

# Refugee Resettlement and Adaptation in the United States

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I would like to thank the conference organizers for the invitation to be on this program. As a native Californian and an alumnus of this university, it was impossible to refuse the invitation. This is really an extraordinary place to get an education.

I am very pleased to see that effort is being put into improving communications and networks among researchers interested in migration and refugee matters in California. I hope these efforts continue and eventually spawn some formal associations, programs, and even some centers in California focused on this area.

The organization I direct—the Refugee Policy Group—has a purpose of improving the quality of data, information, and analysis used in making public policy decisions regarding refugees. Although the centers of national and international policy decision-making are on the East coast (in Washington and New York) and in Geneva, Switzerland, the major area of migration and refugee resettlement has clearly shifted to the West Coast and to California in particular. Organizations like mine that need to be based in Washington to do our work are impeded by the lack of formal organizations and coordination of information, research, and analysis on migration and refugee matters on the West coast. Therefore, I hope the interest in and commitment to the migration and refugee field grows among both faculty and students here.

RPG was formally established in September 1982, following a year-long planning and organizational development phase. The Ford Foundation and the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation have been our primary supporters since the start. Working with an organizing board since September 1982, we held our first fully constituted board of trustees meeting in January of this year. Peter Bell of the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace was elected chairman. We are very pleased that Dr. Michel LaGuerre, who is here today, agreed to be on our board and that he attended the meeting in January. Through him, I feel that RPG has a link to some of you.

RPG tries to take a fairly comprehensive view of the refugee field by organizing its work around three areas: refugees in developed countries; refugee assistance in developing countries; and mass exodus, asylum, and protection. We also have a refugee resource center. Because Lydio Tomasi is here, I would be remiss if I didn't mention a project that our groups have embarked on together. As some of you may be aware, in 1981, the Center for Migration Studies published a special issue of the *International Migration Review (IMR)* on refugees. A decision was made by IMR to publish a follow-up volume, and Lydio asked me to be the guest editor from the RPG. Barry Stein, who did a marvelous job as guest editor of the first volume, is a senior associate with RPG and will be involved in this effort as well.

I will try to keep this presentation brief by making essentially only two related points. First, refugees are victims—they are stateless or are emerging from this condition—and they typically are destitute. They may be survivors with determination and resolve to make a new life and succeed at it, but they are essentially powerless to do this until a decision is made by a state to give them status and allow them the opportunity to make a new life.

For a state such as the United States to take this step and permit refugees to be resettled here requires public decision-making. And public decision-making, particularly in a democracy, requires compromise when many interests, perspectives, and concerns need to be reconciled. The U.S. refugee resettlement program, therefore, is not just about refugees, their resettlement, and the assistance afforded them. Rather, it is about the total context within which this occurs, one that has social, cultural, political, and economic ramifications not only for refugees, but for the broader society, including localities, other ethnic groups and minorities, federal, state, and local governments, voluntary structures, and service delivery agencies.

Refugees are resettled by making exceptions to the normal immigration control procedures of the U.S. government. The public-policy decision to do this is significantly influenced by many factors: foreign policy concerns and interests; the desperateness of the humanitarian crisis and the availability or lack thereof of other alternatives to resettlement, such as a voluntary repatriation or settlement in place; the power of the ethnic and religious community in the U.S.; and the domestic commitment to absorb the costs and impacts, which are influenced by all of the above but also by the extent to which funds are available at the federal level to reimburse localities and states for providing hospitality to refugees.

To complete the first point: a refugee resettlement effort cannot focus only on the needs and requirements of refugees. Rather, the total context must be considered. Failing this, there will not be a resettlement program. Therefore, as you do research or as you try to assist people who have been resettled as refugees, I encourage you not to lose sight of this broader picture.

The second point I want to make, which I think is related to the first, is that there is a significant difference between designing a program to be concerned principally with resettlement of refugees and designing a program to be principally concerned with assisting the adaptation of refugees. The process of adaptation obviously begins during the resettlement phase and is affected by and grows out of the resettlement experience. Resettlement, however, is not synonymous with adaptation and integration.

I make this point because I believe that confusion between the concepts of resettlement and adaptation leads to confusion in programming and administration and to inappropriate expectations and assessments of resettlement program performance, of refugees, and of the organizations endeavoring to assist them to resettle.

What is refugee resettlement? A precise answer is difficult to find. One part of a refugee resettlement effort usually occurs overseas in the country of first asylum and has to do with the processing and preparation of refugees for migration to the U.S. Another part of resettlement has to do with securing sponsors, placing refugees in communities, and receiving them there. The third part of resettlement has to do with efforts to aid refugees in getting off to a good start here. This entails assistance in orientation, securing housing, setting up a household, getting children in schools, getting individuals linked up with the health care system and adults signed up for social security, job placement, language training, and, where necessary, provision of income assistance through the public welfare system. The objective of this latter group of efforts is to promote self-sufficiency of refugees.

Many of these services must be available for a long time and are part of a long-term process of adaptation. Therefore, the line at which a resettlement effort stops is obviously blurred. Policies aimed at trying to draw the line include the three-year limitation on federal reimbursement to states and localities for the provision of cash and medical assistance to refugees and the 18-month limitation on the provision of special cash and medical assistance to refugees who otherwise would not be eligible for these programs. California has not been affected by this latter policy because of generous state and local welfare policies for all residents. Incidentally, the national percentage of U.S. refugees living three years or less on welfare, according to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), is 56%. If California is not included in those statistics, the national dependency rate is about 30%. There is no time limitation on the eligibility of refugees for social services, and these funds have substantially increased on a per capita basis. Additionally, decisions have been made to provide what is called "targeted assistance" to areas deemed to be experiencing adverse impacts from the presence of refugees. The use of these funds is not subjected to time limitations. California jurisdictions will be major beneficiaries of these resources.

Between 1979 and today, we have seen a shift toward more orderly and controlled arrival procedures and more developed and detailed policies and regulations regarding placement. Cases in point are the overseas English-language training and orientation programs and placement policy aimed at steering new arrivals away from areas of major refugee concentration.

In 1979, the nation responded to the humanitarian crisis of the Indochinese. The emphasis at that time was on quick response, on moving people and getting them out of harm's way to the U.S. But, inevitably, the emergency phase receded. More and more attention was then turned to those who had already arrived and increasingly to those who had been here some time and had not achieved self-sufficiency.

ORR has become much more of a program office, supporting efforts such as the Khmer guided placement project; the favored area sites programs; the planned secondary migration program; and community and economic development programs aimed at strengthening ethnic mutual assistance associations.

The possibility exists of a resettlement program turning more and more into an adaptation and ethnic community development program. For example, there is a strong pull on ORR and other agencies to follow the Indochinese, even though this population has been in the country for some time, rather than to focus on more recently arrived refugees who are in scarce supply. But how long are the Indochinese to be seen as refugees with a special claim on the attention of these offices, which have been set up to provide special aid to refugees for a transitional period?

Maintaining an appropriate balance between emergency humanitarian response and assistance for adaptation is at the heart of what a resettlement program is about. All attention to emergency response and none to adaptation can result in disaster. But too much attention to neatness and control regarding admissions and placement, as well as to adaptation programs, can stifle the capability for an adequate humanitarian response.

The target is a moving one. The balance will likely always appear flawed. And there probably have been times when it really has temporarily fallen out of balance. But seen as a dynamic that has taken place during some fairly stress-filled years, I would argue that, to date—and rather phenomenally—a reasonable balance has been sustained in the program. I believe this is testimony to the designers of the refugee act, who put in place procedures of consultation and review that have allowed this to happen.

It is also testimony to the fact that an appropriate administrative balance appears to be present in the program. Many would disagree with this. And, indeed, I would too, if we were only concerned with efficiency. For example, one of the most contentious administrative issues has been whether the State Department or ORR should administer the reception and placement grants. I believe this responsibility should remain in state because it balances the orientation of ORR to the states and to domestic concerns.

I'm optimistic that an effective resettlement program can be maintained. But perhaps, ironically, it may be more difficult to maintain the balance between all dimensions of a resettlement effort when refugee admissions are declining rather than increasing. As refugee admissions drop, eventually some dismantling will occur, and as this happens, we need to be attentive to the fact that program structures, relationships, and policies are retained which sustain the broadest purposes of a refugee resettlement program.

To summarize this second and final point: I've asked about the distinctions between resettlement and adaptation and indicated that administering a resettlement program is different from administering an adaptation program. I've said that the challenge of a resettlement program is to maintain a balance between humanitarian response and adaptation assistance. I asserted that the program balance has been reasonably maintained through some stressful years and that this is a compliment to the program designers and implementors. Finally, I pointed to the irony that it is possible that this balance may be more threatened by declining admissions numbers than it was by high numbers.

I am a bit concerned that my remarks here may have been more administrative and organizational and therefore less substantive in nature than you might have expected. However, I thought that given my background, these were useful perspectives to introduce to this session. Again, thank you very much for inviting me. It's always a pleasure to be at Berkeley.