugee was directly tied to insecurity, which had followed him across the U.S. His displacement had left an indelible mark on his life, resigned to the fact that he may never be free of the weight of being a refugee.

## No Longer a Refugee

Contrary to those respondents who still identified with being a refugee, many other actively rejected this label. For these residents of both San Diego and Boise, being a refugee was what they once were, not who they had become. In these cases, the refugee identity has been relegated to the past and replaced by a newfound American identity. Several respondents pointed to how being a refugee was synonymous with lacking rights, being dependent on aid, or being treated as less than human. Gaining political rights and legal status with resettlement, and particularly the ability to become a U.S. citizen, were therefore antithetical to being a refugee. In many ways, the following respondents echoed Ludwig's (2013) findings with Liberians who had been resettled in Staten Island. Resettlement served as a natural and welcome rupture with their refugee past. For these respondents, being a refugee is more closely tied with geography and legal status, and their arrival in the U.S. allowed them to stop being refugees. For example, Bastien, a Congolese man who arrived in Boise in 2013, associated being a refugee with his experience of forced flight and displacement. He said he was no longer a refugee because "I'm not running here." By finding stability in Boise through employment and residential security, the permanency he had achieved was distinct from the transience that had previously defined his life.

No longer being a refugee does not always mean that the past has been erased. In contrast to those who embraced their refugee identity as a means of honoring their past, Remy acknowledged his refugee history yet did not believe that it described him anymore. He explained:

I don't feel any more as a refugee. Do you know why? Because I'm already an American. Do you understand? So, although I'm still towing, pulling that refugee background behind me...I'm not feeling that anymore...So, much of it has gone already. I take it as a history for me... So that's what I think. I don't feel as a refugee again. I mean, I'm not in that skin of a refugee anymore.

Remy likened his past as a refugee from the DRC as heavy luggage that he still had to pull behind him. However, it ceased to define him now that he was an American, U.S. citizen, and a resident of Boise. He no longer embodied refugeehood as he had for the 15 years he spent in a camp in Tanzania. With resettlement, he had finally shed the skin he was forced to inhabit all those years.

For Patrick, being a refugee meant being confined to restrictive camp conditions and being reliant on aid, which was how his family survived for 15 years in Tanzania. Now a U.S. citizen, he provided for himself and contributed to his family through full-time employment in San Diego. The qualities he associated with being a refugee no longer applied to him. He explained:

when I came to the States, I am no longer a refugee. I was a refugee, because I was in Tanzania...Somebody with cut hands and legs, that's a refugee, because he can't walk. He can't work. So to live in Tanzania, we were given everything in order to live. You can't go out and find a job, to find a life, to do anything... You come here, I don't feel that way. Now I'm working, right? Now I have a home. I have a life. Now I am paying tax...I am hard-working, personally, you know? I am an American citizen, so I got my American citizen award...I don't call myself a refugee. I call myself an American, that's the reason I am here...But I am not living a refugee life, I am living a normal life like everybody right now.

According to Patrick, being a refugee was synonymous with dependence, which he likened to having no hands or legs, forced to rely on the charity of others. Since arriving in San Diego six years ago, he graduated from high school, has held steady employment, and became a U.S. citizen. Consequently, he no longer felt like a refugee. At this point, he saw little that differentiates his life from other Americans around him.

For Maxime, being a refugee was a stigma, as “the refugee term diminishes people.” Similarly Thierry, a young Congolese man in San Diego, also found the word refugee to be belittling. He explained:

I feel like if you've been in America for almost 5 years, I wouldn't want anyone or myself being identified as a refugee. Because the thing about the word, refugee has only negative aspects of it. It's like pity, mercy, all these things, right?... Even some refugees themselves are like, "Oh, I'm a refugee. I'll be a refugee forever." Personally, I don't believe it. Because anytime I tell somebody that I'm a refugee they think, 'Oh, sorry.' No, I don't like that. Treat me as [Thierry] and don't be like, "Oh, how can I help?" No, it's not bad to be helped, right? But no, treat me as [Thierry]. Don't help me because of my vulnerability and things like that. See the potential in me. The skills I have. The capacities, the abilities that I can put on the table. Not only considering my weakness into the word refugee, which is sometimes killing me... I'm a citizen already, so I just want to be... I'm American... Yeah, period. I'm American.

For Thierry, as with Patrick and Maxime, a refugee is inseparable from the dependency narratives that shape humanitarian discourse (Besteman 2016). In order to distance themselves from perceptions of charity and helplessness in favor of competence and self-reliance, these three young men no longer identified as refugees.

Maxime saw little equivalence between the nine years he spent as a Congolese refugee in Uganda and his life in San Diego. According to Maxime, we lack the vocabulary to accurately describe what someone becomes after arriving in the U.S. through the resettlement program.

Maxime explained:

The moment that you leave your settlement, countries like Uganda, by the time you leave and come to America, you are no longer a refugee. You become something else... When people take part in resettlement, they are not a refugee... I think there could be a better term, because I was a refugee when I was in [Kampala]. From Congo or Uganda, you are a refugee. And then from Uganda... Am I a refugee? That is quite different. I think there's a better term which should be used for people, because those people are just in the process being American, in the line of being American. New American is good. Not refugee... New American or somebody who is in the process of.

Maxime understood resettlement as a process during which a refugee becomes an American.

Rather than the static, flattening status of being a refugee, resettlement signaled a dynamic long-awaited transformation, and the continued use of the term refugee minimized that shift.

Some respondents more directly juxtaposed refugeehood with their newfound political membership. In other words, being a refugee was antithetical to belonging in the U.S. Their deep convictions of feeling American, whether or not they had actually naturalized, were at odds with the refugee label. Contrary to other immigrant groups, refugees' shift in legal status upon resettlement is meaningful for two reasons. Firstly, refugees living in camps or urban areas in the Global South lack substantive political belonging, and this lack of political membership made them eligible for resettlement in the first place. As a result, gaining membership in the U.S. was consequential after years or even decades of quasi-statelessness. Secondly, naturalization is the encouraged trajectory five years after refugees are resettled, making full membership both realistic and achievable. Even for those who had yet to acquire citizenship, the eventuality of naturalizing fostered a deep connection with the U.S. and allowed them to stop being refugees.

Aadam, a young man from Afghanistan, spent two difficult years as a refugee in Pakistan before being resettled to Boise with his wife and young child. He knew intimately what it meant to be a refugee, having been displaced multiple times throughout his life. As described in Chapter 1, Aadam's family was first internally displaced during civil war in Afghanistan when he was a child, and then under the threat of the Taliban, they escaped to Pakistan. His family eventually returned to Afghanistan in 2003. He fled to Pakistan again eleven years later after surviving an attack at his workplace. According to Aadam, being a refugee was

the worst title that I had in my life...I was forced to be homeless. I was forced to be a refugee. It was not something I like. But that's gone. Still, sometimes, it affects me with the refugee title, but when I will be a US citizen, it will completely go away. And yeah, refugee title, it's the worst. For me, it's something that I belonged to nowhere. I don't have any roots or anything that I can rely on. So, yeah. Refugee for me, it's gone.

For Aadam, being a refugee signaled a lack of belonging, with no home or country to call his own. In Boise, Aadam and his wife had found the security they lacked in Afghanistan and



Pakistan. Though Aadam was still occasionally plagued by the time he spent in Pakistan, he believed he could finally rid himself of this past through naturalization.

Despite not yet having U.S. citizenship, Munir nonetheless felt more American than anything else. Munir's strong feelings of belonging and loyalty were not surprising, as he had served with the U.S. military in Afghanistan as an interpreter. He explained:

For me, I know I'm not even a US citizen right now. I would consider myself a US citizen right now, because I live in the U.S. And my both kids are born in the U.S...They're American, and I'm living here, and I am eating here, and I am breathing here, and I am walking here, having fun here, so I would consider myself as a U.S. citizen right now. If in case, you know, U.S. government would need me...for war and everybody has to go, I would be the first guy, you know, to go and defend and fight for America. And I already did...And even though I am doing it again and applying for it again, but for me, I'm a U.S. citizen, even though I'm not. But for me, inside, I feel like I'm a U.S. citizen...I'm just like anyone who walks around.

After only three years in San Diego, Munir felt a deep sense of connection to the U.S. and felt American through mundane acts as well as strong feelings of patriotism. At the time of our interview, Munir was applying to return to Afghanistan to serve the U.S. military as an interpreter for the second time.

Now a U.S. citizen, Geoffroi did not feel like a refugee anymore. Growing up as an ethnic minority in the DRC, Geoffroi was excluded from national belonging in the midst of a war that eventually forced his family to flee. As a refugee, Geoffroi lacked membership to any nation-state, which he had since remedied in the U.S. Moreover, having U.S.-born children further reinforced his feelings of rootedness:

Well, to me...I don't consider myself as a refugee still. Because I have my citizen[ship]. I'm a citizen, right?...Because back then...I wasn't even a Congolese. I was not even Rwandese, right? So I didn't have any country that claims that I'm their citizen, right? I wasn't any citizen of any country, right? But this time, I'm not a refugee anymore...This is the country where I live, and that's the part of me now. Yeah. Because if anything, you know - let's say if I was in Rwanda as a Rwandese, if anything could happen to the country, I would fight for

the country, right? That's the same thing that I can do, because this is my family. My kids were born here. My wife lives here, so this is my home...I don't call myself a Congolese or Rwandese. I'm an American citizen.

For Geoffroi, place and national belonging mattered more than his origins. Despite having been born elsewhere, his affinity and identity were tied to his family and home in Boise.

Similarly, Cyrille believed that his U.S. citizenship made him an American rather than a refugee. Not only did he obstinately reject the refugee label, he also deliberately avoided community events that celebrate refugees in Boise, further distancing himself from his refugee past. He felt like his membership in the broader community and active political participation were indicative of his inclusion. He said, "Even if they call me refugee I am not going to answer. I am not. I am a U.S. citizen. I voted. I will keep on voting...So, after one year, I never felt I was a refugee...I am a U.S. citizen. I am an Idahoan. Don't tell me anything else." Cyrille no longer felt like a refugee and actively rejected others' use of the refugee label to describe him, adamant in his self-determinism as an American and Idahoan.

### **Once a Refugee, Always a Refugee**

Regardless of one's own relationship with a refugee identity, it is nonetheless impossible to control the perceptions of others. For some refugees, this external labeling subjects them to a perpetual reminder of the circumstances that brought them to the U.S., forever defined by this one life event. Some respondents expressed how ultimately it was not up to them whether they were still seen as refugees. Despite having been in the U.S. for several years, the refugee label had become a permanent prefix employed by those around them. They were described by others as a "refugee friend," a "refugee colleague," or a "refugee neighbor," reifying them first and foremost as refugees and reducing them to their migration experience.

These accounts of being perceived as a refugee were particular to my interviews in Boise. For those resettled in Boise, the refugee label was especially sticky, which precluded them from distancing their past migration from their present life. This finding speaks to the heightened visibility of refugees in places like Boise when compared with more diverse cities like San Diego. Boise is 89% white without a history of extensive non-white migration. Refugees who have arrived through the resettlement program since 2002 now make up 4.24% of the population of Boise and 53.24% of the city's foreign-born population. In other words, if a resident of Boise is foreign-born, she is more likely to have come as a refugee. Boise stands in stark contrast to San Diego where 64% of the population is white, and refugee arrivals since 2002 make up only 1.3% of the total population and 4.68% of the foreign-born population despite being the fourth largest resettlement program in the U.S. over the past 17 years (WRAPS 2018). Given San Diego's diversity and history of immigration, refugees are not as visible a minority group as they have become in Boise. The case of Boise speaks to the racialization of refugee, particularly in communities with limited diversity.

Some of the intent by the Boise community to continue labeling refugees as such is an effort to convey a sense of welcome and inclusiveness in a city and state not typically associated with immigration. By actively celebrating and engaging with the "refugee community," Boise residents are trying to signal their support without realizing that they are perpetually othering their new neighbors in the process. This misplaced benevolence can have an alienating effect on people who have sought to rebuild their lives in the U.S. and distance themselves from their refugeehood. A casework staff member at the Boise RA was aware of how reductive this tendency could be, commenting, "I wouldn't want to be defined by the worst moment in *my* life." Moreover, one of the few non-white staff members at the Boise RA shared how he, too, had been

assumed to be a refugee by well-meaning yet uninformed community members, despite not being from a refugee background. He explained, “Me, being a person of color and being on the staff...and advocating for refugees the way I am. For example on World Refugee Day, I had three people that were local white, who came to me and said, ‘Welcome to America.’” During Boise’s local celebration of this global day of refugee recognition and appreciation, several members of the Boise community assumed that by being Middle Eastern in Boise, he was necessarily a refugee, prompting their grossly misplaced words of welcome. He elaborated on the assumed characteristics of refugees in Boise as well as the notion that once someone is a refugee, she will always be a refugee:

I tell every person that is willing to give me an ear that a refugee is not a person, it is a circumstance. I love flaunting the white refugees I get from Ukraine...It is someone that could look just like you. It is important what kind of narratives we perpetuate...We have refugees from the Congo and the Ukraine, one’s white and one’s black and they are sitting in the same room trying to acclimate to America. And so, I think perception is important.

By contrasting Congolese and Ukrainian refugees, this staff member critiqued the facile racialization of refugee populations in Boise. In addition to equating non-white residents with refugees, these racialized notions of refugeehood simultaneously created the erasure of white refugees in Boise.

Remy, a Congolese educator in Boise, highlighted how there was often a discrepancy between the identity that he maintained on the inside and the person that his fellow Boiseans saw:

The label itself won’t disappear...People who saw me come here, they still had that label in mind that this is a refugee. Outside, they know that I’m a refugee, but inside myself, I’m no longer feeling like a refugee. That’s two levels. And if they call me refugee, I’ll not blame them, no...Because that’s the label which is on my face here, they’re just reading what they see, but they don’t read my mind...So that refugee background is what they see here...I cannot remove it. How can I?... And now you have by tens and maybe hundreds in a year, which means that now

people know that every newcomer here with this or that nationality must be a refugee...Not all people with this face are refugees...But here people don't learn that. Every person...who look that way is called refugee.

As the Boise community has grown more aware of local resettlement, the default was to associate certain national origins with refugee status. Remy described what had become the corporeal markers of refugeeness in Boise. He was keenly aware of how he, along with other Africans, wear their refugee background on their faces, whether they want to or not. Because the refugee label had become racially coded, Remy felt powerless to counteract it. Despite knowing that others perceive him in a way that contradicted his own identity, Remy was nonetheless forgiving of those who continued to see him as a refugee.

However, not everyone is as willing as Remy to believe this labeling is inevitable.

Bastien, a young musician also originally from the DRC, spoke up after his fellow bandmate in Boise continued to introduce him as a refugee, stripping Bastien of ownership over his own identity. One day Bastien told his bandmate, "I don't think it is a good idea to keep calling me a refugee." Bastien elaborated:

when we go to the public, we play music. When it's about my part, the president [of the band] will stand up [and say], "This guy is a refugee. He came from Tanzania"...It's not feeling right, and I tried to say, "I'm not a refugee anymore." Because maybe you might not know the meaning of refugee. Because maybe you never lived like a refugee, especially the place that I was. And then you feel like it may be just easy to say "refugee," but it's not really like the people are living like a refugee... You know, it almost seems like it's like Americans...they force you to keep having that label, even if you don't want it anymore. Even if...you're sort of in a different stage of your life. It's like you can't escape that label.

When Bastien was called a refugee, he felt like it "reduce[d] his value." According to Bastien, living like a refugee meant experiencing dependency, food scarcity, confinement, and restriction. His life in Boise was far from that as he held a stable job, pursued multiple hobbies in the community, and prepared to apply for citizenship. However, regardless of how different

Bastien's life was in Boise compared to the years he spent growing up in a refugee camp in Tanzania, those around Bastien forced him to inhabit an identity that he had worked so hard to leave behind.

Despite resisting the refugee label, Amara, a young woman originally from Ethiopia, learned that in Boise this decision was not always in her control. When I asked her whether being a refugee was still part of her identity, she replied:

No, it is...whether I want to or not. And...I'm actively protesting that. Because now, I've spent even more time here than there, but sometimes, I feel like it's forced on me, you know? It's like, "Oh, where are you from?"...every time somebody asks me that, even though they have a good intention to just want to know, their curiosity comes at an expense, because it comes with the feeling of this is not home. I want to be sensitive that they're curious, but how can I balance that with how it makes me feel? Like for me, this is home, and I'm not a refugee anymore, because are you paying for my bills? Like no, I'm paying for myself. I don't have like a caseworker. On top of everything else that comes with being a refugee, I think that identity is forced on us a lot of times. We're always refugees.

Despite her near-native command of spoken American English, Amara was a visible minority in Boise and therefore could not escape assumptions about her foreignness, which were often followed by the omnipresent question of "where are you from?" While she told me that she wished she could just be known as "Amara from Franklin [Road]," inquiries into her origin denied her of this ordinariness, implying that no matter how much she felt like Boise was her home, she would always really be from elsewhere. Amara juxtaposed the markers of being a newly arrived refugee in the U.S., such as having a caseworker or receiving public assistance, with her present life in Boise, which now closely resembled her Idaho-born peers. Despite everything she had achieved and the life she had built in Boise, others still viewed her refugee status as her most salient attribute. Boise was Amara's home, yet she was deprived of the luxury of anonymity and assumed belonging, forced by others to be a curiosity at her own expense.

There is also an inherent danger that comes with refugees' visibility. In the political climate that coincided with my fieldwork, refugees were not immune to the Trump Administration's continued attacks of different minority and foreign-born populations in the U.S. Andre, a young community leader who was among the first Congolese to be resettled in Boise in the mid-2000s, knew that being seen as a refugee ultimately left him vulnerable. He explained his underlying fear as a visible minority in Boise:

But with refugees it is hard to get it over with because it seems to stick with you...and also the Americans don't get to understand, to be explained our full system...they don't get to learn about these things. So, they just think that it sticks arounds. They don't know that you can vote in five years. Most of them don't even know that, they just think a refugee is still a refugee. People don't understand that these people are Americans. And that's the problem with refugees. It may come to a point where Trump says refugees can't come here, and now everybody is looking and saying you've got to go home. I am an American. They are looking at my kids and they say your kids got to go home. My kids were born here. They don't get to understand, so we may all fall victims because of that name attachment to us...If there is a target on refugees, guess what? I am not exempt. Because people look at me and said, 'he is a refugee. He's another one.' No, I am not no longer, leave me out of it. You're still going to fall victim to the hysteria.

Andre was aware of what was at risk when the receiving community was poorly informed of the nuances of forced migration. Beyond the frustration expressed by Bastien and Amara, Andre feared that the ease with which others identified him as a refugee could ultimately bring harm. Because of his visibility, Andre felt like he and his Boise-born children were never fully safe. Consequently, Andre lived with the tenuousness that his belonging could still be revoked. Similar to other respondents in Boise, Andre identified how being labeled as a refugee signaled that no matter what else he had accomplished in his life, his most defining attribute would always be the circumstances of his migration.

## Conclusion

Despite all of the obstacles of early resettlement, refugees eventually gain equilibrium in their lives, even if they continue to experience many of the structural inequalities they confronted upon arrival in the U.S. Though they may not be living the lives they had envisioned prior to their departure, as time goes on, they may nonetheless be getting by while their children are making educational advances that would have been impossible in the country of asylum. With little to no options for return to the home country, they must find a way to build a life and a future in the U.S. By relying on refugees' own voices, this chapter examines how their perceptions of the refugee label evolve following resettlement. Respondents attested to the many ways in which people relate to their forced migration, which is both unplanned and life-altering. For some, being a refugee was an identity that remained with them forever, even years after resettlement in the U.S. For others, refugee status was instead circumstantial, tied to geography and feelings of exclusion. Though just because someone may no longer feel like a refugee does not mean that she is content with how her resettlement unfolded. Contrary to prior studies of refugees in the U.S., my findings point to the diversity among resettled refugees as well as the subjectivity of the refugee label. The term "refugee" fails to differentiate between initial displacement and subsequent resettlement, flattening these stages into one continuous status. However, for those who had lived through both experiences, they were far from comparable. Our lexicon does not appropriately capture the nuances of the multiple phases that refugees endure.

In addition to the ways in which language falls short, refugees are not always in control of the labels associated with them. Respondents in Boise spoke to the tensions between perceived and self-ascribed identity in a city where they had become a visible minority. Given the lack of diversity in Boise, the refugee label has been conflated with minorities, particularly



for those from Africa and the Middle East. As a result, new arrivals who may wish to distance themselves from their forced migration are reminded not only of their past but also of their foreignness. Even communities that envision themselves as welcoming may nonetheless be denying refugees their self-determinism. Just as people may not have a choice in becoming refugees, they are often refused the option of ceasing to be a refugee, forever identified by the circumstances of their migration.

## CONCLUSION

When I asked an RA staff member if she thought resettlement in Boise was successful, she responded that it worked “by the skin of its teeth.” Nonetheless, she noted how shorter-term struggles during the early years of resettlement often gave way to longer-term stability, especially for the second generation. She said, “People make it, they make it short-term by the skin of their teeth, and many, many, many people thrive, become rooted.” There were also generational dynamics that shaped what success looked like. This staff member added, “I think something to also consider is a lot of parents don't expect do to very well when they get here. The reason they came is for their children...And I think just it doesn't matter who you are; starting over later in life, or at an older age just is harder. So yeah, it depends on the measurement of success but children's, the next generation's fight is incredible.” She pointed out how early challenges did not undermine the staying power of narratives of the American Dream, which remained pervasive in communities in spite of obstacles and inequalities. She said, “you talk to a lot of refugees themselves, and they will continue to quote, America and Boise as the land of opportunity.” But while many refugees do eventually find opportunity, there are still others who face inordinate hardships in their quest to find security.

When refugees do succeed it is because of their resilience, dedication, and ambition in spite of the circumstances they have been dealt. They have managed to get by before in the country of asylum under impossible conditions. Without the luxury of a home country to return to, they have no choice but to make it work in the U.S. Just because most refugees eventually manage to get by does not mean that the U.S. should not provide a more compassionate and humane resettlement. Refugees should not have to rely on their resilience in order to achieve stability and security, and refugees’ strength and tenacity should not be an excuse to accept the

failings of the USRP. War and persecution robbed these families and young people of a future in their home country and they deserve to rebuild their lives with dignity. When refugees confront the displacement and disappointments of U.S. resettlement, they are doing so already exhausted by the traumas of war, forced migration, and loss. Resettlement can be complicated and messy. The objective of this dissertation is to provide the full scope of what resettlement entails, including departure, arrival, adjustment, and settling into life in a new community. Resettlement asks a lot of refugees and RA staff, and this dissertation sets out to show just how fraught it can be.

Throughout this dissertation, I sought to hold a magnifying glass to refugees' early months in the U.S. before routine and stability set in to better understand how refugees experience resettlement. Though over 1,000 hours of ethnographic fieldwork in an RA in San Diego, CA and Boise, ID as well as 102 interviews with refugees and service providers, I explore how and why resettlement is so challenging for new arrivals and the RA staff charged with assisting them. By framing resettlement as another displacement for refugees, this dissertation foregrounds resettlement within the full scope of refugees' lives, including the stages before, during, and after their forced migration. In doing so, I argue that while resettlement may ultimately be a "good" displacement, it is nonetheless disruptive. Not only must refugees rebuild their familial, professional, and personal lives in a new country and language, they must do so in a system that offers little grace, all while dealing with the mental and physical aftereffects of war, persecution, and protracted displacement. Their resettlement comes with strict terms that may be in conflict with their aspiration and expectations. The relief of having finally won the "lottery" (FitzGerald 2019) of resettlement is quickly tainted by disillusionment and a lack of ownership over the trajectory of their lives. Framing resettlement as a solution gives a false sense

of closure to refugees' displacement. This dissertation offers a paradigm shift for how we think about the early stages of resettlement, which becomes another uprooting with its own stresses and traumas.

By giving space to the perspectives of resettled refugees and the RA staff tasked with welcoming them, I also set out to show how deficits in the federal resettlement program create tensions between these two parties. In particular, RA caseworkers assume responsibilities that far exceed their job description. Given the precarity and financial insecurity of early resettlement, the USRP is only functional because of the hard work and ingenuity of RA caseworkers. Yet despite caseworkers' tirelessness and dedication, programmatic shortcomings spur an erosion of trust between refugee clients and their caseworkers, leaving refugees feeling deceived and their caseworkers frustrated. When programmatic objectives clash with the immediate and ongoing needs of refugees, tensions result in an unraveling of the relationship between refugee communities and local RAs. This friction is exacerbated by refugees' expectations upon arrival that are constantly disappointed by reality. The USRP is made up of many complicated, interconnected programs that differ across states and even within the same city, making it ripe for misunderstandings and confusion. As the point of direct service provision, caseworkers are the easiest target of blame both from resettled refugees and the broader receiving community. This dissertation also critiques narratives that the USRP is failing as a program of integration. In framing resettlement as a form of displacement, I argue that integration is an inappropriate bar with which to measure resettlement, and expectations of achieving integration within a few months of arrival set RAs up for failure. All caseworkers are able to achieve in such a short amount of time and with such limited means is a managed displacement.

Though it is inevitable that resettlement will come with difficult changes and adjustment, it is incumbent upon policymakers to mitigate the stresses put on refugees. Below are some policy recommendations that arose from my fieldwork. However, I will not take credit for these ideas; most of these recommendations arose during interviews with residents of San Diego and Boise who had gone through the resettlement process themselves. From their more secure and stable vantage point several years after arriving in the U.S., they reflected on what could have eased the displacing effects of resettlement for themselves and their families. It is important to note that any recommendations to improve the USRP that bring added work to RAs and caseworkers must also come with more funding and resources for RAs.

Firstly, the USRP must evaluate how the pre-departure Cultural Orientation curriculum is being taught in Resettlement Support Centers around the world. The rumors and misinformation about the USRP that circulate widely are powerful and uphold falsehoods about the support that awaits refugees upon arrival in the U.S. In order to reduce the erosion of trust that develops between newly arrived refugees and RAs, efforts must be put into place to ensure that refugees receive a thorough orientation to the realities of U.S. resettlement taught by instructors who have a deep knowledge of the expectations and systems of support that await refugees upon arrival. This pre-departure moment is an opportune time to preemptively counteract narratives related to financial assistance and prepare refugees for how their initial economic support may vary based on their resettlement destination. Refugees must be able to trust the information they receive. Formerly resettled refugees from various ethnic and language communities could be trained on up-to-date information about the USRP and travel to Resettlement Support Centers to deliver these orientations in a “Resettlement Ambassador” capacity. If pre-departure Cultural

Orientation is able to prevent or decrease refugees' mistrust of their RAs, it will result in a smoother resettlement experience for everyone involved.

There are also improvements that can be made to post-arrival Cultural Orientation. This curriculum is delivered over one or two days during the 90-day R&P period. While it is an important first chance for refugees to learn more about their communities and the adjustments to come, it should not be the only opportunity to review important information related to topics as critical as public assistance, laws, and education. Newly arrived refugees are already dealing with so much information related to their resettlement and frontloading so much within these early months may hinder retention. Moreover, the curriculum may be more impactful once refugees have gained some real world context for the topics being covered. An iterative approach to Cultural Orientation would allow refugees to review information pertinent to their financial, social, and emotional wellbeing as they adjust to their new community and would be a structured time to ask questions and talk through points of confusion. While it becomes difficult to schedule Cultural Orientation once refugees are employed or enrolled in school, a flexible schedule and financial incentives for attendance could help. Additionally, rather than housing Cultural Orientation within RAs, funding could instead be given to ethnic- and community-based organizations to deliver these sessions. These local organizations understand more intimately the needs of their communities and can better translate misunderstandings and issues of cultural adjustment.

The staff employed at RAs should reflect the refugee populations they work with and that live in the community. Not only do staff from refugee backgrounds possess a deeper understanding of the forced migration and resettlement experience, they can also foster greater trust as new arrivals move through the resettlement process. Though RAs tend to have a small

staff, hiring initiatives would nonetheless provide more professional-level job opportunities to people whose skills, expertise, and language proficiencies may be going unused in wage labor. It is important that people from refugee backgrounds are brought into roles beyond just interpreters and are sufficiently compensated for the additional emotional labor they take on through this role.

In order to better support the immediate needs of arriving refugees and to alleviate some of the burdens placed on R&P caseworkers, local RAs should each have a designed emergency number that refugees can call outside of business hours to address questions, concerns, and points of confusion. RA staff members could rotate who is “on call” during evening and weekend shifts and would be responsible for fielding these calls. Refugees would not have to worry about a caseworker not picking up their phone in the evenings, and caseworkers would be better able to protect their nonworking hours.

Newly arrived refugees should have access to a simple yet complete mapping of the services they will receive and the various agencies who will provides these forms of support. Over time refugees are enrolled in various programs within and beyond the RA. This structure of service provision is not intuitive and makes it difficult for refugees to know who to call for what. Not only would a map or flowchart of services make the USRP more legible to new arrivals, it would also provide refugees with a better understanding of their progress and important milestones to come.

In framing resettlement as another displacement for refugees, this dissertation examines the complicated nature of resettlement as a solution to forced migration. Resettlement alleviates many insecurities, yet it creates new uncertainties in its place. Resettlement provides newfound rights, but those rights are contingent on a strict framework of rules and expectations that dictate

how refugees should incorporate in a new country. While resettlement may ultimately be a “good” form of displacement, it is still an uprooting that requires rebuilding and reestablishing so many aspects of one’s lives.



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