Dissertation Abstract  
Odessa Gonzalez Benson  
University of Washington School of Social Work  
obenson@uw.edu

Policy-driven vis-à-vis refugee-driven resettlement: A nationwide, multiple methods, case study examination of placement patterns and services for resettled refugees.

Dissertation Committee  
Chair: Marcia Meyers, Professor, UW School of Social Work  
Members: Mark Ellis, Professor, UW Department of Geography  
Scott Allard, Associate Professor, UW Evans School of Public Policy  
Melissa Martinson, Assistance Professor, UW School of Social Work

Refugees and resettlement policy have been contentiously debated in public and policy discourse, prompted by the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe in 2015 and public reaction in the US. Resettlement policy is about refugees and local communities, but, importantly, it also bespeaks the commitments and values of countries of reception. Called for are new insights and critical examination of the latest cohorts of refugees in the post-Sept11 era of resettlement.

Resettlement policy, as anti-poverty program for refugees, forwards its goal of socioeconomic integration through appropriate geographic placement and service provision. However, refugees and their communities, naturally, very much also determine their own resettlement, via self-placement and refugee-based services. My research examines (a) refugees’ self-placement or internal migration patterns and (b) services and goals of refugee-ran community organizations, and the ways in which those patterns, services and goals are in/congruent with policy. This research is nationwide in scope and applies a case study approach, focusing on Bhutanese refugees, one of the new refugee cohorts in the post-September 11 era. Empirically, I apply both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine data from several sources, and partnered with refugee organizations for primary data collection, participant recruitment and analyses.

First, I lay the national landscape of primary arrival placement and internal migration patterns, and then conduct a comparative examination of relevant city-level factors explaining refugees’ in/out-migration patterns into localities across the US. Appropriate placement of refugees is important but has long been problematic in resettlement policy. After placement in primary cities of arrival, refugees commonly move or relocate domestically -- internal migration, disarraying the government’s planned dispersion strategy. Migrants’ voluntary movements are natural and expected, but difficult to predict and track, complicating policy funding appropriations and service provision and impacting refugees and local communities.

Quantitatively, I use official population data in US cities of arrival (n=287) from the US Office of Refugee Resettlement and community-based population data in cities of domestic migration. I visually and represent resettlement patterns in maps, using the Geographic Information Systems software ARCGIS. I used data from the US Census, the US Office of Refugee
Resettlement and other publicly available sources to construct city-level indicators for relevant factors, particularly low-wage labor and local immigrant policy. I conducted multivariate analyses of the contribution of each factor to the net in- or out-migration of refugees in each city, using the statistical package STATA. Findings indicate job quality and local integration policies as relevant factors for refugees’ internal migration away from traditional immigrant gateways and into new immigrant destinations in the midwest and southwest, mimicking domestic paths of previous migrants, particularly those from Mexico and Latin America.

Second, I examine refugee community organizations’ goals and activities, and congruence with federal policy and implementing agencies. Self-sufficiency as policy goal is measured as refugees’ job rate within eight months of arrival; the bulk of services goes to job placement. That outcome has been critiqued as misguided and failing to capture self-sufficiency in a more meaningful way. Integration, meanwhile, as policy goal is not systematically measured due to lack of policy guidance and a clear definition. Unclear and unmeasured policy goals pose problems in program implementation, with ramifications for refugees and local communities. Too often neglected in resettlement policy research are refugee community organizations that form and operate along the sidelines of federally-contracted resettlement agencies, and serve high-needs, high-poverty areas. Interrogating refugee organizations against the broader policy and institutional contexts offers new insights and raises questions about participatory approaches and effective service provision with refugee communities.

Qualitatively, I use 40 semi-structured interviews and four focus groups with refugee leaders of Bhutanese refugee organizations in 30 cities across the US, using the coding software ATLAS.ti. I identify themes and patterns in the data and formulate a typology of activities, and then examine goal congruence with federal policy. Findings indicate that refugee community organizations fill in gaps in service to complement policy-mandated service provision and federal policy goals, but are also self-determining in other ways.

The theoretical dimension of my dissertation project draws upon social work literature and interdisciplinary perspectives, in political science and human geography or migration studies specifically. I formulate discussions about refugee resettlement that considers participatory approaches and labor equity as part of socioeconomic integration or adjustment processes of refugees, as contextualized by locality and policy.