



Your US Neighbor: The Experiences of Syrian Refugees in the American South

*A Case Study of Refugees in Towns
Austin, Texas, USA*

May Mzayek

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About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

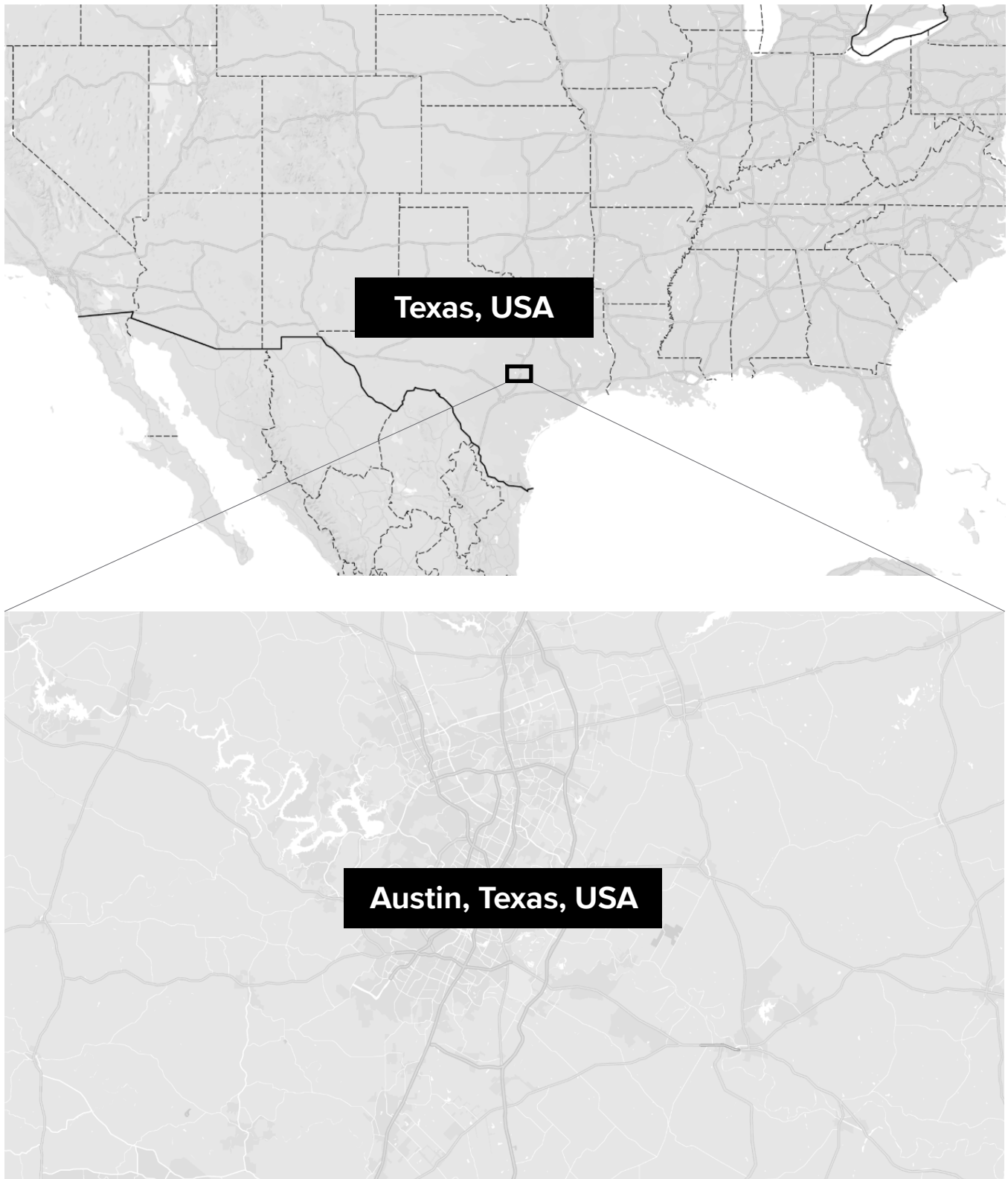
The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.org

Location



Introduction

Austin, Texas offers an example of resettled refugees' experiences in the American South. Austin provides insight on resettlement in Texas, a state that is somewhat unusual in that it pulled out of the Federal Refugee Resettlement Program in 2016, resulting in the loss of the state's access to federal resettlement funds (Kennedy, 2016). Despite this loss, in 2017 Texas resettled the largest number of refugees of the 50 states. The city of Austin approved the resettlement of 315 refugees, half of which were Syrian. Two resettlement organizations, Refugee Services of Texas (RST) and CARITAS of Austin became the main agencies resettling Syrian refugees, assisted by other non-profit organizations, including Syrian American Refugee Aid (SARA), organized by Syrian Americans. The Syrians in Austin are mostly from Daraa, and a few from Damascus, Hama, Homs, Aleppo, and Idlib. Some of the families have been in the United States since 2015, while others have been resettled for less than a year. These households averaged five individuals per family, of which four on average were children (Personal communication with SARA).

Methodology

My fieldwork took place in the spring of 2017 as part of my MA research at a Texas university. I was living in Austin with a couple from SARA who introduced me to Syrian families by assigning me volunteer work with the community. From my interactions with SARA members, I interviewed two women personnel about their observations of Syrian refugees in Austin to gain a better understanding of their interactions with the refugee community. They provided insight on the urban impact of Syrian refugees in the city. I then used purposive sampling and my own position as a Syrian to make connections to the Syrian community.

To understand refugees' experiences, during my research I used participant observation, the qualitative method of partaking in the participants' daily activities and recording observations (Bernard, 2011) I recruited 35 individuals (Table

About the Author and How She Wrote the Report

I decided to work with Syrian refugees because, as a Syrian native, I sympathize with their suffering and wanted to provide relief to my own people. While I still have family in Syria, most of my relatives are displaced abroad in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Also, I was familiar with the difficulties of resettlement, integration, and culture shock. I felt that I could provide some sense of direction to the Syrian refugees in Austin as they acclimated to their new environment.

I migrated to the US in 2000 when I was ten years old. My father wanted our family to have endless opportunities because we viewed America as the "land of the free." As a Syrian-American, I wanted to share my experiences with the Syrian refugees in order to help them during the integration process. Having the same background and language as the Syrian refugees helped me build trust with the Syrian community: all of my contacts were enthusiastic when they heard me speaking Arabic. They joked about my Aleppian accent—known as the heaviest accent in Syria—and welcomed me into their homes. We sympathized with each other as we shared stories of loss and heartache in Syria. Many of these refugees felt comforted by my presence because they saw me as a cultural and linguistic liaison, and they felt proud to have a fellow Syrian-American in their community because I reinforced their hopes of integrating into American society.

Interview Sampling Chart: Research Participants in the Syria Refugee Community and SARA

Number of Research Participants	Men	Women
Age Range	18-59	18-62
Interviews (N=15)	7	8
Key Informants (N=10)	2	8
Participant Observation (N=37)	13	24
SARA Personnel (N=4)	2	2

1) who agreed to allow me to be a participant observer in their lives; and of those, 15 approved to be interviewed about their experiences while 10 became my key informants. Also, I worked with four individuals from SARA to understand their experiences with the Syrian refugee community and their role as an aid agency. My participants were adults of 18 years or older. I obtained IRB approval from the University of Texas, San Antonio to conduct my research.

My daily interactions with Syrian refugees and volunteering at SARA allowed me to observe and interview refugees about their experiences in the United States. All of my interactions were in Arabic, which made it easier to communicate with the refugees. In most cases, their English limitations made it difficult to connect with non-Arabic speakers. My Syrian background made them feel comfortable because they knew I understood their cultural norms such as donning conservative attire, accepting snacks and drinks during visits, smoking hookah, and performing gender normative roles (cooking, cleaning, or babysitting).

These interactions allowed me to gain the trust of the community. Many would repeat, “She is Syrian to us! She knows the American world, but she maintains her roots.” I became a friend or a family member to many in the Syrian community because I spent time with them every day sharing a language and a culture. During my interviews, I asked the refugees about their wellbeing to track how this had changed from their time in Syria through their integration period in the United

States. Each interview ranged between 30-90 minutes. I maintained contact with most Syrian refugee families from Austin who became my friends.

A Note on Terminology

This report uses working definitions of “wellbeing,” “refugee,” and “integration.” The article focuses on resettled refugees who are situated in a grey zone between refugee status and citizenship. For the purposes of this report, they are referred to as “refugees.”

It is impractical to present a specific definition of “wellbeing,” because in the refugee literature researchers have defined the term in several different ways, most of which are tied to past refugee experience and trauma (Correa-Velez, 2010). However, I use Mathews and Izquierdo’s (2009) understanding of wellbeing which emphasizes the concept as a subjective experience of satisfaction with life, or the “good life,” which can be shared among groups of a mutual background. In addition, I examine integration because it is a factor that affects the wellbeing of refugees who find it difficult to adapt to a new environment (Phillimore *et al.*, 2007).

I define “integration” through a combined understanding of Ager and Strang’s (2008) and Phillimore and Goodson’s (2008) frameworks because their work combines objective and

subjective approaches to integration. Ager and Strang (2008, p.166) state,

Key domains of integration are proposed related to four overall themes: achievement and access across the sectors of employment, housing, education and health; assumptions and practice regarding citizenship and rights; processes of social connection within and between groups within the community; and structural barriers to such connection related to language, culture and the local environment.

Phillimore and Goodson (2008, p.309) highlight the added importance of “equity, relationships with the host community, the importance of retaining one’s own cultural connections, shared values and the need to ensure safety and security.” By combining these frameworks, I can understand the functional and social experiences of Syrian refugees with integration in Austin.

Background on Refugees in the United States

The United States has a long history of welcoming refugees, and though recently resettlement numbers have declined, the United States remains one of the top resettlement countries in the world. Over 3 million refugees have been resettled in the US since 1975 (Refugee Council USA, 2017). Resettlement of refugees is conducted through the United States Refugee Admission Program. The program is comprised of several federal agencies including the State Department, Homeland Security, Department of Justice, and the Department of Health and Human Services (US Department of State). The President of the United States each year determines the number of refugees who may be admitted, along with the designated nationalities and processing priorities (Refugee Council USA, 2017).

The US history with refugee settlement begins with the end of World War II when the United States resettled nearly half a million Europeans through the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. Resettlement of refugees continued through the Cold War period with the US focusing its resettlement initiatives on taking in refugees from Communist states. Following the large resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees in the 1960s and 1970s,

Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which incorporated the United Nations definition of a refugee as defined by the 1951 Convention. Through the Refugee Act, the US standardized the resettlement services for refugees by creating the US Refugee Admission Program.

Since the 1980s, refugee resettlement demographics in the US have become more diverse and less defined by Cold War dynamics, with refugees coming mostly from Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Burma, Iraq, Somalia, and Bhutan (Igielnik, 2017). The largest shift in resettlement patterns occurred post September 11, 2001: under the Bush and Obama administrations, refugee resettlement numbers decreased, with the lowest numbers reaching 27,110 in 2002. Numbers under the second term of the Obama administration began to increase, only to shrink again under the Trump administration with a projection of 45,000 refugees to resettle in 2018 (Rose, 2017).

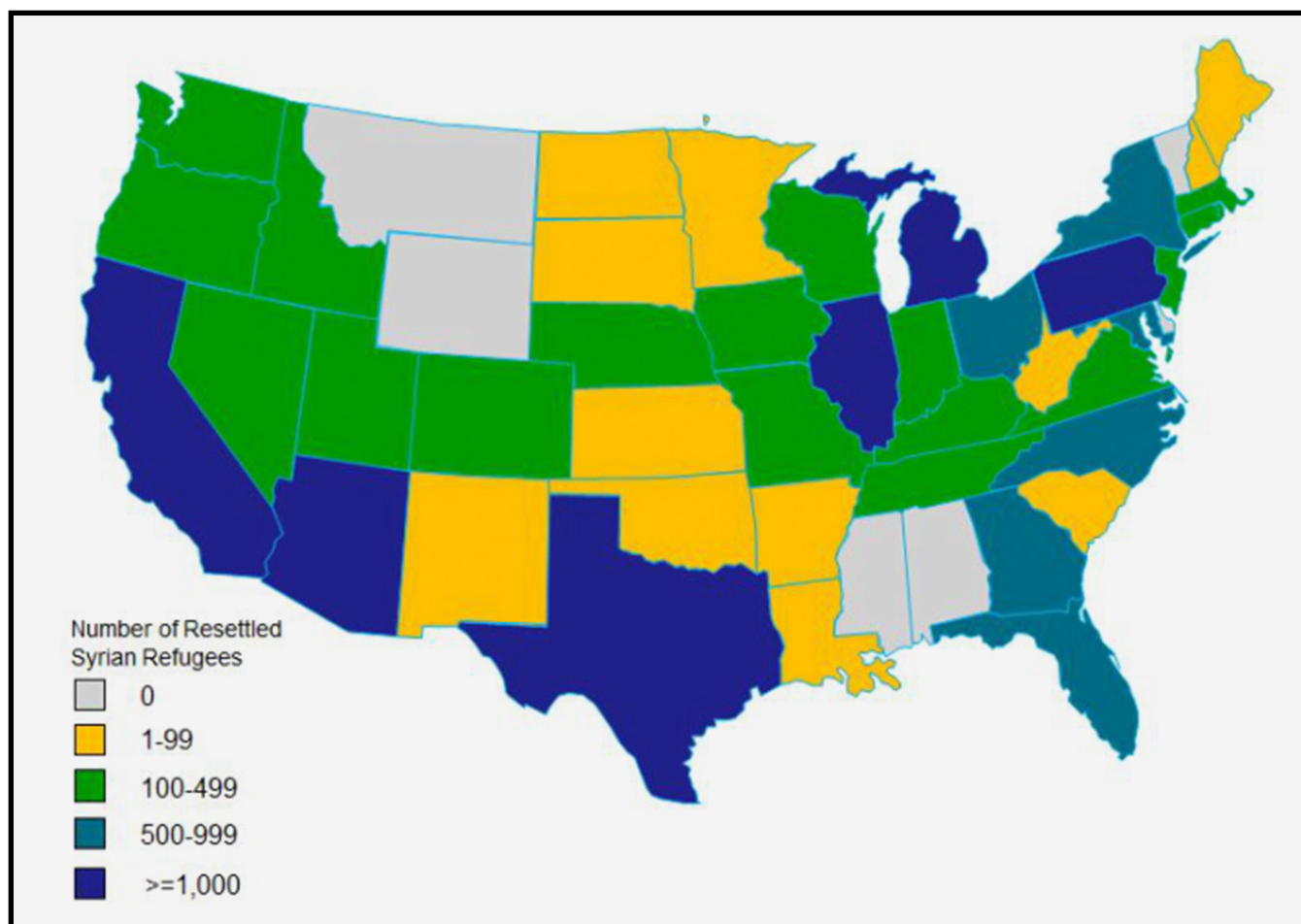
In addition to formally resettled refugees, historically there have been large numbers of irregular migrants to American cities. Efforts to manage irregular migrants has affected their

precariousness to varying degrees. For example, since the 1990s, the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program have attempted to provide “provisional” humanitarian relief to displaced persons, meant to protect them from deportation and offer the right to work until the “triggering event” of their displacement has been recovered from (Messick and Bergeron, 2014). By contrast, recent “immigrant bans,” bolstering of Federal immigration enforcement, and efforts to remove TPS protections under the Trump Administration have put strains on both legal migrants from singled-out countries—especially Muslim majority countries—and irregular migrants alike.

This report will focus on Syrian refugees in the United States: between 2011 and 2016, 18,007

Syrian refugees were resettled in the US (Zong and Batalova, 2017). In 2017 President Trump suspended the resettlement of Syrian refugees into the United States indefinitely (Krogstad and Radford, 2017). After the Trump election, many Syrian refugees experienced increasing Islamophobic and xenophobic incidents along with immigrant rhetoric that links Syrian refugees to terrorism or the Islamic States of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (Whittaker, 2016; Koca, 2016). This rhetoric and the associated incidents of discrimination has caused physical, emotional, and social problems for Syrian refugees in the US (Doner *et al.*, 2013), but they have also responded with resilience and self-reliance (Gabiam, 2016).

Figure 1. Map of the distribution of Syrian refugees in the United States 2012-2017.



Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the US Department of State Refugee Processing Center, “Admissions & Arrivals” database.

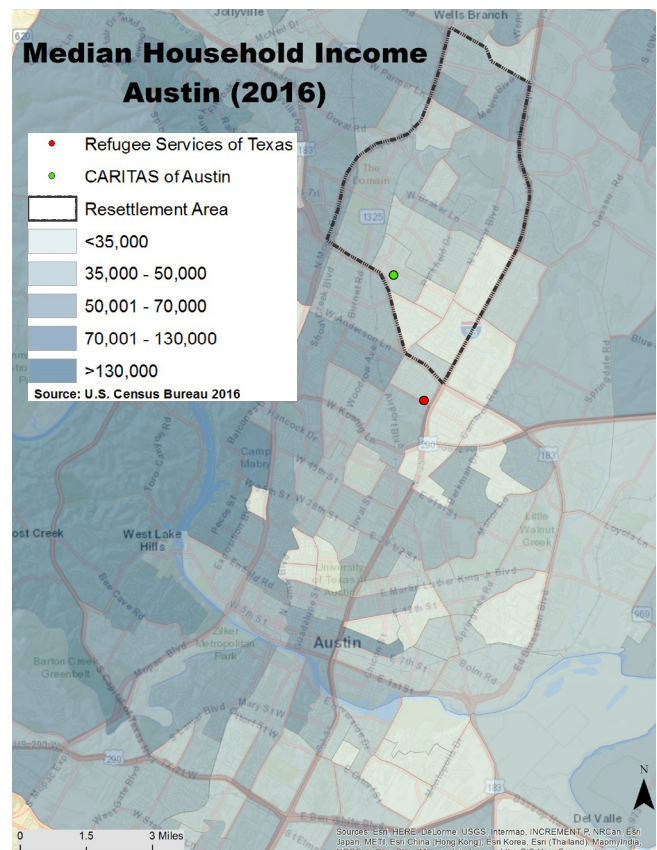
Background on Refugees in Austin, Texas

Migration to Texas extends back to the 1830s when the state was part of Mexico (Orrenius *et al.*, 2013). Conflicting reports on illegal migration into Texas show that either Mexican locals welcomed Anglos immigrants, and/or that Mexican border troops were unable to stop the large influx of Anglos into the region (Orrenius *et al.*, 2013; Menchaca, 2001). After statehood, Texas experienced migration from European whites (American South), African American (Slaves), Tejanos (Hispanics), and German immigrants (Lathrop, 1949). While immigration halted for nearly a decade during the Great Depression, migration from Mexico was on the rise during World War II (Orrenius *et al.*, 2013), with additional migrants coming from Latin America and Asia (White *et al.*, 2015).

From 1990 to 2000, Austin, among a few other Texas cities, developed as a high-tech center which nearly tripled the city's immigrant population (Orrenius *et al.*, 2013). Austin became one of the top three cities in Texas that experienced the most rapid foreign-born population growth, which is usually associated with proximity to borders (*Ibid*). Relative to other Texas cities, Austin also has a higher number of immigrants from Asia, Europe, Canada, and Australia (*Ibid*). In recent years under the Trump administration, Austin and other cities in Texas have resettled fewer refugees than previously (Lopez, 2018). These policies have decreased the resettlement rate in Texas by almost 80%—only 11 Syrians were resettled in Texas this year (*Ibid*). Working with Syrian refugees and the Austin community showed that even with stricter laws on refugee resettlement, local Texans continuously advocated for the resettlement of more refugees in Austin.

Mapping the Refugee Population

During my time in Austin, I witnessed Syrian refugees clustering in one particular area of the city, not distributing evenly throughout the urban space. There were 41 Syrian refugee families resettled in apartment complexes in the northern area of the city because the location provided cheaper rent, had preexisting migrant and refugee populations, and it was near to the resettlement agencies (See Median Household Income 2016 map). Their resettlement area represented low median household income rates during 2016. Most of the families originally relied on adult males to find employment and financially support the family



unit. However, many reported living off of minimum wage jobs which placed most of the families in financial difficulty. In addition, large families living on less than \$35,000 per year met current poverty level rates of the United States (Federal Register,

2017). However, many of the newer families relied on adult men and women to work multiple jobs or long hours and used resettlement aid and financial assistance to alleviate their initial financial problems.

The Urban Impact

Economic Integration

While Syrian refugees in Austin struggled to integrate to the American environment, they also showed resilience. Most of them were skilled workers in Syria who championed hard work and perseverance. Therefore, many of the men were able to find suitable jobs and receive promotions. Some of the men worked in restaurants and gained enough experience to manage their own food trucks. In addition, Syrian refugee women who never worked before began to join the work force in Austin to help their families. A few worked outside of the home in restaurants and small shops which required them to learn how to drive or to use public transportation to get to work. One Syrian woman spoke about her experiences working and said,

At first, I did not want to work because in my town (in Syria) most of the women only worked in their homes, you know not in public. But I had to help my family here, so I got a job. I was so happy until I realized that I had to learn how to drive. That was a scary experience, but I am so glad that I learned! Now I can go anywhere I want. I feel free and I know that I am helping my husband and my family.

Furthermore, with the aid of SARA, many of the Syrian women started their own sewing and catering businesses from within their homes. The women advertised their sewing business at local art and crafts festivals where they interacted with and befriended many Americans who became their customers. Similarly, the women working with

food became very popular in Austin because the locals enjoyed their homemade Syrian recipes. On many occasions, I delivered the food to the locals who acclaimed the cooking and the hard-working women.

Social & Cultural Integration

These interactions provided opportunities to bridge Syrian refugees with the Austin community. During my research, I attended many parties and dinners hosted by organizations and churches in Austin to welcome the Syrian refugees. At those events, the Syrian women catered the food and brought the entertainment. As an attendee, I was in charge of helping with preparations, introducing families, and translating between refugees and locals. There were moments where I paused in awe and admiration of the Syrians in their attempts at communication with the locals. There were many hand signals, smiles, a few exchanged words, and a lot of child translators. Then I would snap back to reality when the Arabic music came on through the speakers. The Syrians danced and performed the *Dabkeh*—a Middle Eastern step dance—while they urged locals to join them and to learn. It was moments like this where I felt that the Syrian community would become accustomed to their new country.

Moreover, it was evident that time and experience improved the Syrians' understanding of the culture and norms in Austin. On many occasions, refugees ventured outside the comfort of their homes to enjoy the park or a local event. They attended

events with their neighbors and friends and made efforts to intermingle with English speakers. The Syrian refugees felt that with time, they were able to figure out different ways to sustain themselves and their families. Many wanted to stay in Austin and open local businesses because they wanted to give back to the city that provided them with aid and understanding. Also, a number of young adult Syrians worked several jobs and attended English classes to gain access to the colleges and universities in Austin: they wanted to attain higher education in order to give back to their local community. Most aimed to study medicine and engineering to become an innovative part of society.

People are always living in hope. We are doing well because we have hope for our situation. We will live anywhere you place us. We were refugees. We came from nothing. We had zero. We were in Jordan with nothing and now we are here. We are doing better. We just need the language in order to feel more secure. There are still hardships. Everything is different here. The culture is different. We have built our lives in Syria the last 20 or 30 years, and all of a sudden, we were stripped of all that and became refugees. We then had nothing. And now we are starting over. But we can do it. We are doing it.

- Samer

Refugee Experiences in Austin

At first, it was shocking. We were shocked by the bills, the paperwork, the language, the culture, I mean everything. We thought America would be this amazing place. I feel like Syria is a lot better, but maybe it is because I am not used to the culture here and I do not have all my family with me.

- Lina

Most Syrian refugees felt conflicting emotions in Austin. Their new home did not feel familiar to them. They felt grateful to their local community but struggled with their wellbeing and sense of belonging. When asked, they explained “wellbeing” as a combination of social, physical, mental, financial, and individual wellness. Many added “integration” to their understanding of wellbeing or viewed wellbeing as integration to the United States.

Health Care

From the 35 Syrian refugee participants in Austin, 7 had physical health problems (injury or sickness) sustained or exacerbated during the war and displacement periods. In a few cases people needed prosthetics or surgery. From the 15 Syrians interviewed, 10 experienced dental problems that ranged from mild to severe cases. On arrival, refugees have health insurance for six to eight months, but some adults did not know how to renew it after it expired as they were not instructed properly on renewal procedures. One Syrian woman, Fatima, said:

Honestly, I have not seen a doctor because I had Medicaid for six months and then it expired. And I have a lot of issues with my teeth. I do not have health insurance. The kids still have theirs's, but the adults lose it after six months. My teeth hurt so much that

I cry sometimes. Also, I have allergies. They (resettlement organization) brought me a used mattress and my skin broke out in bacteria or something, and my skin has been irritated for five months now. You see all of the rashes on my body? I can't get it taken care of right now.

There are several difficulties in obtaining or renewing health insurance for refugees in Texas. Those who qualify for Medicaid include low-income families, people with disabilities, and pregnant women. In addition, the children of refugee families are automatically covered by the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) until the age of 18. However, many Syrian refugees did not know how to access the healthcare programs in the United States which affected their health and comfort.

Psychological Issues

Many of the Syrian refugees in Austin suffered from psychological trauma stemming from the war and displacement, and this trauma was possibly aggravated during the integration process in the United States. During interviews, Syrian women were more likely to talk about depression and anxiety than the men. However, most of the Syrian refugees who spoke briefly about their psychological problems were not willing to talk much about the issue because they felt responsible for the wellbeing of their families. Some adults said that sometimes their children exhibited strange or violent behavior after a racist encounter at school. Many parents did not know how to deal with these issues and were unfamiliar with the counseling services available in the United States. In addition, the adults were preoccupied with maintaining their livelihoods and the basic wellbeing of their families.

Syrians found it difficult to be far from their relatives abroad. One Syrian woman said, "We feel depressed and lost. We miss our relatives. They are everything to us, but they are far away. And it was not as we imagined because everything is different here and we hope to feel

happy someday." On many occasions, the Syrian refugees shared pictures and videos of their loved ones with me. With each picture, they told stories about the life and sometimes death of their relatives or friends. During those moments, I saw and felt their anguish as we exchanged stories of our past experiences in Syria. Further, I sympathized with them as they contacted relatives to check on them daily. At those moments, the Syrians would excitedly introduce me to their relatives to reassure them of their connections. Many believed that if a Syrian girl like me can integrate into American society and preserve my Syrian roots, then they can do it, too. This notion put a lot of pressure on me to endorse my American ideals while maintaining my Syrian identity. However, I was delighted to know that I represented their ideal hopes of integration in the United States.

Financial Challenges

The Syrian refugee adults worried constantly about their financial situation. They could only access entry-level jobs which did not support the high cost of living in Austin. Initially, families were placed in small apartments and had their rent covered by the resettlement agency for three months, after which they had to deal with the rent, utility bills, groceries, and other expenditures. Rents in Austin are the highest in Texas with two-bedroom apartments averaging \$1,190 a month, compared with Houston at \$1,040 and Dallas at \$910 (Ward, 2014). Financial difficulties mean Syrian men work long hours or multiple jobs to provide for their families. Many believed their financial problems or challenges lead to their anxiety, depression, fatigue, and stress. Financial stability was a reoccurring issue that affected their wellbeing and sense of belonging. Most assumed that they would feel resettled once they bought a house, which they felt was difficult to attain in Austin due to the rising prices. Organizations such as SARA became important to the Syrian refugee community because they covered living expenses for the Syrian families who could not afford monthly payments. A few families qualified

for government subsidized housing that placed the larger families in three-bedroom apartments for rent averaging around \$900 per month.

I spent hours with the families trying to find government funded housing and was overwhelmed with the amount of information and paperwork needed to apply to these housing projects. I could not imagine the families completing the forms on their own. Some were able to find affordable housing, but most were not eligible or had to wait long periods to find an available unit. These housing and financial problems were an overwhelming barrier to Syrians' sense of wellness.

Culture and Language

I don't feel a part of society yet. I will feel like an American once I learn the language.

- Yara

The Syrian refugees saw American culture and the English language as enormous obstacles in their integration experiences. All of my participants did not understand American culture and were perplexed by the different cultural characteristics of the United States, which they sometimes viewed as contradictory to their own culture. For example, they regarded the American sense of individuality as a strange concept in comparison to the Syrian sense of a communal way of life. They believed that family is more important than individuality. Thus, they developed their own small community to maintain cultural and social familiarity with their Syrian identity.

While American culture was bewildering to the Syrian refugees, many also complained about the difficulty of the English language, which they viewed as the main barrier between them and the local Austin community. They felt like outsiders when they could not interact with locals in English. In a lot of cases, they could not

access jobs, communicate with the locals, read mail, or understand their surroundings. While the resettlement organizations provided refugees with free English lessons, most found it difficult to access these classes. The refugees complained about the responsibilities and chores they dealt with on a daily basis. The women occupied their time with housework and their children's activities, including making sure the family received vaccinations and health checkups during required medical appointments. In addition, the men spent most of their hours working so they did not have time to attend English classes.

However, some set up turns to transport their neighbors to English classes, so they could receive proper language education. The women who could not leave their homes due to chores or childcare learned how to use different applications on their computers to join virtual online English classes. Also, most benefited from their children who helped them learn important English words or phrases. In order to grow more confident in their language abilities, some of the Syrian families hosted small dinners for their American friends to interact with them and to show them gratitude. During my attendance to these dinners I became the primary translator for both groups. Therefore, I learned to encourage the Syrians to communicate with their guests, so they can learn the language.

Furthermore, a lot of the Syrian refugees did not have cars or could not access public transportation because they had trouble reading traffic signs and feared getting lost. Often, I found myself driving them to grocery stores, shopping malls, or appointments. On those journeys, these refugees complimented my car and asked me to teach them how to drive and learn traffic signals. It amazed me how they could not comprehend most of the signs but reminded me of the trouble I had in understanding and relating to most things in the United States when I moved here in 2000.

Even though some of the refugees could not get access to cars, others were able to afford a car after working and saving for a few months. Also, several families received a car as a donation through charitable organizations. However,

even with cars, many complained about their unintentional violations of traffic laws which became costly for them. Some of the refugees received traffic tickets or had their cars towed after failing to read traffic signs.

Also, all of the Syrians interviewed worried about the lack of their English ability because they did not want to be seen as outsiders by the locals. Due to the election of President Donald Trump, some of the Syrian refugees experienced higher incidents of xenophobia and Islamophobia. In one case, a Syrian woman said:

I used to wear the burka which covered me from head to toe, but now I resorted to wearing the hijab, where you can see my face because a few people harassed me. One time when we were on the bus, a man started yelling Islamophobic rants at me. I was very scared, but my husband was with me and the bus driver with a few other Americans kicked him off the bus. - Fatima

Moreover, the governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, was strongly opposed to the resettlement of Syrian refugees in his state. A Syrian man said, “I worry about my wife because she wears the hijab. We are good people and I wish they (Americans) would not fear us as we don’t fear them. It is silly because they are wonderful people and they will know that we are, too.” Therefore, many avoided conversations about American politics in fear of being viewed as threats or outsiders. This fear reinforced their wishes to become a part of American society.

Green Cards

Almost all of my participants believed that they would start to feel integrated into American society once they received a green card. The Syrian refugees assumed that the green card would guarantee their stay in the United States. They felt that obtaining the green card is an integral official recognition of their place in American society. In one case, an informant said, “I hope for my kids to finish their studies and graduate college and find good jobs. I hope to feel resettled and to be a part

of this community, where I will feel comfortable. I would hope to get the green card and visit my parents and my relatives someday.” The green card was not only a formal resettlement paper, but a way to visit family displaced abroad. However, even with a green card, many of the Syrian refugee families felt that they cannot visit family yet because they feared the possibility of blocked reentry into the United States due to the current political climate. However, all anticipated the green card as a guaranteed position in American society. While the green card has a functional purpose, the Syrian refugees viewed the card as a symbolic achievement in their journey of integration into American society.

Hope in their Children

The Syrian refugees in Austin hoped to integrate into the American environment, however, many continued to struggle with their efforts and parents placed confidence in their children to become a part of American society and to achieve a better life. In most cases, the children learned English faster than their parents and, on occasion, acted as translators for their families. In addition, the children interacted with different groups of people at their schools, so they became acclimated to their environment quicker than their parents. The adults assumed that they faced more difficulties integrating into the United States but believed that it was their mission to raise their children to become successful members of American society.

My hope is for my kids to learn the language, to finish school, and to have bright futures. My daughter is doing great in school! She is picking up English faster than anyone! It is most likely because she is so young but even her teachers think that she is a bright student. When we go to most places she acts as our translator and she is only six! People are very impressed by her and the Americans can see that we care about being a part of this society.

- Fawaz

Conclusion

During the journey from Syria to the United States, the Syrian refugees viewed social, physical, mental, and financial factors as key elements of wellbeing (Mzayek, 2017). In Austin, their idea of wellbeing evolved to incorporate integration as the main goal to achieve a good life for their families. The Syrian refugees struggled with their financial, physical, and emotional wellness, however, in Austin, they were most concerned with integration because they wanted a new beginning for their lives in the United States. Therefore, the difficulty of the English language became the principal obstacle between their refugee status and their integration.

This case study shows how integration is an important factor in Syrian refugees' wellbeing in the US. Within the context of Austin, Texas, many of the Syrian refugees merged their definition of wellbeing with integration: to be well meant being integrated culturally, linguistically, and economically. Prominently, the Syrian refugee community exhibited resilience which aided them during the integration process. They believed that with time, they or their children will acclimate to the American environment.

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About the Author

May Mzayek earned her Master's Degree in Anthropology from The University of Texas at San Antonio. She is a Syrian native and an immigrant to the United States. Through her volunteer work with refugees and her background as a migrant, May became interested in the health and wellbeing of refugees during their displacement and resettlement periods. Her case study focuses on the integration experiences of Syrian refugees in Austin, Texas. May plans to pursue a doctorate degree in Anthropology focusing on Forced Migration.

Email: maymzayek@gmail.com

Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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