



Using the Annual Survey of Refugees Questionnaire to Identify Pre and Post-Migration Stressors and the Relationship with Effectiveness of Refugee Assistance Programs for Refugees that Entered the United States Between 2011 and 2015

Jessica Deer & Kendell L. Coker, Ph.D., J.D.



ABSTRACT

Refugee assistance programs have historically been very helpful to individuals resettling in the United States (Kerwin, 2019). However, refugees' adjustment to their new homes can be impacted by a variety of stressors. Currently, most of the research focuses on post-migration stressors and has no concrete way to determine success within the United States. The current study focuses on identifying whether a relationship exists between various stressors and demographic factors, including receipt of financial programs and their annual household income. The results revealed that refugees who reported speaking English 'very well' prior to migration and those that were not currently attending school or university had significantly higher annual household income. However, region of origin and receiving certain types of financial assistance were significantly associated with a lower annual household income. Implications of these findings are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

A refugee is "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion and on the basis of asylum eligibility" (Refugee Convention, 1967). The United States has led the world in formal refugee resettlement (Blizzard & Batalova, 2019). Refugee assistance programs, administered by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), are instituted to help refugees achieve economic self-sufficiency as soon as possible after arriving in the United States (Bruno, 2011). Identity confusion, acculturation stress, separation from family members back home, poverty, unemployment, and lack of their cultural social network are powerful consequences of post-migration stress (Wessels, 2014; Keyes & Kane, 2004; Khawaja et al., 2008; Miller, Worthington, Muzueovic et al., 2002 & Teodorescu, 2012). Currently, there is a lack of research on refugees. Refugees are subject to multiple stressors prior to and after their arrival to the United States. Due to the United States serving as a popular site of refugee resettlement, understanding their stressors can drive legislation, improve current assistance programs, and ease their transition and adjustment.

METHOD

The current study utilized data from the Annual Survey of Refugees, which included a sample of 4,776 refugees. In addition to demographic questions, the participants were asked questions about their experiences prior to and since their immigration to the United States as well as types of received government financial assistance. A regression analysis was used to examine whether several demographic variables and migration stressors were significant predictors of annual household income. Annual household income accounted for the number of people reported in the household. All countries of origin from the region of central Africa were coded as 1; countries from east Africa were coded as 2; countries from south Asia were coded as 3; countries from the Middle East were coded as 4 and Cuba, which was the only North American country, was coded as 5. Responses entered as "don't know" or missing were excluded from the analyses.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Pre and Post-Migration Stressors

Variable	Mean	(N)	Percent
Region of Citizenship			
Central Africa	6486.3233	(38)	6.1%
East Africa	5027.3002	(45)	7.3%
South Asia	9878.0920	(97)	15.6%
Middle East	9402.4565	(352)	56.8%
North America	11422.1303	(88)	14.2%
Pre-Migration English Level			
Very Well		(42)	6.8%
Well		(166)	26.8%
Not Well		(226)	36.5%
Not at All		(186)	30.0%
Post-Migration English Level			
Very Well		(174)	28.1%
Well		(245)	39.5%
Not Well		(146)	23.8%
Not at All		(55)	8.9%
Post-Migration Education			
Attended Schooling		(139)	22.4%
Post-Migration Assistance Rece			
Food Stamps		(371)	59.8%
TANF		(27)	4.4%
RCA		(16)	2.6%
SSI		(87)	14.0%
GA		(4)	0.6%
MMA		(11)	1.8%

^aDependent variable is current household income

RESULTS

Refugees from south Asia had the highest reported mean household income (M = \$9,878.10) compared to the other regions of citizenship (Table 1). Assistance received varied; however, the most common assistance was food stamps (60%). A chi-square omnibus test showed that the current model with the predictors outperformed the null model, $F(17) = 55.103, p = .000$. Table 2 revealed that several variables were significant predictors of annual household income. In comparison to Cuba, refugees from east Africa had significantly lower household income $\chi^2(1) = 4.45, p = .035$. In comparison to those who reported that they did not speak any English at all prior to arriving in the United States, those who spoke English 'very well' had a significantly higher annual household income, $\chi^2(1) = 6.12, p = .013$. Those that attended school/university within the past 12 months compared to those that did not, had significantly lower household income, $\chi^2(1) = 14.56, p = .000$. Refugees that received food stamps, $\chi^2(1) = 7.63, p = .006$ and supplemental security income (SSI) had significantly lower household income than those who did not receive such assistance, $\chi^2(1) = 7.61, p = .006$.

Table 2

Migration Stressors as Predictors of Household Income

Variable	β	Std. Error	df	Wald Chi-Square	p	95% Confidence Level	
						Upper Bound	Lower Bound
Region of Citizenship							
Central Africa	-4935.81	3195.48	1	2.39	.122	-11198.82	1327.21
East Africa	-6394.83	3030.00	1	4.45	.035	-12333.52	-456.14
South Asia	-1544.04	2374.06	1	.42	.515	-6197.10	3109.03
Middle East	-2019.67	2220.16	1	.83	.363	-6371.11	2331.77
North America	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Pre-Migration English Level							
Very Well	8055.82	3297.21	1	6.12	.013	1693.41	14618.23
Well	3477.81	2283.84	1	2.32	.128	-998.43	7654.05
Not Well	958.01	1875.28	1	.26	.609	-2717.47	4633.50
Not at All	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Post-Migration English Level							
Very Well	1069.00	3295.02	1	.11	.746	-5389.12	7527.11
Well	3500.09	2915.67	1	1.44	.230	-2214.53	9214.70
Not Well	59.2	2611.31	1	.00	.982	-5058.16	5177.99
Not at All	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Post-Migration Education							
Attended School/University	6154.27	1613.20	1	14.56	.000	2992.46	9316.08
Post-Migration Assistance Receive							
Food Stamps	3641.38	1318.52	1	7.63	.006	1057.13	6225.63
TANF	556.126	3039.22	1	.03	.856	-5439.84	6552.09
RCA	4311.53	3919.62	1	1.21	.271	-3370.79	11993.85
SSI	5005.58	11814.16	1	7.61	.006	1449.89	8561.27
GA	1165.39	7790.25	1	.02	.881	14103.22	16434.01
MMA	1905.22	4732.63	1	.16	.687	-7370.55	11181.00

^aDependent variable is current household income

CONCLUSION

This study examined demographic and migration factors associated with annual household income among refugees who immigrated to the United States between 2011 and 2015. The data revealed a significant relationship between receiving food stamps, SSI, and reported annual household income. It is expected that refugees who received food stamps had significantly lower household income than those who did not. Prior research found that there was an increase in utilization of food stamps for refugees who entered the United States after 1996 (Bollinger, & Hagstrom, 2008) and refugee households utilizing food stamps were 85% more likely to have food insecurity (Hadley & Sellen, 2006). Also, the current study found an association between annual household income and English language proficiency prior to entering the United States. These findings along with prior research may have support for more language proficiency classes for incoming refugees to assist them with their transition into the United States. All refugee assistance programs should be evaluated to determine why only food stamps and SSI programs were associated with annual household income. Other research has found that refugees' income is at a near-destitute level for those that received any form of assistance (DeVotz et al, 2004). This current study fills a gap in the literature about migration and demographic factors associated with financial "success" in the United States. Future studies should examine additional indicators of "successful" economic transition into the United States. Annual household income may not necessarily be the best proxy of how well a refugee family is adapting to their new home.

REFERENCES

Blizzard, J. B., & Batalova, J. (2019). Refugees and Asylees in the United States. *Bollinger, C., & Hagstrom, P. (2008). Food Stamp Program Participation of Refugees and Immigrants. Southern Economic Journal, 74(3), 665-692.*

Bruno, A. (2011). U.S. Refugee Resettlement Assistance. *Congressional Research Service, 1-23.*

DeVotz, Don J. and Pivnenko, Sergiy and Beiser, Morton, The Economic Experiences of Refugees in Canada (March 2004). *IZA Discussion Paper No. 1088.*

Hadley, C. & Sellen, D. J. *Immigrant Health (2006) 8: 369.*

Keyes, E. F., & Kane, C. F. (2004). Belonging and adapting: Mental health of Bosnian refugees living in the United States. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing, 25, 809-831.* doi:10.1080/01612840490506392

Kerwin, D. (2018). The US Refugee Resettlement Program — A Return to First Principles: How Refugees Help to Define, Strengthen, and Revitalize the United States. *Journal on Migration and Human Security, 6(3), 205-225.* doi: 10.1177/2331502418787787

Khawaja, N. G., White, K. M., Schweitzer, R., & Greenslade, J. (2008). Difficulties and coping strategies of Sudanese refugees: A qualitative approach. *Transcultural Psychiatry, 45, 489-512.* doi:10.1177/1363461508094678

Miller, K.E., Worthington, G.J., Muzurovic, J., Tipping, S., & Goldman, A. (2002). Bosnian refugees and the stressors of exile: A narrative study. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 72(3), 341-354.* doi: 10.1037//0002-9432.72.3.341

Teodorescu, D., Heir, T., Hauff, E., Wentzel-Larsen, T., & Lien, L. (2012). Mental health problems and post-migration stress among multi-traumatized refugees attending outpatient clinics upon resettlement to Norway. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology, 53(4), 316-332.* doi:10.1111/j.1467-9450.2012.00954.x

United Nations. (n.d.). Implementation of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

Wessels, Whitney Keltner. (2014). The Refugee Experience: Involving Pre-migration, In Transit, and Post Migration Issues in Social Services.