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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Connecting Refugees in a Nontraditional Resettlement Destination: The Role of Social Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Transportation serves as the linchpin that enables refugees to enter the job market, find gainful employment, and both receive necessary services and access useful goods and services, essential to basic survival and social integration. The lack of transportation options means that refugees depend largely on the services and schedules of others, especially in the nascent months of resettlement. Recently arrived refugees who settle in traditional gateway cities like New York, Chicago, and Miami generally learn to navigate their way, as these cities have extensive public transit systems and refugee services as well as large coethnic communities in place. The trend in the United States, however, is to resettle refugees in nontraditional, automobile-dependent destinations that do not have the same density of social institutions. This study explores how resettlement agencies, transportation systems, and social networks interact as social institutions in refugee resettlement in Colorado Springs, Colorado, a nontraditional resettlement destination and an automobile-dependent city. The study uses semistructured, in-depth interviews with twenty recently arrived refugees and a resettlement agency official. The results speak to the potential for long-term integration of refugees in Colorado Springs, and more generally to the effectiveness and long-term potential of policies that resettle refugees in nontraditional destinations.

KEYWORDS

Refugees; refugee settlement; resettlement agencies; social networks; transportation

Mobility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power. Mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship.

—Skeggs (2004, 49)

Transportation serves as the linchpin that enables migrants, and especially refugees, to enter the job market and find gainful employment, receive necessary health services, and access other useful goods and services, such as language training and vocational instruction, essential to both basic survival and social integration in the United States (Garasky, Fletcher, and Jensen 2006; Liu and Painter 2012; Bose 2013, 2014). The lack of transportation options means that the livelihoods of refugees depend largely on the services and schedules of others, especially in the nascent months of resettlement. Recently arrived refugees who settle in traditional U.S. gateway cities like New York, Chicago, and Miami generally learn to navigate their way, as these cities have extensive public transit systems and refugee services as well as large coethnic communities in place. These refugee services, transportation systems, and large coethnic communities all act as social institutions, which as argued elsewhere, play instrumental roles in life experiences and the shaping of everyday geographies (Frazier and Henry 2016).

The trend in the United States, however, is to resettle refugees in nontraditional, automobile-dependent destinations, such as rural settings and smaller cities (Hume and Hardwick 2005; Scott 2006; Kraly

2008; Skop 2008; Akiwumi and Estaville 2009; Blyden and Akiwumi 2009; Kraly and Vogelaar 2011; Newberry and Darden 2011; Winders 2012; Bose 2014; Newberry 2015; Secor and Ehrkamp 2015; Airriess 2016). These nontraditional resettlement destinations do not have the same type or density of social institutions as traditional gateway cities. Thus, this study explores how resettlement agencies, transportation systems, and social networks interact as social institutions in refugee resettlement in Colorado Springs, Colorado, a nontraditional, automobile-dependent resettlement city. The study uses semistructured, in-depth interviews with twenty recently arrived refugees and a resettlement agency official to uncover how refugees access various social institutions to navigate the city in the days and months after they first arrive. The results speak to the potential for long-term integration of refugees in Colorado Springs, and more generally to the effectiveness and long-term potential of policies that resettle refugees in nontraditional, automobile-dependent destinations.

Key social institutions in refugee resettlement

Resettlement agencies

The passage of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention set the universal standard for the definition and qualifications of a refugee (UN General Assembly 1951): “A refugee is defined as a person outside of his or her country of nationality who is unable or unwilling to return because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinions.” Since then, the United States has settled more than 3 million refugees (Singer and Wilson 2011). Resettlement agencies have been critical in that effort and receive federal funding for the services that they provide. For decades, resettlement agencies have included national-level resettlement agencies and their local affiliates. Their chief responsibility is to enter into cooperative agreements with the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM 2014) and then sponsor and provide reception and placement services for refugees arriving in the United States.

U.S. refugee resettlement policy, which outlines the responsibilities of resettlement agencies, has shifted dramatically since 1951 (Mott 2010). Refugee resettlement policy has increasingly reflected the neoliberal turn of the U.S. government (Zucker and Zucker 1996, 28). For instance, the nine-point Cuban Refugee Program begun in 1961 was the largest refugee assistance program in U.S. history and allotted extensive services and resources for up to ten years. Today resettlement agencies only receive funds through their cooperative agreements with the Department of State to help refugees settle into their respective communities during their initial thirty to ninety days to cover housing, food, clothing, and other necessities (General Accounting Office [GAO] 2012). After that, longer term resettlement aid varies from state to state and agency to agency. In Colorado, resettlement agencies serve refugees for up to five years, guiding refugees through the application process for federal, state, and local public programs. This is a requirement of cooperative agreements signed with the Department of State. Long-term assistance varies geographically, however, and the explicit goal of refugee resettlement policy is based on current notions that refugees should become self-sufficient quickly and that the onus is not on the federal government to facilitate that sufficiency (Ott 2011).

When the United States began resettling refugees, most government-sponsored refugees were placed in gateway cities like New York, Chicago, and Miami, traditional immigrant destinations with extensive transit systems and social institutions (Newbold 2002; Singer and Wilson 2011). The intention was to provide “refugees with critical resources to assist them in becoming integrated members of American society” and “to prepare refugees who are resettled in the US for economic success and community involvement” (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2011). Traditional gateways were also destinations where local resettlement agency affiliates had been successful in resettling refugees year after year (GAO 2012).

Much like broader U.S. refugee resettlement policy, however, the question of where to place refugees has also gone through many changes. Beginning in the 1970s, the federal government began questioning the logic of concentrating refugees in certain destinations. Policymakers increasingly believed that

resettlement of refugees in areas outside of traditional gateways would permit the refugees to find employment and opportunities at higher levels of activity and income (Moncarz 1973). As a result, national resettlement agencies were asked to find local affiliates willing to sponsor refugees in nontraditional destinations. Smaller cities and towns began to appear on the map as refugee resettlement destinations, including cities like St. Louis, Omaha, and Lexington (Brown, Mott, and Malecki 2007; Forrest and Brown 2014; Hume 2015). The goal of this “regionalization” policy was to disperse the refugee population across the United States to create more diverse opportunities for refugees and ensure their long-term integration (Skop 2001, 2008; Hardwick 2008; Singer and Wilson 2011; Ray and Rose 2012; McDaniel 2016).

This regionalization program has resulted in higher refugee populations in smaller, nontraditional resettlement destinations, although secondary migration to traditional destinations is significant and perhaps illustrative of the magnetism of coethnic social institutions in pulling refugees to certain communities (McHugh, Miyares, and Skop 1997; Miyares 1998; Ott 2011; Newberry 2015; Alberts 2016; Chacko 2016). Figure 1 illustrates the dispersion of local refugee resettlement affiliates across the United States. Clearly, there are multiple nontraditional resettlement destinations.

It remains unclear, though, whether this shift facilitates long-term incorporation. A 2012 report from the GAO, *Refugee Resettlement: Greater Consultation with Community Stakeholders Could Strengthen Program*, offered this summary:

The communities in which refugees are placed vary significantly in size, capacity, and experience in resettling refugees. Major gateway cities tend to have more experience incorporating large and steady streams of people from other countries, but can be very expensive places to live. Smaller cities and towns, on the other hand, can be more

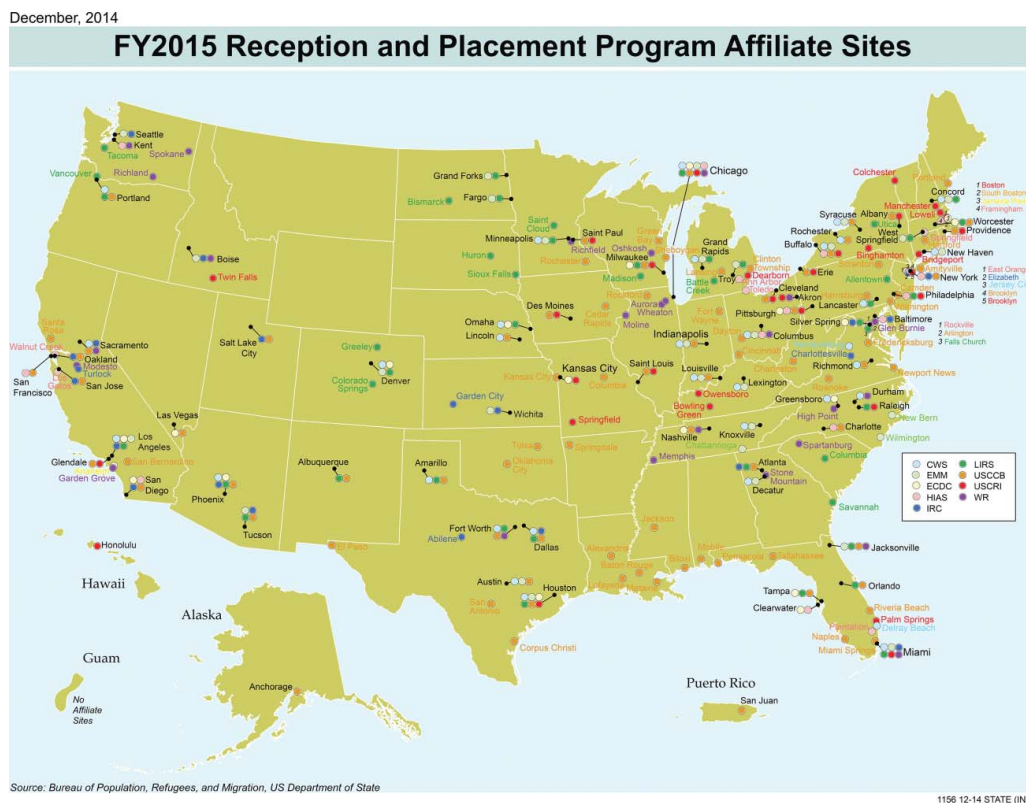


Figure 1. Dispersion of refugee resettlement agencies in the United States. *Source:* Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, U.S. Department of State (2014).

affordable and easier to navigate, but may not have sufficient resources to provide refugees adequate services, including education and health care. (GAO 2012, 1)

In the present day, resettlement agencies continue their work of sponsoring and receiving government-sponsored refugees through public–private partnerships that mandate significant volunteer commitments. National resettlement agencies ask local affiliates to assess their own capacity and that of other service providers in the wider community and propose the number of refugees that they will be able to resettle that year (GAO 2012). When deciding how many refugees to place in each community, some resettlement agencies prioritize local agency capacity, such as staffing levels and the size of the volunteer corps, whereas others emphasize community capacity, such as job access and housing availability. The conclusion, therefore, is that the ability of resettlement agencies as social institutions to resettle refugees varies considerably, and that the number of and access to resources affects both the shaping of everyday geographies and the long-term integration of refugees.

Transportation systems

Transportation is one of the most influential aspects of long-term integration of refugees (Dluhy, Revell, and Wong 2002; Garasky, Fletcher, and Jensen 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006; Cresswell 2010; Lo, Shalaby, and Alshalalfah 2011; Liu and Painter 2012; Bose 2013, 2014; Lo *et al.* 2015). For instance, transportation affects one's access to health care, to various employment opportunities, to community events, to social services, and to educational opportunities. If these opportunities are not located on public transit routes and if the refugees do not have access to other forms of transportation, it leads to missed opportunities, which in time could hamper long-term integration. As a social institution, then, transportation systems clearly play an instrumental role in the integration of refugees.

Bose (2013) found in his study on migrant and refugee mobility patterns in Vermont that transportation systems are not accessible, and thus, barriers can and do arise. He argued, “A lack of access to desired and required destinations may lead to less optimal outcomes—fewer job opportunities, poorer health, and missed chances to improve skills and education” (Bose 2014, 157). Indeed, the majority of the respondents in the studies that examine transportation issues among refugees and migrants have stressed the importance of having a car (Garasky, Fletcher, and Jensen 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006; Bose 2013, 2014). Bose (2014) highlighted some of the key consequences of limited access to transportation on refugees:

Limited transportation options can, in substantial ways, restrict the autonomy and independence of refugees, leaving them dependent on the services and schedules of others. This, in turn, can adversely affect their ability to seek and secure gainful employment, receive necessary medical care, and access other goods and services vital to other basic survival and social advancement. (152)

The reality is that not everyone, but especially not refugees, can afford a car; nor can they accommodate for costs of obtaining a driver's license, qualifying for insurance, and continued maintenance (Bose 2013). Even over time, after the initial phase of acclimatization, there is evidence that certain groups living in automobile-oriented, low-density, and highly segregated cities such as Boise and Burlington face particular vulnerability due to their inability to access private transportation means (Bose 2014). Bose (2014) gave an example of an English language-learning program located in a Burlington, Vermont, suburban neighborhood not served by the public transit system, and located far away from where the refugees lived and worked. Due to their immobility, the majority of the refugee population was not able to take advantage of the opportunity to better their English skills.

Refugees must often work nontraditional hours, including the second and third shifts, and travel long distances, using slow and infrequent public transportation to travel to work (Lo *et al.* 2015). As a result, they have to either carpool with coworkers or pay for a taxi to get to work, because buses do not typically run late into the night, especially in smaller cities (Bose 2014). This forces refugees to depend on other people to access their jobs, and potentially inhibits their ability to become self-sufficient.

Both Engels and Liu (2011) and Schwanen *et al.* (2015) argued that a lack of access to transportation often results in social-spatial exclusion. Herbert (2009) defined social-spatial exclusion as all those

circumstances—social, economic, and political—that prevent individuals, households, and even entire communities from fully participating in and better integrating with mainstream society. They, along with Lo *et al.* (2015) and Lo, Shalaby, and Alshalalfah (2011), contended that social-spatial exclusion leads to significant social vulnerability, which in turn limits the self-sufficiency of refugees and affects their long-term integration. “Transit needs to be recognized as a key ingredient for the success of the migrant settlement process” (Lo, Shalaby, and Alshalalfah 2011, 470).

Importantly, more and more refugees are being resettled in nontraditional, automobile-dependent destinations (McCarthy 2009; Singer and Wilson 2011). These nontraditional destinations sometimes have limited ability in providing the kinds of resources, especially transportation resources, that are influential in helping refugees become established (Ray and Rose 2012, 150). Although these smaller, less congested cities might be extraordinarily functional for people with access to private transportation, they could prove challenging places to live and work for people who depend on buses or sharing rides (Ray 2004). Although many refugees have positive resettlement experiences in smaller cities and towns, others suffer from the absence of a critical mass of social institutions, and especially from the lack of transportation resources.

Social networks

Refugees do not necessarily choose their destination, nor do they have the variety of social networks to draw on (Hardwick and Meacham 2005; Mazen 2015). Yet having different kinds of social networks plays an instrumental role in the life experiences and the shaping of everyday geographies of refugees, as well as proving particularly important in their long-term integration (for overviews, see Menjivar 1995; Wilson 1998; Goss and Lindquist 1995; Massey 1999; Tilly 2007; Samers 2010; Castles, de Haas, and Miller 2013; Mavroudi and Nagel 2016). Goss and Lindquist (1995) argued, “Social networks are generally defined as webs of interpersonal interactions, commonly comprised of relatives, friends, or other associations forged through social and economic activities that act as conduits through which information, influence, and resources flow” (329).

The type of social networks that refugees use while establishing themselves in their new destination can be broken down into a continuum of strong ties and weak ties (Wilson 1998). Strong ties can be described as the social relations between an individual and his or her close friends, kin, or both (Wilson 1998, 397). Weak ties are described as the relationship between an individual and his or her “acquaintance network” (Wilson 1998, 397). Strong ties are important, as they are the easiest way to receive information, but Granovetter (1973), Menjivar (1995), and Wilson (1998) all stressed that weak ties tend to be more useful in accessing various social institutions and in exchanging information about jobs, housing, and health care. It is widely recognized that weak ties are extremely beneficial for finding employment opportunities (Wilson 1998; Williams 2006; Brown, Mott, and Malecki 2007; Hodagneu-Sotelo 2007; Ryan 2011; Morales 2016). Researchers also have noted that weak ties can change into strong ties over time (Williams 2006; Morales 2016).

There is a general lack of literature that examines how refugees use social networks to overcome the various challenges they face throughout the resettlement process with the exception of a few articles based in the United Kingdom and Canada (Simich 2003; Williams 2006; Stewart *et al.* 2008; Ryan 2011). Ryan (2011) discovered how social networks emerge as refugees establish themselves in their new destination in the United Kingdom. She explained that social capital is built through bonding and bridging. Bonding creates ties between individuals who are similar in some important way (often it is ethnic background that bonds new refugees); these bonds are then used for “getting by” (Ryan 2011). Meanwhile, bridging connects individuals who have less in common; bridging in some important way helps with “getting ahead” (Ryan 2011, 710). Ryan acknowledged that the binary of “bonding” and “bridging” is simplistic, and refers to a continuum of relationships that blur together between the two ends. Williams (2006) found similar findings with refugees in the United Kingdom using weak ties and “bonding” with those from their same ethnic group and individuals who speak the same language to exchange information on where to find services, housing, and employment. She then discovered that after some time, the refugees focus on bridging relationships to find better employment opportunities

and to foster relationships with individuals who have similar interests rather than focusing solely on those individuals with similar ethnic backgrounds. Ryan (2011) also found that refugees often face obstacles in accessing certain networks that would lead to upward mobility. These obstacles include their social position, language fluency, occupational status, expectations, and ambition.

The majority of refugee resettlement in the United States is driven by family ties, with 69 percent of refugee applicants indicating that either (1) they arrived as a result of a family member filing to bring them here through the resettlement program, or (2) they indicated on overseas paperwork that they had a family tie in a particular location (K. Taintor personal communication, February 15, 2017). Family reunification drives placement as national resettlement agencies determine optimal locations for refugees (Bose 2014, 153). For those without family ties, the “national resettlement agencies [also] determine where one will be place[d]” (Bose 2014, 153), suggesting that the integration process for some refugees relies significantly on the support of local resettlement agencies and their volunteers, and not on family. Although he did not explicitly connect his findings to the role of social networks in refugee resettlement in the United States, Trudeau (2012) did discover how resettlement agencies provide vital services that refugees would not, otherwise, be able to access. Clearly, resettlement agencies often do the work of both strong and weak ties, by bonding and bridging individual refugees and supplying information regarding where to find services, housing, and employment.

Research methods

From December 2015 to February 2016, the first author conducted twenty in-depth semistructured interviews with refugees who have resettled in Colorado Springs within the past year. She also conducted an interview with a staff member at Lutheran Family Services Rocky Mountains (LFSRM) to get the resettlement agency’s perspective on the process of refugee resettlement and issues that the agency faces with refugee resettlement. Another goal was to obtain a better understanding of the processes and services the agency offers. Meanwhile, the second author has served as a consultant with the Colorado Springs Refugee Resettlement Stakeholder Group, co-organized by the Colorado Refugee Services Program and LFSRM since February 2016. That group meets quarterly to discuss the latest data and information available about refugee resettlement in Colorado Springs, specifically, and, more generally, in the state of Colorado.

All of the participants interviewed have been resettled in the United States over the past year. The authors wanted to focus on newly arrived refugees because it is during the initial months of resettlement that refugees learn how to navigate and use various social institutions, including the local resettlement agency and the local transportation systems. Over time, social networks are likely to become increasingly important as a social institution but there is a time in the initial phase of resettlement when refugees rely especially on support drawn from the local resettlement agency and local public transportation systems.

To connect with individuals for interviews, the first author volunteered with LFSRM beginning in June 2015. Over the next several months, she helped out with a program called Job Class. The main purpose of that class is to train and help refugees prepare for jobs in Colorado Springs. The program educates refugees about the job application process. Refugees are also able to practice and prepare for job interviews. The program then identifies potential job prospects, and provides guidance to work through tax forms.

The first author was able to experience firsthand the effort that goes into the refugee resettlement process, not only from LFSRM itself, but from the volunteers that help support the resettlement agency in its efforts. Many of the eventual study participants also trusted the first author because they had interacted with her previously. Importantly, using verbal consent at the beginning of each interview, the first author made clear to potential participants that they could choose not to participate or could withdraw from the study, at any time, without penalty. None of the participants asked to withdraw, and they were all eager to talk about their experiences since arriving in Colorado Springs.

The first author used a semistructured interview guide. This semistructured format provided opportunities to let the interview flow and diverge into various themes. The first author then performed

latent content analysis, defined as an assessment of implicit themes, on the transcribed interviews (Hay 2010, 125). The key themes that emerged were the various barriers that refugees experienced while accessing public and private transportation including transit time, waiting for the bus, bus availability, navigating the driver's license process, buying a car, car maintenance, transportation costs, and weather. Other prevalent themes included the varied levels of use of LFSRM, other volunteers, or family, friends, and other acquaintances to help them to navigate everyday life. It was through these interviews that the role of resettlement agencies and social networks as critical social institutions in refugee resettlement became apparent.

The origins of participants, and the top source areas for recent refugees to Colorado Springs, included Afghanistan (five participants), Iraq (seven participants), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (seven participants), and Myanmar (one participant). Refugees either came to the United States through the refugee application process with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), or were granted Special Immigration Visas (SIVs) through the U.S. government. SIVs are granted to refugees who were employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government for a period of at least one year, and who have experienced an ongoing serious threat as a consequence of that employment. Those coming to the United States on SIVs are supported by the same programs and have access to the same resources as the refugees who went through UNHCR. Each participant waited in a transition country an average of eight years before arriving in the United States (the range was four to twelve years of waiting).

Because of their backgrounds and overseas experiences, all of the participants were able to speak English fairly well, so no interpreter was necessary. Thus, by focusing on refugees with English-speaking ability, this study underrepresents individuals who very likely experience multiple barriers on arrival because of their inability to communicate in English. Nonetheless, the authors are comfortable with the sample because the goal is not to reflect the experiences of all refugees in Colorado Springs, but rather to elucidate the experiences of these twenty refugees as they navigate various social institutions and begin the process of integration.

Results: The role of social institutions

Resettlement agency

LFSRM has been successfully resettling refugees in Colorado Springs since 1978 and has served people from more than forty countries including Bhutan, Burma, China, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cuba, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Mauritania, Russia, Somalia, Sudan, and the Ukraine. The resettlement agency considers a variety of factors when they propose the number of refugees to be resettled in each community, but typically includes information on community capacity—such as employment rates, available health care, and housing—as well as information on the resettlement agency's organizational management plans and policies. Table 1 lists the sample factors that local resettlement agency affiliates consider when assessing community capacity for their annual proposals to the national conglomerate, which then submits proposals for PRM's Reception and Placement Program for approval.

Table 1. Sample factors that resettlement agencies consider when assessing capacity.

Community factors	Institutional factors
Employment opportunities	Language ability of staff
Availability of affordable housing	Staff size (ratio of staff to refugees)
Existing ethnic and linguistic groups	Number of matching grant program slots
Public transportation	Volunteer corps
Health care resources	Private revenue
State budget trends for public assistance	Long-term financial needs of resettlement agency
Number of available cosponsors	

Note. Data from Government Accounting Office (2012).

LFSRM has generally settled between 1,000 and 1,200 refugees each year over the past five years in Colorado, with offices in Denver, Colorado Springs, and Fort Collins, along with additional staff in Greeley and Fort Morgan. This number varies somewhat year to year, as the President of the United States proposes different entry ceilings at the national scale, and as local affiliates reevaluate their capacity to serve refugee populations coming from different regions of the world. Generally, however, because refugees are placed in communities where local affiliates have been successful in resettling refugees, the same communities are often asked to absorb refugees of similar origin groups year after year (GAO 2012).

This is the case in Colorado Springs, where over the past five years, the local affiliate of LFSRM typically handled the cases of 100 to 150 refugees per year. Many of the refugees to this community come from Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Refugees from these countries have done well on multiple measures of both short-term and long-term integration, according to “The Refugee Integration Survey and Evaluation (RISE) Year Five Report” (Lichtenstein *et al.* 2016). That longitudinal survey, designed to assess refugee integration in the early years of resettlement by focusing on a single cohort of refugees during the first four years of resettlement in Colorado, indicated that as a whole, the cohort steadily progressed from low integration at baseline to high integration by year five (with the exception of some older women, who experienced significant individual barriers and isolation, although they still contributed to their family’s long-term integration by doing care work).

The results from the RISE survey illustrate that LFSRM serves its target population in both the initial months and over the longer term. Indeed, the role of the resettlement agency and volunteers are crucial for successful integration, as evidenced in the RISE survey. The vast majority of refugee respondents repeatedly indicated that services provided by the resettlement agency and its “community connectors” (the phrase used by the RISE researchers to encompass volunteers, cultural mentors, and embedded community mentors with extended social networks) were critical in the integration process (Lichtenstein *et al.* 2016, 12). The agency assists with housing, food, language and education classes, and cultural orientation. Community connectors further aid in the process by driving refugees to medical appointments, preparing them for joining the workforce through job classes, and providing social and emotional support well past the initial three months of resettlement assistance.

This assessment was shared by the refugees interviewed in this research. Although their experiences are limited because they have been in the United States for a year or less, all of the refugees indicated satisfaction with the services provided by LFSRM. Unlike refugees to other destinations (including those cited in the recent U.S. Senate report, *Abandoned Upon Arrival: Implications for Refugees and Local Communities Burdened by a U.S. Resettlement System That Is Not Working*; Committee on Foreign Relations 2010), refugees participating in this research indicate that their needs are being met, at least in the short term. Perhaps there is some selection bias, as participants are those who are both invested in the “job class” sponsored by LFSRM, and are also more capable of communicating in English on arrival, but their experiences and opinions are valid nonetheless.

Participants described how cultural mentors help out in ways that the resettlement agency cannot. They teach refugees how to use appliances in the home, how to shop for food in local grocery stores, how to ride the bus, and many other things necessary for surviving in a new culture. Indeed, these volunteers are key players in helping refugees adjust to their new life, according to interviewees. It is important to note that, as stated by the LFSRM representative, on average, LFSRM Colorado Springs has 100 active volunteers who work with specific families outside of the office as cultural mentors. In addition, the local LFSRM retains a dozen more in-office interns and volunteers (including those who coordinate Job Class, and English as a second language classes). Various other community members volunteer in other ways, including cleaning apartments for newly arriving refugees, donations, and intercultural events and exchanges. In the month of January 2016, for instance, the agency reported 330 volunteer hours, a total that does not include the numerous congregations and faith-based organizations and additional community partners that provide critical support for the program. When evaluating the capacity of LFSRM to receive refugees each year, it is the very active and generous capacity of volunteers that is often highlighted as a key strength.

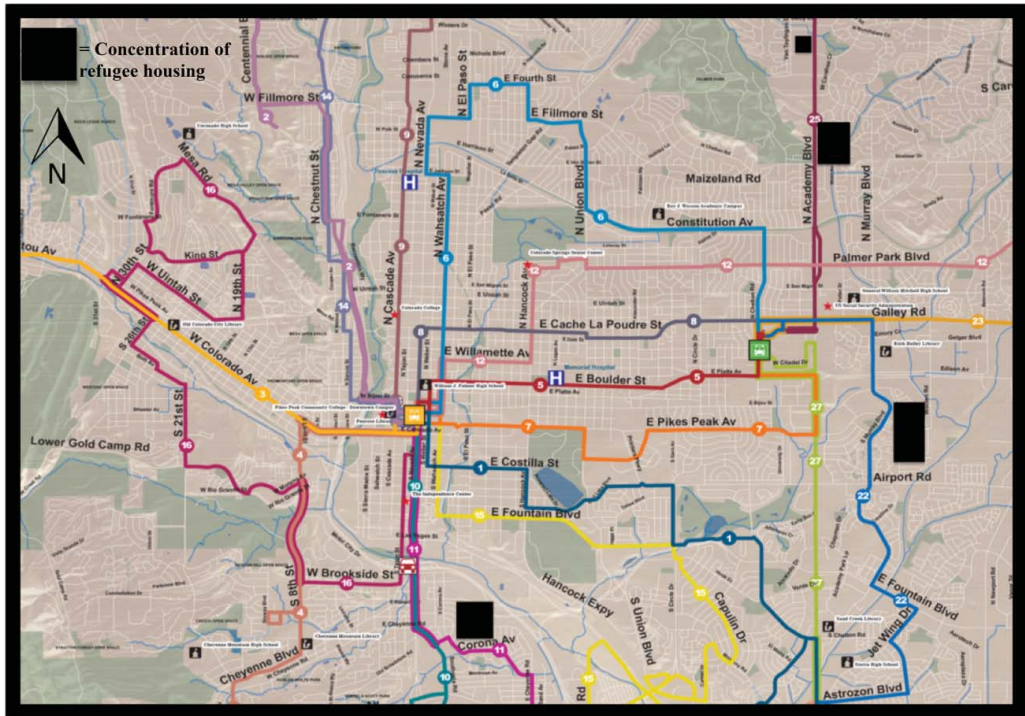


Figure 2. Colorado Springs transportation systems and concentrations of initial refugee housing. *Source:* Interview with LFSRM staff member; City of Colorado Springs GIS Analyst (2015).

Transportation systems

Despite praise from interviewees, and RISE survey evidence of long-term integration, transportation barriers present a key issue in the resettlement of refugees in Colorado Springs. Figure 2 shows areas of concentration of initial refugee housing in Colorado Springs. The various colored lines are the Mountain Metropolitan Transit (MMT) public bus routes, along with a base map of road infrastructure. A visual analysis of the map indicates that refugees, generally, initially are not placed in areas of the city with the best access to public transportation, but rather on the periphery of Colorado Springs, with perhaps one or two public bus routes.

Unlike traditional resettlement destinations with more defined and highly accessible migrant neighborhoods, refugees living in automobile-dependent Colorado Springs reside in more dispersed, less central, more limited transportation areas. On arrival, small groups of families and individual refugees live together in apartment complexes scattered throughout the metropolitan area. Although some pockets are distinguishable (Figure 2), they in no way reflect concentrations in the traditional sense.

This is because when refugees arrive in the city, they are placed in particular LFSRM-sponsored apartments located in complexes where affordable rents have been negotiated with property management. LFSRM, aware of the general lack of public transportation options for refugee newcomers, also deal with two key constraints in finding affordable and accessible housing.

First, LFSRM competes in a rental market recently cited in a survey by Apartment List, a San Francisco-based rental service, as the fastest rising rental market in the country (Laden 2016). According to the survey, “Apartments in the Springs rose 11.4 percent in March compared with the same month a year earlier. ... That increase topped 100 cities in the survey” (Laden 2016). Although Colorado Springs still offers more affordable housing than many other cities, an improved economy and strong demand from young people and empty nesters have increased interest in the rental market (Laden 2016). Likewise, apartment construction in Colorado Springs is not keeping pace with demand, which

contributes to rising rents. Thus, the clusters represented in [Figure 2](#) are apartment units where property managers are willing to subsidize higher rents to house refugees on arrival in Colorado Springs.

Second, LFSRM is located in an automobile-dependent city that does not prioritize public transportation. Indeed, public transit in Colorado Springs suffered budget cuts for years, which affected both bus schedules and routes, resulting in severely limited access to public transportation (Katz 2016). Since 2004 the transit system has been budgeted \$5.7 million annually. From 2004 to 2014, however, the public transit budget failed to reach its goal (Mendoza 2014). For ten years, the MMT system “operated on what one city official called ‘a bare bones’ transit system without bus services on evenings and weekends and most weekday routes available once an hour. ... At its worst, MMT was only operating 255 days a year” (Sun 2016). The situation has improved significantly since 2015; the city even received the Colorado of Transit Agencies Large Community Transit Agency of the Year award (Sun 2016). Yet, the problem of poor public transportation access remains a chief issue for refugees living in Colorado Springs.

In fact, in every interview conducted, every participant recognized and emphasized the importance of having a car in the United States. “What I have noticed in the United States is if you do not have a car, you don’t have shoes. Without shoes you cannot walk anywhere” (Aamir interview, December 8, 2015). Within weeks, all of the refugees interviewed recognized that Colorado Springs is an automobile-dependent environment, and that owning a car makes life significantly easier. All of the participants have used the Colorado Springs public transit system to get around Colorado Springs.¹ They all described the challenges of taking public transit to navigate the city. All of the individuals expressed interest in owning a car: “The dream is to have your own car because with your own car you can go on time to do anything, and everywhere on time. The bus is good but it is taking time” (Fumu interview December 9, 2015).² Throughout the interviews, the challenges of public versus private transit were readily apparent.

The main challenges that refugees face while accessing public transit include the availability of the various bus routes, the amount of time waiting for the bus, and the amount of time spent on the bus. The weather and the cost of transportation are some other factors that came up during interviews as well. Many of the refugees coming to Colorado Springs are not accustomed to Colorado’s winter weather. Snow in particular proved a challenge; nearly all of the interviewees had at least one story about getting stuck in snowstorms.

Using the public transit system takes considerable time. Interviewees described situations where they either ended up at various destinations hours in advance or minutes late due to the irregularity of the public transit system. “Sometimes I have missed a class. This is now two times I have missed a class. Sometimes I do not wish to miss the class, but because of transport I can miss it” (Dunia interview, December 9, 2015).

Most refugees averaged one and a half hours of transit time (taking on average two buses) to access English learning, GED, and job classes located at a high school campus in the central northwest part of town. Aamir described his typical transit journey to that high school for his GED classes:

My class was starting at school at 9. So I had to leave the house at 7:30 because the 7:30 bus was coming to the Citadel Mall and the next bus was 8:00, like bus number six to Constitution comes every hour. So I was early to class like every day like forty minutes. And after I got a car it’s like a five-minute drive. (Aamir interview, December 8, 2015)

The general sentiment is that getting to and from key appointments, classes, and events on the public transit system takes too much time. Refugees either have to plan to make sure that they make it to their destination ahead of time or risk being late.

¹ All of the participants except for the refugee from Myanmar (Than) have accessed public transportation. Than had family already established in Colorado Springs when he arrived here, and they were able to provide rides for him to places to which he needed access.

² The authors maintained confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. These pseudonyms were chosen from a list of popular names from each refugee’s country of origin.

Few of the participants owned vehicles or had a driver's license in their place of origin, yet obtaining private transit quickly became a goal for all of the interviewees. Navigating the driver's license process, figuring out how to purchase a car, and maintaining cars proved to be challenging, especially for those refugees without strong ties in the community and those lacking experience with cars. Many of the refugees described the struggle of overcoming language barriers, navigating the bureaucracy, and learning all the rules and regulations of driving.

Makin (interview, February 5, 2016) described how he navigated the driver's license process and how he ran into multiple obstacles in obtaining one. For starters, he translated most of the driver's booklet into Arabic with Google Translate to fully understand the driving laws in Colorado. When it came time to take the written test he ended up failing it twice, primarily because of miscommunication. He did pass the test on his third try. Then, the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) employee informed him that he could not get his driver's license until he fixed his names so his Social Security card matched his passport. His passport has four names: his first name, his father's name, his grandfather's name, and the name of the state where he was born. His Social Security card, though, only has two of his names listed. Makin took care of the name situation, but when he went back to get his driver's license he encountered another problem with his date of birth. He decided to leave his date of birth alone and came back another day to try again. The DMV employee he encountered this time was confused as to why he went to all the trouble with changing his name. The employee explained that DMV employees are supposed to know that refugees might have some differences with their names on their passports and Social Security cards and they should overlook this small logistical issue. He was finally able to get his driver's license after many hurdles.

Other interviewees told stories of getting stranded with car trouble. Askar (interview, December 18, 2015), from Afghanistan, described the times when he could not figure out what was wrong with his car. His car kept overheating while he was driving it, and he would just pull over to the side of the road until it cooled off enough for him to keep driving. His roommate was with him one time when this happened. Luckily, his roommate knew some basic car maintenance and fixed the car. His roommate taught him what kind of coolant to buy and how to check and fill the coolant, as well as some of the other maintenance that goes into taking care of a car.

The cost of transportation also proved challenging. MMT bus passes cost \$63 a month. The resettlement agency covers this cost during the initial months of resettlement until the individual acquires a job. Then it is the refugee's responsibility to cover his or her own transportation costs. Not all refugees end up buying a bus pass after they get a job. Uhuru (interview, December 17, 2015) walks to her job, so often she opts out of buying a bus pass. Instead, she pays the basic fare of \$1.75 a ride, which includes transfers. She will ride the bus to work on snowy days or to her English classes twice a week.

Cost was also an important factor in the decision when buying a car. This was a decision not only based on the actual expense of the car, but also because many of the interviewees were sending money home to their relatives. Makin (interview, February 5, 2016) shared that he sends money back to his brother in Iraq. Although he was proud to buy a new car within a year of arrival, he ended up selling that car and replacing it with a much cheaper model to send his brother more money to help him get a better apartment in Iraq.

Within one year of resettlement, just half of the interviewees had purchased or leased a private vehicle. Regional geographic differences emerged in these numbers. Nine of the twelve refugees from the Middle East had purchased or leased their own vehicle, but none of the seven refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo had purchased or leased their own vehicle. Previously owning a car in their home country played a role in the timeline of car ownership, with those accustomed to owning a car finding a way to purchase a vehicle in their initial months in the United States. This was not the only factor that influenced car ownership, though. After reviewing the interview transcriptions, it became readily apparent that social networks were a key social institution that plays a role in whether refugees purchase vehicles.

Social networks

In this research, the use of social networks proved to be especially useful in obtaining and exchanging information and resources. Although some of the refugees had family ties, many did not, so they do

not have a variety of strong and weak social networks to draw on. Thus, they are especially dependent on LFSRM and its volunteers for both bonding and bridging. For some, LFSRM proved to be the most useful tie as refugees establish themselves during their initial months of resettlement. Importantly, there is a general distinction between those refugees coming from the Democratic Republic of the Congo compared to those coming from the Middle East. Although human capital explains some of the difference in their experiences, it was social capital that really affected their short-term integration.

The amount of bonding and bridging used by the participants varied considerably. Many of the refugee families lived amongst each other in the same apartment complexes. Whereas some were aware of each other and frequently exchanged information with one another, others had no idea that other refugee families were living in the same apartment complex, even though they had been attending the same language and job classes. For example, Uhuru and Zari from the Democratic Republic of the Congo were asked if they knew any other refugees in the area. They both said that they did not talk too much with their fellow community members. Within days, at the very same apartment complex, Nadim, Farha, and Halim were asked if they knew any other refugees in the area, and none could identify any, even though a fellow refugee family that attended classes with them lived just five doors down the hall. Nadim, Farha, and Halim did know several other refugee families from the Middle East in Colorado Springs with whom they exchanged information.

This differing use of social networks is apparent in many ways in Colorado Springs. Most refugees from the Middle East learned how to navigate the driver's license process and buy cars through both strong and weak ties that they have not only in Colorado Springs, but also in other U.S. communities. Some had owned vehicles in their place of origin, and others relied on information from multiple sources to access private transportation. The interview results point toward a tightly knit community within the Middle Eastern population in Colorado Springs.

Despite only being in the city a short time, Aamir (interview, December 8, 2015) has helped multiple fellow refugees navigate the driver's license process and find cars for fellow refugees, including Halim, Nadim, and Farha. Zahra and Makarim's (interviews, February 6, 2016) family bought their three cars from a friend of a friend who owns a used car dealership (although the dealer was not of Middle Eastern origin). Clearly, the Middle Eastern interviewees have access to a breadth and depth of social networks and use this interconnectedness to exchange information.

Not only did many in the Middle Eastern refugee population talk among themselves, but also they tended to know other people in both Colorado Springs and elsewhere in the United States before resettlement. As with the majority of refugees entering the United States today, Makin, Salma, Omed, and Haroon all had family members living in Colorado Springs prior to being resettled, and regularly used these local social ties to gain information to help establish themselves in their new community. Meanwhile, Aamir, Halim, Nadim, Penaw, Askar, Farha, Zahra, and Makarim all had friends or knew people living in the United States prior to resettlement, and they all drew on these networks for both bonding and bridging.

Several of these refugees were resettled in Colorado Springs under the SIVs program through the U.S. government because of their work on and in behalf of the U.S. government, or because they are family members of those workers. Importantly, this also means that these refugees came to the United States not only with social networks, but with significant human capital as well, as a number of the individuals listed earlier were college-educated in their home countries and worked as translators for the U.S. military in Iraq, Afghanistan, or both. Aamir (interview, December 8, 2015) even mentioned that he gets together with fellow translators who worked for the same company as him in Iraq and plays chess regularly in Colorado Springs. As a result, the Middle Eastern refugee population has access to both strong ties of family and close friends, and additional weak ties of the resettlement agency and volunteers to draw on in navigating the initial phases of resettlement.

Meanwhile, most refugee participants from the Democratic Republic of the Congo did not have the same access to social networks as the Middle Eastern population. Few of the participants from the Democratic Republic of the Congo had either friends or family living in the United States prior to their resettlement, although all of them came with their own families. They arrived in the United States with both limited human capital and limited social networks. Few had previously owned a car, and most

arrived from rural settings without a culture of driving. Their stories reflect a situation where they end up relying on their various weak ties from the resettlement agency, volunteers, and friends that they made either during their journey to the United States or through work, classes, or other community interactions.

Dunia noted the lack of community among refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, specifically in Colorado Springs: “Yeah, we have people that are from where we are from, I cannot say that they are friends, we come from the same country. ... They are not friends we just talking, explain something, if there is something we don’t understand” (interview, December 9, 2015).

Uhuru (interview, December 17, 2015) indicated that she does get rides from fellow refugees in the choir where she sings at church on Sundays, but she reported that is the only time that she gets rides from someone else. This aligns with the findings of Ryan (2011) in her study: “while people tend to seek friends who are like themselves in some way, it is apparent that shared ethnicity may not be a sufficient basis for close friendships” (715). Indeed, there appear to be specific cultural norms around “asking for rides” among this refugee population. Permissible “asks” for assistance and support might also be based on customs around reciprocity and exchange, which in turn translates into why these particular Democratic Republic of the Congo refugees might not have as many strong or weak ties.

All of the refugees interviewed from the Democratic Republic of the Congo said that they obtained most important information either from LFSRM, from their “cultural mentors,” or from other LFSRM volunteers. This is not unexpected or necessarily concerning in the acclimatization phase, because resettlement agencies are designed to be a key social institution that refugees use during their initial months in the United States. Still, it must be noted that LFSRM is doing most of the work of both strong and weak ties, and carrying the responsibility of both bonding and bridging among most refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in this initial period of resettlement. Fortunately, as is readily apparent in the Colorado Springs Refugee Resettlement Stakeholder meetings, LFSRM has launched an extensive collaboration with numerous congregations and faith-based organizations, nonprofits, and community volunteers to limit, proactively, the potential social vulnerability and sociospatial exclusion of refugees. Additionally, there is much brainstorming about best practices for fully integrating all refugees into Colorado Springs.

Conclusion

As a nontraditional, automobile-dependent resettlement destination, Colorado Springs makes a good case study to examine the effectiveness of key social institutions in incorporating refugees into society. Clearly, the local LFSRM affiliate fulfils its mission as a resettlement agency. Amidst broad-sweeping and ever-increasing negative commentaries, such as the recent U.S. Senate report, *Abandoned Upon Arrival: Implications for Refugees and Local Communities Burdened by a US Resettlement System That Is Not Working* (cited in Ott 2011), LFSRM stands out as an agency that meets the needs of the refugee populations they are currently mandated to assist. Many interviewees provided examples of the multiple ways that the resettlement agency and their cultural mentors supported them during the first days, weeks, and months after arrival.

Indeed, with a large pool of volunteers ready to serve, a community that is generally receptive to refugees,³ and those additional institutional and community capacity factors identified by the GAO (2012) as necessary for success, Colorado Springs illustrates why “regionalization” of refugee resettlement can and does work. This is despite the fact that Colorado Springs is an automobile-dependent

³In early 2016, a Colorado Springs city councilman crafted a working proposal, titled “A Resolution Declaring Opposition to the Relocation of Refugees from the United States Refugee Resettlement Program to the City of Colorado Springs.” His resolution echoes one passed by El Paso County commissioners unanimously in November 2015, citing refugee relocation as “an unfunded mandate” and asking the state refugee coordinator to “notify the city immediately” of refugees to be brought here. Although the county declaration passed without dissent (mostly because it was not publicized, nor covered by the local media), the new resolution effort stirred a torrent of protest, expressed in social media and nearly 300 e-mails to city officials, the most seen in the last five years (Anleu 2016). It appears as though the extensive network of stakeholders invested in refugee resettlement mobilized this campaign, and refused to allow politics to countermand the exceptional work of refugee resettlement done by LFSRM and its community partners these past thirty-five years.

city with numerous transportation barriers. Thus, in this case, the strength and extent of local social institutions illustrates how the place matters in refugee resettlement.

Federal refugee resettlement policy cannot be ignored, however. The fact that the U.S. refugee resettlement program advocates self-sufficiency means that local social institutions are critically important to long-term integration. The devolution of welfare services in the United States has increased the importance of the nonprofit sector (Judkins 2011). The federal government provides resettlement agencies ninety days of targeted support, but LFSRM must be ready to take over on Day 91. LFSRM is mandated to serve an individual for five years postarrival depending on the situation and support that an individual refugee needs. At the same time, LFSRM staff are looking to see whether a refugee is relying on ever-expanding social networks and becoming more self-sufficient as the months and years since initial resettlement pass.

Granted, there is more that LFSRM could do to ensure the successful long-term resettlement of refugees in Colorado Springs. With its plethora of volunteers (and only a limited number of volunteer positions available), LFSRM has opportunities to push its own capacity further, particularly when it comes to transportation issues. Because most refugees want and need private transit in Colorado Springs, volunteers could create materials about how and where to obtain a driver's license. They could also help refugees get driver's permits, help those who have permits learn how to drive, and help refugees fulfill their permit-driving requirement hours. Volunteers could also create new classes focusing on car buying and auto maintenance basics, perhaps even creating a list of approved car dealers willing to work with refugees. These suggestions could help maximize the benefits of the weak ties of the resettlement agency and encourage opportunities for less-connected refugees to receive information about their transportation options.

Without a deep level of commitment from LFSRM and its corps of community volunteers, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations, the long-term incorporation of refugees in Colorado Springs might be at risk. There is a self-perpetuating cycle: When refugees experience more sociospatial exclusion, they might be less able to access services, housing, and employment. With continued reliance on public transportation, too, refugees in nontraditional, automobile-dependent resettlement destinations begin to experience significant social vulnerability. This, in turn, might limit the self-sufficiency of these refugees and eventually could influence their long-term integration. The RISE survey bears this out: The longitudinal results indicate that the most socially and spatially isolated refugees in Colorado also show the lowest levels of integration across multiple domains at the end of the five-year time period (Lichtenstein *et al.* 2016). In the end, then, the only way to break this cycle is to focus policy and resources on the social institutions that work together to create successful refugee resettlement, including effective resettlement agencies, efficient and accessible transportation systems, and extensive social networks.

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