



Host Communities' Perceptions of Refugees in North Dakota and Perceived Impacts of Refugees on North Dakota Communities

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Abstract

This study identifies host communities' perceptions of refugees and perceived impacts of refugees on North Dakota communities by analyzing a 2015 petition against future refugee resettlement using Braun and Clarke's guide to thematic analysis. I identify two host community perceptions of refugees: refugees as "other," and refugees as a potential threat to the security of individuals, the community, and the nation. I also identify three perceived impacts of refugees: deprivation of American citizens, and the beliefs that refugees exert pressure on public services, and refugees are ruining the American way of life.

Keywords: *Refugees, Perceptions, North Dakota, Perceived Impacts*

Introduction

Although North Dakota has been resettling refugees since 1997, evidence suggests that North Dakota residents' concerns on resettlement are recent. On August 6th 2015, WDAY Valley News Live aired "Fargo and West Fargo could see 350 refugees move to cities by the end of September" (Burner 2015), and shortly thereafter North Dakota residents began an on-line petition against future resettlement of refugees (WDAY Valley News Live 2015). The petition was two-fold: petitioners demanded that the state legislature grant North Dakota residents the right to vote on further refugee resettlement and that Lutheran Social Services (LSS), the non-profit agency that resettles refugees in North Dakota, release all data on funding for refugee programs (Change.Org 2015). As of November 27th 2015, 3,257 residents of North Dakota and residents of other states such as Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, Florida, Texas, Utah, Kentucky, Washington, Indiana, and Idaho had signed the petition (Change.Org 2015).

The petition gave signees the opportunity to provide an explanation for supporting the petition. By critically examining petitioners' comments, this research identifies North Dakota residents' perceptions of refugees and the perceived consequences of refugee resettlement. The residents' perceptions are identified using thematic analysis.

Despite evidence from studies conducted in Europe, Africa, and Australia showing that immigrants' method of entry, refugee or asylum status, and demographic factors influence community attitudes toward immigrants (Codjoe, Quartey, Tague, and Reed 2013; Croucher 2013; Banks 2012; McKay, Thomas, and Kneebone 2012; Alix-Garcia and Saah 2009; Naidoo 2009; Phillimore and Goodson 2006; Verkuyten 2004; Hernes and Knudsen 1992), most studies conducted in the United States make no distinctions between immigrant sub-groups (Turper, Iyengar, Aarts, and van Gervan 2015; Garcia and Davidson 2013; Woods 2011; Fennelly 2008; Raiya, Pargament, Mahoney, and Trevino 2008; Fennelly and Federico 2007; Rohmann, Florack, Piontkowski 2006; Mayda 2004). Attitudes toward refugees, in particular, are insufficiently studied in the United States (Bullard 2015, Murray and Marx 2013). In addition, there is a lack of qualitative studies on attitudes toward refugees in the United States (Bullard 2015, Murray and Marx

2013). Although findings of quantitative studies contribute to the literature, they are not ideal for capturing elements of behavior and attitudes that are not quantifiable. Instead of attempting to quantify participants' perceptions, this study draws on participants own words and social experiences to identify their beliefs of refugees and justifications for opposing refugee resettlement.

Who is a Refugee?

Refugees enter the United States through authorized methods as non-permanent residents for humanitarian emergency reasons. Refugees are defined as people who are “unable or unwilling to return to their country of nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (Martin and Yankay 2014:1). Refugee status is granted to people who apply for admission while outside of the United States (Martin and Yankay 2014). Although upon arrival refugees are not classified as lawful permanent residents, refugees become “eligible to adjust to lawful permanent resident status” one year after their continuous presence in the United States (U. S. Dept. of Homeland Security 2016: no pagination).

Refugees who enter the United States without permanent residency status are not considered unauthorized immigrants because they are subjected to intensive biographic and biometric security checks prior to entering the country. The United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) has a priority process in place to identify the eligible refugee individuals and groups for resettlement in the US. Priority is given to 1) “individuals referred by the United National High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a US Embassy, or a non-government organization”; 2) “groups of special humanitarian concern”, and 3) “family reunification cases” (Mossaad 2016: 2). After a referral is provided, a resettlement support center working under cooperative agreement with the U. S. Department of State (DOS) conducts a pre-screening interview with the applicant and submits the completed application to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Then, a USCIS officer interviews the applicant to determine if he or she is credible, meets the definition of refugee, and is eligible for resettlement in the United States (Mossaad 2016). In this stage, applicants are required to complete the necessary biometric checks, additional biographic tests, and medical exams prior to obtaining approval (Mossaad 2016). The applicants who obtain approval for travel are screened prior to boarding based on travel information collected by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) (USCIS 2015). Based on the screen results, CBP determines if the applicant should be admitted to the United States (USCIS 2015).

Statistics on Refugees at National and Regional Level

National Level

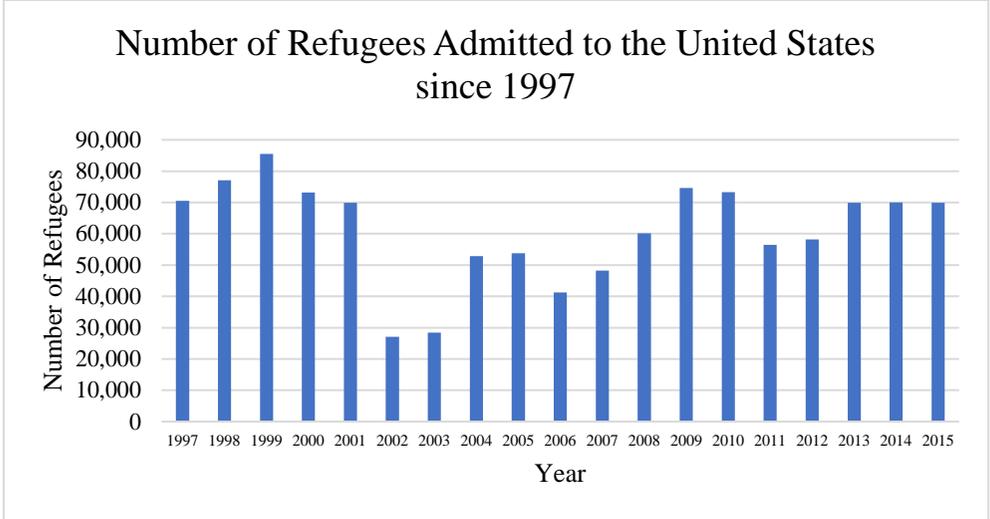


Figure 1. Number of Refugees Admitted to the United States from 1997 to 2015 (U. S. Department of State Bureau of Population 2016)

From 1997 to 2015, the United States resettled an average of 61,000 refugees each year (U. S. Department of State Bureau of Population 2016). From 2013 to 2015, an average of 70,000 refugees were resettled (Mossaad 2016). The refugees in the United States come from Burma, Bhutan, Iraq, Ukraine, Vietnam, Russia, Liberia, Iran, Somalia, Laos, and Cuba. Since 2008, the majority of refugees have come from Burma, Bhutan, Iraq, and Somalia (U. S. Department of State Bureau of Population 2016).

Regional Level

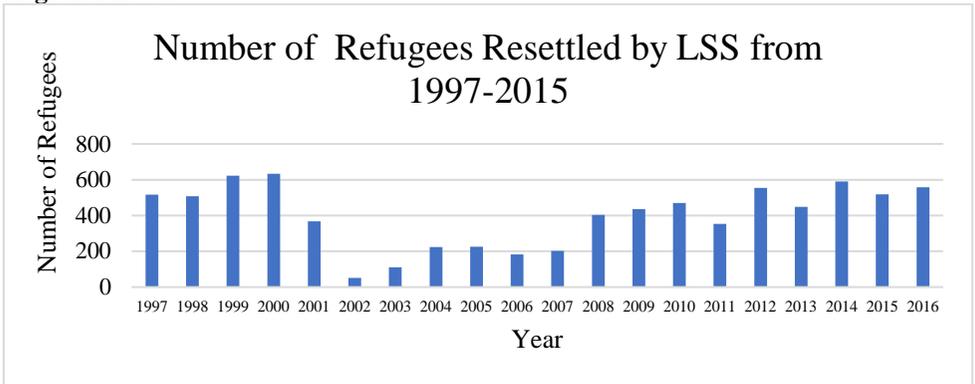


Figure 2. Number of Refugees Resettled by LSS from 1997 to 2015 (Lutheran Social Services 2017)

Since 1997, Lutheran Social Services (LSS) has resettled an average of 400 refugees in North Dakota each year. By fiscal year 2016, nearly 7,780 refugees have emigrated to Fargo, West Fargo, Grand Forks, and Bismarck (Lutheran Social Services 2017). It is projected that LSS will resettle 475 refugees in Fargo, Grand Forks, and Bismarck in fiscal year 2017 (Arick 2015). The refugees in North Dakota come from 35 different countries (Ross 2014) including Bhutan, Iraq, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cambodia, Sudan, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Nepal, Burma, Iran, Ethiopia, India, Jordan, Pakistan, and Vietnam (Lutheran Social Services 2017). The majority of refugees resettled in North Dakota since 2001 arrived from Bhutan (39 percent), Iraq (26 percent), and Somalia (24 percent) (Arick 2015).

Literature Review

There is a lack of empirical research on attitudes toward refugees and impacts of refugees in the United States. Thus, the review draws on a range of qualitative and quantitative studies conducted in Australia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East on authorized and unauthorized immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers outside of the United States. There is a general movement within studied host communities to restrict the flow of unauthorized immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers (Ceobanu and Escandell 2010; Richmond 2002; Hovey et al. 2000), however that restriction is more severe when communities perceive that immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are entering through unauthorized methods. For example, host communities along the Mexican border express more prejudice and anxiety toward unauthorized immigrants, and perceive unauthorized immigrants as a greater threat to their cultural and moral values, and overall welfare compared to authorized immigrants (Murray and Marx 2013). In Australia, hostility toward asylum seekers arriving by boat without valid visas has increased over time compared to other immigrants arriving with visas. Between 1999 and 2001, and between 2008 and 2010, Australia received about 12,000 and 9,000 asylum seekers by boat respectively (McKay et al. 2012). Two opinion polls conducted during these periods show that negative public reaction toward asylum seekers arriving by boat had increased from 50 percent in 2001 to 75 percent in 2010 (McKay et al. 2012).

Holding such negative attitudes toward immigrants can influence important behaviors within host communities, including voting decisions on immigrant related policies (Verkuyten 2004) and active opposition to increasing immigration (Mayda 2004). Past attempts by American voters attest to efforts on supporting policies that impact immigrants. In 1994, California voters passed proposition 187¹ to deny unauthorized immigrants from receiving public social services such as welfare benefits, public education, and health care (Cox 2013; Schuck 1995). In 2011, South Carolina passed Bill 20 to authorize law enforcement officers to determine the immigration status of immigrants during any lawful stop and convict immigrants who fail to carry official legal status verification documents (Fandl 2015).² In addition, in 2011, Alabama enacted the Beason-Hammon Alabama Taxpayer and Citizen Protection Act (HB 56) to “make it unlawful for unlawful aliens to apply for work in the state, prohibit tax deductions for service payments to unlawful aliens, and make it a civil offense for an employer to dismiss a lawful worker while retaining an unlawful alien worker” (Fandl 2015:539).

¹ Although the proposed law was passed by the voters, it was not enforced (Cox 2013).

² Legal status verification documents include, but are not limited to, U. S. passport, certificate of naturalization, certificate of U. S. citizenship, valid state issued driver's license.

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Besides method of entry, and refugee and asylee statuses, immigrants' demographic factors also influence community attitudes. Demographic factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, country/region of origin, gender, education level, skill level, occupation, skin complexion, and economic status affect host community attitudes toward immigrants (Bullard 2015; Turper et al. 2015; Garcia and Davidson 2013; Marx, Ko, and Murray 2012; Woods 2011; Raiya et al. 2008). These demographic factors not only affect attitudes toward immigrants (Murray and Marx 2013; Raiya et al. 2008; Hernes and Knudsen 1992) but also the level of acceptance rates for potential immigrants (Turper et al. 2015).

In rural and urban areas of the United States, residents' lower acceptance of immigrants is largely influenced by a few social and economic concerns. The opposition to immigration in rural areas is influenced by immigrants' perceived impacts on the crime rates and competition for jobs (Garcia and Davidson 2013). The opposition to immigration in urban areas is similarly influenced by perceived impacts on the local economy, crime rates, and competition for jobs (Garcia and Davidson 2013).

In addition, urban and rural American residents feel threatened when immigrants do not conform to the values embodied in presumed American identities. Both urban and rural American residents equally value a set of core virtues embodied in the American identity (Fennelly 2008; Sears and Henry 2003). Thus, Americans would expect immigrants to conform to American virtues such as hard work, obedience, self-sufficiency, punctuality, sexual oppression, thrift (Sears and Henry 2003), English language proficiency, honesty, familial connections (Garcia and Davidson 2013), patriotism, and loyalty (Benjamin 2009). When immigrants' virtues are perceived to be in conflict with said virtues, Americans tend to perceive immigrants as a threat to their traditional values. Non-conformists of American traditional values of importance were considered violators in the past (Sears and Henry 2003). In addition, although rural residents are highly invested in the notion of American identity, it is not seen as an attitude determinant for rural residents in predicting opposition to immigration (Garcia and Davidson 2013). On the contrary, American identity is seen as an important attitude determinant for urban residents in predicting opposition to immigration (Garcia and Davidson 2013).

Rural residents feel threatened and act less receptive when immigrants are from a lesser known and more visibly distinct culture. In the past, immigrants predominantly resettled in the metropolitan areas. However, over the past two decades, resettlement has been shifting away from urban areas to rural areas where cost of living is comparatively low (Garcia and Davidson 2013; Nezer, 2013; Fennelly 2008). Since most of the rural areas are homogenous communities, immigrants can be easily identified as a new population (Nezer, 2013; Rubin 1994). Sudden influx of a diverse population who are culturally, racially, and religiously different can unsettle the localities' historically stable notions of belonging (Nezer 2013; Collins, 2013; Rubin 1994). Since rural residents are not accustomed to the presence of immigrants from diverse cultures, and are uncertain about problems that may arise with immigration (Garcia and Davidson 2013), immigrants presence may seemingly threaten the localities distinct traditional world-view and way of life (Fennelly 2008; Zárate et al. 2004). As a result, immigrants can be viewed as a threat to local values consequently generating negative attitudes toward immigrants (Zárate et al. 2004).

Urban and less educated residents are more likely to perceive that immigrants lead to crime and other social ills, and express negative attitudes toward immigrants (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007; Palmer 1996). Urban residents in the United States are more concerned about immigrants worsening crime problems than their rural counterparts (Garcia and Davidson 2013). Residents who perceive immigrants worsen crime problems are more likely to prefer decreased immigration (Garcia and Davidson 2013) or oppose immigration (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007). However, this perception is most prevalent among the less educated residents, with more educated residents less likely to perceive that immigrants lead to increased crime rates and social ills (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007).

Few prior studies have focused on presenting positive impacts of refugees on host communities (Grindheim 2013; Codjoe et al. 2013; Zetter 2010). According to these studies, refugees bring economic benefits and infrastructural developmental potential to their host communities. For example, refugees in Franklin, Ohio contribute to the local economy as consumers and small-business owners. Ohio refugees' household spending in 2015 is \$36.9 million and their total contribution to the local economy is \$1.6 billion (CRP Partner Organizations 2015). Furthermore, about 873 refugee-owned businesses in Columbus Ohio employ over 3,900 workers. In Franklin, the rate of refugee entrepreneurship (13.6 percent) is twice the general Franklin County rate of entrepreneurship (6.5 percent) (CRP Partner Organizations 2015). Similarly, refugees in North Dakota also contribute to the local economy as homeowners and taxpayers. According to Valley News Live, a report indicates that at least 100 refugee families in North Dakota own houses and pay about \$200,000 in taxes (Stanwood 2015).

Refugees also stimulate the growth of the host economy through other direct and indirect means. Refugees directly influence the expansion of the local market by increasing the demand for local food produce and commodities such as building materials (Grindheim 2013; Codjoe et al. 2013; Zetter 2010). Increased food, housing, and land prices bring more income to local farmers, and landowners (Mercy Corps 2012; Alix-Garcia and Saah 2009). At the same time, the presence of refugees indirectly contributes to the built and social capitals of the host communities. The host communities could seemingly benefit from assistance programs that provide infrastructure and welfare services to refugees in need (Zetter 2010).

Between 2011 and 2012 alone, 14,000 Syrian refugees arrived in Jordan (Mercy Corps 2012). An assessment performed by Mercy Corps humanitarian agency identifies that the increasing tension between Jordanian host community members and refugees is a result of pressure placed on local resources by the rapid influx of refugees.³ Jordanian host communities are frustrated due to elevated rents and the plummeted availability of housing caused by the refugee influx (Mercy Corps 2012). The study noted that many residents complain that they have been priced out of their own housing market, and that skyrocketing rental prices force residents to pay a significant amount of their monthly income toward rent (Mercy Corps 2012). Although host community residents are aware that refugees are also adversely affected by exorbitant prices charged by opportunistic property owners, residents insist on a solution that favors them over refugees (Mercy Corps 2012). Host community residents also demand to charge a fair rent and protect them from excessive prices that result from high demand for housing (Mercy Corps 2012).

Studies also indicate that competition over resources can have both positive and negative economic impacts on communities (Mercy Corps 2012; Alix-Garcia and Saah 2009; Chambers 1986). Between 1993 and 1998 because of refugee influx, residents of

³ Based on data gathered through focus groups and key informant interviews.

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Western Tanzania experienced increases in the prices of locally produced and consumed agricultural goods. Increases in prices due to refugee demand for food positively affected the local producers and negatively affected the consumers (Alix-Garcia and Saah 2009). Thus, the study suggests that policymakers should be concerned about price increases resulting from refugee demand when developing policies in order to avoid any adverse impacts on local consumers (Alix-Garcia and Saah 2009).

Host community residents perceive immigrants as a burden on the economy, public services such as education, and housing (Codjoe et al. 2013; Cox 2013; Nezer 2013; Mercy Corps 2012; Naidoo 2005; Burns and Gimpel 2000; Hovey et al. 2000; Zetter 2010), and also as a competition for jobs (Cox 2013; Mercy Corps 2012; Hovey et al. 2000; Richmond 2002; Rubin 1994). In recent years, these concerns have influenced several countries to implement tighter immigration control policies (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007). The following section discusses the negative socio-economic impacts of immigrants in detail.

Refugees are considered an economic burden by countries and states facing economic difficulties. African host communities claim that refugees residing in Africa are “imposing additional costs on already economically hard-pressed public and social welfare budgets, arresting economic growth,” and “distorting markets” (Zetter 2010: 50). In the United States, states experiencing financial difficulties and members living in those communities have become resentful toward refugees in regards to the actual use of federal funds to supplement medical, education, housing, and transportation needs of refugees (Nezer 2013).

Residents view immigrants as a burden on social services assuming that immigrants subtract more from the government and taxpayers than they contribute to the local economy as taxpayers and employees. Many Americans perceive unauthorized immigrants as a burden on social services on the basis that social benefits unauthorized immigrants receive are provided at the expense of tax paying Americans (Cox 2013), and immigrants’ tax contributions may be minimal (Burns and Gimpel 2000). Many Europeans perceive immigrants as a burden on social services on the basis that they subtract more from the government than they pay back in taxes (Hainmueller and Hiscox. 2007). A survey conducted in 24 different countries, including United States finds that many residents perceive asylees as a drain on welfare system assuming that asylees are prohibited to work (O’Rourke and Sinnott 2006). Moreover, residents who perceive immigrants as a burden on social services are more likely to express negative attitudes toward immigration (Cox 2013).

Some host community residents of California view unauthorized immigrants as a burden on school services. These residents are more in favor of providing healthcare services for unauthorized immigrants than providing school services. The host community residents perceive children of unauthorized immigrants as contributing to overcrowded classrooms, which lowers the quality of public education (Hovey et al. 2000).

Apart from unauthorized immigrants’ children, refugee children are also seen as a burden on school services. Different learning techniques and language abilities of refugee students⁴ exert pressure on teachers who have to equip refugee students with necessary

⁴ Some African refugee students come from agricultural backgrounds that use oral tradition for learning and do not include any form of writing.

academic, social, and linguistic skills while attempting to create conditions for them to participate in the ongoing school curriculum demands (Naidoo 2005). The task becomes more challenging when teachers lack experience in teaching students whose first language is not English. In most instances, the schools, and staff are ill equipped and under-resourced to cater to the needs of the increasing number of refugee students (Naidoo 2005).

Immigrants are also perceived as competition for jobs. There are concerns that immigrants may take jobs away from local residents (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007; Palmer 1996). When immigrants are perceived as a competition for jobs and willing to work for low wages (Cox 2013; Mercy Corps 2012), they are seen as a threat because they are hired for jobs that would supposedly have gone to local residents (Zárate et al. 2004). Furthermore, opposition to immigration increases during periods of recession or high unemployment (Mercy Corps 2012; Hovey et al. 2000; Palmer 1996; Rubin 1994). When residents become unemployed, they are more likely to believe that immigrants take jobs away from the native-born (Palmer 1996). In such instances, residents become anti-immigrant but not anti-refugee, on the belief that refugees are not authorized to work, therefore not a competition for jobs (O'Rourke and Sinnott 2006). In addition, competition for employment opportunities between immigrants and residents can also increase the existing ethnic and political tensions among diverse groups (Richmond 2002).

Methodology

The study analyzes responses to a publicly available online petition⁵ opposing future refugee resettlement in North Dakota that was started in August 2015.⁶ As of November 27th 2015, 3,257 petitioners had signed the petition. The petitioners included residents from North Dakota as well as residents from other U. S. states including Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio, Florida, Texas, Utah, Kentucky, Washington, Indiana, and Idaho. Out of the 3,257 petitioners, 1,044 petitioners stated their reasons for opposing refugee resettlement. Among those 1,044 comments, 730 comments were made by North Dakota residents. Since this study focuses on North Dakota residents' attitudes toward refugees, the data set was limited to the 730 comments from North Dakota residents. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide to thematic analysis. To increase reliability and accuracy of coding, the data were analyzed using the qualitative analysis software ATLAS.ti.

⁵ Publicly available data does not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

⁶ The petition is available online at <https://www.change.org/p/cass-county-legislature-stop-lutheran-social-services-in-fargo> under "Stop Refugee Resettlement and Lutheran Social Services in North Dakota" (Change. Org. 2015).

Analysis and Findings

Table 1. Main Themes: Perceptions and Perceived Consequences

	Themes	Frequency
Petitioners’ perceptions of refugees	Refugees as “other”	227
	Refugees as a potential threat to the security of individuals, the community, and the nation	137
Perceptions of impacts on communities	Privation of American citizens	222
	Refugees exert pressure on public services and taxpayers	212
	Refugees are ruining the American way of life	187

Table 2 displays themes developed during coding. The themes are separated into two categories: petitioners’ perceptions of refugees or petitioners’ perceptions regarding the impacts of refugees on communities. Frequency counts for each theme are provided. Themes on host community perceptions include seeing refugees as “other” and seeing them as a potential threat to the security of individuals, the community, and the nation. The perceived impacts of refugee resettlement include privation of American citizens, belief that refugees exert pressure on public services and American taxpayers, and the belief that refugees are ruining the American way of life. The next section discusses each theme in detail.

Petitioners’ perceptions of refugees

Perception 1: Refugees as “other”

Many petitioners viewed refugees as “other” where other refers to non-conformists (n=111), outsiders (n=97), and inferiors (n=19). Petitioners’ perceptions of refugees were frequently explicitly or implicitly held in contrast to values embodied in the native-born American identity. For example, petitioners described themselves as “hardworking,” “honest,” “respectful,” “loyal,” and “patriotic,” while describing refugees as “lazy,” “don’t work,” “disrespectful,” “not loyal,” and “unpatriotic.”

A few petitioners compared refugees with American immigrants who arrived after World War II. In particular, they argued that early immigrants learned English, found jobs, and worked hard to provide for their families. As one resident explained, “[early immigrants] didn’t expect any handouts but helped others when in need.” The petitioner perceived that “this should be the same standard today rather than giving handouts” to refugees (Fargo resident). According to a few petitioners, the current “standards” are different from what petitioners desire.

About half of the petitioners who perceived refugees as non-conformists expressed a belief that unlike native-born Americans, refugees are unwilling to work hard and do not seek to be self-supporting. For example, many petitioners perceived refugees as “freeloaders” who are “free riding” in the United States without contributing to the

economy. Petitioners claimed that refugees “live off” of “handouts,” “free stuff,” “free programs,” and “free services,” without finding jobs, working hard, and paying taxes. As stated by one Fargo resident, “we can’t keep bringing in more freeloaders. These people who come here live off the system. They refuse to work and are far from productive.”

Beyond the perception that refugees are unwilling to work, one other perception among some petitioners is that refugees in the United States expect to receive handouts and think they are entitled to receive benefits. As a Fargo resident stated, “[refugees] come here getting free handouts and expect everything for free.” One Fargo resident succinctly captured the reoccurring idea that refugees think they are entitled to receive benefits, and that the attitude of modern refugees is seen as distinct from past immigrants.

I feel we are creating a nation of helpless victims that feel they are entitled to benefits that we the people work for. Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't be here if it weren't for our great country allowing immigrants on to our land. But, our immigrant ancestors work[ed] hard and help[ed] build our nation. Now, they [refugees] sit in [on] their asses reaping the benefits from our hard work.

Using the words of a McCanna petitioner, “the majority of these immigrants want [the] generosity [of the American residents] and [expect] free programs without paying in return.” In addition to highlighting the perception of refugees as free loaders, it reflects an understanding of refugees as non-conformists who are “abusing resources,” and “taking advantage of the system.”

Another perceived aspect of refugee non-conformity mentioned lack of social skills appropriate to the United States. Some examples of inappropriate social etiquettes and social graces include shouting, screaming, littering, refusal to greet back, and staring at native-born residents. A Fargo resident stated, refugees “lack severely the daily skills, social and proper public etiquette, no common sense, dang near when they drive or even get outta [out of] the cars.” Examples of language used by petitioners to describe the perceived lack of U. S. social etiquette include “disrespectful,” “ungrateful,” “rude,” and “horrible drivers.”

Refugees were also seen as being outsiders. This conception is represented both by the labels applied to refugees, and the explicit mention of traits that supposedly make refugees culturally distinct from native-born Americans. For example, some petitioners described refugees as a group separate from the local community using terms such as “foreigners,” “unknowns,” and “outsiders” to express their attitude. That refugees were culturally distinct was highlighted through references to language, dress, religion, and eating rituals. For example, some petitioners mentioned that refugees were “clad with rags from head to toe,” that “the majority of these folks [refugees] are Muslim,” “can’t speak English,” or had “very bad English,” and that there were differences in cooking and eating habits. A Fargo petitioner shared a related negative experience, “I can’t shop and talk to someone in English anymore while they are a US Citizen. Won’t handle my pork and causes delays in everyone’s shopping experience.”

Lastly, about 17 percent of petitioners who viewed refugees as “other” held a belief that refugees were inferior to native-born Americans. Dimensions along which refugees were seen as lesser include education, skill, social status, and worthiness. Language used by petitioners to describe refugees as inferior include “substandard,” “uneducated,” “unskilled,” “losers,” “trash,” “stupid,” and “garbage.” The following quotations exemplify the view that refugees are inferior:

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“These guys are pigs, garbage and filth where they live”
(Fargo resident).

“Take the trash out somewhere else. Enough!” (Minot resident).

Perception 2: Refugees as a potential threat to the security of individuals, the community, and the nation

The belief that refugees pose a threat to individuals, the community, and national security is grounded in the assumptions that refugees are either criminals or increase crime rates, and are either terrorists or potential terrorists. Petitioners viewed refugees as “unlawful” “criminals,” “illegals,” “lawless,” “thieves,” and “troublemakers” who “cause trouble” in the belief that refugees are disproportionately involved in criminal and illegal activities. These activities included “theft,” “robbery,” “vandalism,” involvement in “fights,” “shootings,” terrorist activities, and drug use or distribution. A Park River resident described some of the criminal and illegal activities he/she believes are carried out by refugees:

Too many problems with the people that are in the valley already! Shootings, fighting ect [etc.]. Peoples [People] at a business in Grand Forks openly trying to get others to join Isis! Some have only been in GF [Grand Forks] only a couple days! Lots of trouble with them, a few weeks ago two girls hit a pole in Fargo one girl was trying to teach the other to drive! Neither one had a license neither one knew how to drive! You can go on all day long [...]

Over 50 percent of petitioners (who viewed refugees as a potential threat to the safety of the individual and community) claimed that not only have crime rates in North Dakota increased with the arrival of refugees, but that the increase is caused by refugees. One Fargo resident states that the, “dramatic increase in violent crime in FM area timeline coincides with concerted effort to settle refuges [refugees] in Fargo.” Certain petitioners saw crime as being “significant,” having “sky rocketed,” “soared,” “doubled,” and “tripled” in response to refugee resettlement.

Not only do many petitioners’ viewed crime rates and criminal activities such as “theft,” “robbery,” “vandalism,” and “involvement in fights” as occurring more frequently, but they view Fargo and Grand Forks as areas that are increasingly unsafe. A Fargo resident shared an observation about how neighborhoods have changed over time because of refugee arrival: “Over the past 10 years, I have watched as Fargo goes from being a great safe place to live, to a city just like every other with crime that just keeps rising.” Some petitioners expressed a fear of walking at night in their neighborhoods, going to gas stations at night, leaving their possessions unattended, and that they might be subjected to physical violence.

Increasing levels of fear among residents produced a number of expressed behavioral intents. For example, few petitioners mentioned that they had started to lock their vehicles and houses, had purchased guns for protection, or intended to move out of

their community to safer areas such as “Horace, Harwood, and Mapletown.” In the words of an Arvilla resident:

I lived in a neighborhood that was overrun by Somalian[s] and we had to move [because] the crime rate was crazy. The police where [were] always there. We found and saw these people throwing drug paraphernalia in our yard. I have a teenage son and couldn't live this way or expose him to this. We where [sic] scared to walk in or out at night. We had to move because of these people.

Though some petitioners claimed personal experiences as a justification for their feelings of insecurity or being at risk, others developed beliefs based on information provided by friends and relatives, and reports on mass media. As a Fargo resident mentioned, “The crime rate has also increased, as yet I have not been affected by this but I watch the news.” Few petitioners proposed that the means to “decrease crime” and “improve safety” is to stop bringing refugees into North Dakota.

Fears concerning safety and security seemed rooted in a fundamental distrust of refugees paired with a lack of knowledge regarding refugees’ backgrounds. Certain petitioners expressed a belief that most refugees come from countries with a “history of producing terrorists,” and by extension assumed that most refugees have connections to terrorists or terrorist groups. Though some petitioners revealed a general feeling of fear and distrust oriented toward all refugees, a few select participants expressed fear of Muslims in particular. For example, one Grand Forks resident expressed the following: “We shouldn't be bringing Muslims to our country! Ever [every] single one of them is or, will be a terrorist. They are either on jihad or support those who are! It's part of their religion.” Likewise, a Mapleton resident expressed a concern about potential terrorist attacks: “I feel as if we should stop refugees from coming into the United States at all, they have their own country they don't need to barge into ours and ruin our lives from possible terrorist attacks.” A West Fargo resident expressed concerns about the safety of the future generations of America. “These people [refugees] could be terrorists living next door to you, are [our] kids won't be safe.”

Although the USRAP has a process to identify refugees’ eligibility for resettlement in the United States, nearly half of the petitioners who viewed refugees as a threat to the nation raised questions about the reliability of the current security screening process. According to a Fargo resident, “These people are not screened by OUR standards but by the standards of the country they are trying to leave – by their own chaotic governments that don't want them –and we take their word for it that these are “good” people.” Such comments reflect feelings of dissatisfaction or distrust with standing procedures. Some petitioners requested more information about the security screening process. Certain petitioners also raised concerns about refugees’ potential links to terrorists and terrorist groups. Some petitioners suggested to stop bringing refugees to the United States and a few suggested to act “with caution” instead “with heart” in order to protect the country and its citizens, and prevent placing the latter at “high risks of terrorism.”

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Perceived impacts of refugees on North Dakota communities

Impact 1: Privation of American citizens

Petitioners saw refugees as depriving American residents of goods and services that they believe to be justly theirs. A significant amount of petitioners expressed feelings of exclusion, deprivation, and loss of priority and entitlement. Their claim is that it is right and just to prioritize the needs of American citizens as long as such need exists, and that assistance rendered to refugees by the government and social service agencies such as LSS should only be allowed in circumstances when need of native-born citizens have already been met.

A large number of petitioners mentioned a number of social groups within the United States that they saw as deserving but lacking assistance due to what they see as the prioritizing of refugees by governmental agencies and non-profit groups. Social groups mentioned include veterans, homeless, senior citizens, underprivileged (low-income) families, single parents, disabled, sick, pregnant women, and the unemployed. A considerable amount of petitioners argued that, though these groups' needs include financial assistance, housing assistance, medical assistance, food, operable vehicles, and jobs, American citizens do not qualify to receive assistance. In their own words, Americans "can't get help" "don't get help/assistance," are "denied help," or do not "get enough help" when they need assistance. A Grand Forks resident expressed feelings of disappointment about the situation:

I'm irritated with the fact that they can receive help with housing in an instant... I am an American who is a month away from having a baby and have to jump through hoops and has [sic] ultimately been denied...

Many petitioners perceived that "exclusion" of "native-born," "hardworking," "tax paying," "needy" Americans was "not fair: As a West Fargo resident explained, "this has nothing to do with race or color, it has to do with fairness and...that rules aren't the same for everyone." An Embden resident reasoned why exclusion of native-born was not fair: "We as citizens of this country should be able to get help when needed since we were born here and have worked here as well."

The belief that refugees are favored over financially struggling native-born Americans is reflected in a number of comments. Statements include, American citizens "are at the bottom of the lists for assistance" or are put on waiting lists in order to help refugees. Additionally, some claim that when Americans are unable to get assistance, or denied assistance, it is because refugees receive the "best of everything" and that the refugees' experience in receiving assistance is easy and quick even "being from a different country." As a Leonard resident stated:

I know several of my family members have tried to get help when they have ended up homeless with children and they have been told that they can't help them right now. Oh yet, an immigrant from another country comes over here and they

don't tell them that they get everything handed to them!!!!
What in the world that is ridiculous.

Whereas in this context social groups such as veterans and native-born homeless are seen as deserving, refugees are seen as underserving. Moreover, many petitioners viewed the provision of public services to refugees as favoring the undeserving at the expense of deserving American citizens. These perceptions seemed to be rooted in the belief that American citizens had to work and pay taxes to create social services, but they do not receive the benefit, and refugees (implicitly) do not work and pay taxes, but do receive benefit. A large number of petitioners expressed resentment over such treatment. Some petitioners desired that they had the same privileges the refugees enjoy.

Some petitioners also expressed feelings of relative deprivation. These petitioners assessed their positions in life and standards of living by comparing themselves with refugees. Some petitioners perceived that refugees “live better” or “are better off” compared to the “hardworking U. S. born citizens.” Several petitioners said that they have not witnessed any refugee who is “homeless, hungry, or without a vehicle to drive?” Some petitioners also made interpersonal comparisons between their own property and the property owned by refugees. According to many petitioners, although refugees depended on social services and other support systems, they owned brand-new expensive vehicles such as BMW, Lexus, and Mercedes, the latest cellular phones, “better furniture,” and “nicer clothes” when compared to the hard working, taxpaying American citizens. Some petitioners expressed feelings of anger, frustration, and social injustice in response to this perceived difference. “I’m sick of seeing Somalians and other such groups of people with cars nicer than I and my family have ever had” (Fargo resident). For some petitioners, the perceived inequity was coached in terms of their ideological aspirations, and a perceived unfair advantage held by refugees. For example, certain petitioners felt deprived because “refugees get the American dream,” and “everything they want within months of being” in the United States as a consequence of the support given by the government and agencies such as LSS (Fargo resident).

The perception that American citizens should be prioritized over refugees did not only stem from personal experience with refugees, but rather was an attitude expressed more generally by third-party perceivers.⁷ Perceivers, in this case host community respondents, favor the in-group. A large number of petitioners used phrases such as “take care of our own people,” “take care of our people here,” and “take care of the people born in this country” repeatedly to emphasize the importance of catering to the needs of native-born Americans prior to helping refugees.

Impact 2: Refugees exert pressure on public services and American taxpayers

A significant number of petitioners saw refugees as exerting pressure on public services such as “welfare,” “social security,” “health care/ medical,” the “education system,” “public housing,” and “infrastructure.” They claimed that at present, the United

⁷ A perceiver is a person who “assesses a given outcome distribution, a procedure, or means to treat individuals” (Hegtvedt 2006:47). However, all perceivers are not recipients of “outcomes, or targets of the procedure or treatment” (Hegtvedt 2006:47). Perceivers who are recipients of outcomes or targets are first-party perceivers and they make assessments that are greatly influenced by self-interested concerns (Hegtvedt 2006). Perceivers who are not recipients of outcomes or targets are third-party perceivers and they make impartial assessments (Hegtvedt 2006).

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States is “broke,” and is “over 18 trillion in debt,” and that is has “enough problems with poverty.” According to many petitioners, the country has a “hard enough time funding [its] own citizens/programs/schools” and “doesn’t have enough resources” such as “housing,” “space in schools,” and general infrastructure such as roads, law enforcement “to help those who are already here”⁸ Further, they see it as impossible to “assimilate this huge influx of refugees without significantly affecting [the] community”⁹. In the view of petitioners, there are not enough resources to provide for the needs of the native-born citizens, and bringing in “way too many refugees” is “taxing the resources of [the] communities,” Some petitioners questioned the sensibility of bringing refugees to the United States before “fixing” the existing economic problems and strengthening local economies. As a Fargo resident stated:

I started this petition because I have VOLUNTEERED my time at the Food Bank and have packed thousands of lunches for the weekend when low-income children don't have school lunch. If our county and state isn't [sic] taking care of these children and families and are relying on DONATIONS AND VOLUNTEERS to feed them then WHY are we allowing LSS to ship an additional burden on [to] me and my family?

A considerable number of petitioners assumed that refugees live at the expense of taxpayers, and are thereby exerting pressure on native-born, taxpaying citizens. Many petitioners saw refugees as a burden in that they “lived off” of public services paid for by hard working American taxpayer. They thought that citizens have to “support” refugees like “children” because “most of [the refugees] do not want to work to support themselves” but “want to be taken care of.” According to many petitioners, since “a lot of [refugees] don’t work” they “live on [American taxpayers’] money.” Some petitioners claimed that refugees never pay “property and school taxes,” and “any [other] taxes,” but refugees qualify to receive “SSI from Social Security” and other “free stuff” such as “free money,” “free education,” and “free medical.” As one Fargo resident shared, “I’m tired of my taxes paying for refugees’ free healthcare, housing, and food.” Another Fargo resident expressed similar thoughts: “Our tax money is taken and given to those who contribute nothing.” Few petitioners feared that they will have to pay more taxes in order to support refugees.

Though perceived impacts of refugee resettlement on public services included a range of factors such as longer waiting times or waiting lists for public housing, increased housing costs, overloaded welfare systems, and overcrowded schools. Some petitioners seemed disproportionately concerned with the negative impacts on schools. Such impacts include overcrowding, lack of teachers, and a reduction of attention paid to American children as refugee children monopolize the teacher. As a Fargo resident explained:

[T]he [incoming refugee] rate is unsustainable and taxing the schools and services of the community...In some schools there is a 20% and growing population of early English

⁸ Fargo resident

⁹ West Fargo resident

learners, and when the schools have to dedicate 30-35% of the teacher resources because of English proficiency standards it leaves the other students at a disadvantage.

Even in the absence of concerns regarding the current deprivation of American citizens, there is a fear of over burdening the system so that future deprivation might occur. According to some petitioners, “too many Americans are already on some form of assistance.” Petitioners claimed that social services and welfare programs are unable to bear the burden of Americans who are already depending on them. Some petitioners feared that “dumping” refugees on “already overloaded systems” and “already overstressed social support systems” will put “more strain,” subsequently “drain[ing] welfare systems.”

Some petitioners blamed the government and LSS for encouraging refugees to depend on public services, and taxpayers. According to several petitioners, the “[government] takes [American citizens’] taxes and supports [refugees] for nothing” as a result “[refugees] refuse to work.” Some petitioners are also “tired of seeing LSS only teaching the immigrants they bring to Fargo how to fill out welfare forms and leave the taxpayers to support their clients for decades.” In petitioners’ view, providing free goods and services discourage refugees from becoming productive economic assets for the community. Certain petitioners further blamed LSS for not taking the responsibility to help refugees be self-sufficient, claiming that this responsibility is transferred to American taxpayers after a few month of refugees’ arrival. As one Fargo resident explained:

LSS brings these people here and then dumps them on society expecting us to pick up the pieces. They, LSS, gives them little to no assistance or training on how to integrate into the populace properly. LSS relies on the communities programs paid for by taxpayers to do the job for them.

Impact 3: Refugees are ruining the American way of life

Many petitioners reported that the arrival of refugees resulted in negative changes within their neighborhoods. According to some petitioners, North Dakota communities, prior to the arrival of refugees were “peaceful,” “quiet,” “secure,” and “good,” but refugee resettlement has negatively impacted those community traits. A Horace resident explained, “I am sick of the influx of refugees in the FM area because the FM area used to be peaceful and not a bad neighborhood in town.” Another Fargo resident expressed similar notions: “The Face of Fargo has changed in the last 8 1/2 years since my family moved here, and all I see is more violence.” Perceptions of the decreasing quality of place led to some petitioners expressing a desire to “move out of” their current locations.

Some petitioners also experienced an undesired change in the national composition of the population, because of the perceived “influx of refugees.” Petitioners used phrases such as “too many new Americans in too short of time,” “our town being swarmed with foreigners,” and “neighborhood have been flooded by immigrants over the last couple of years” to express the belief that the national composition of the population has changed rapidly and to the detriment of current residents. Few petitioners expressed that they now felt like “the minority” in their neighborhoods.

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Many petitioners perceived that “refugees are ruining [their] way of life.” In particular, some petitioners claimed that refugees and refugee resettlement are “ruining” North Dakota, its communities and neighborhoods “little by little” by undermining the local culture and values, and lowering the “standard of living down to a third world country level.” Perceptions seem to be shaped by what were seen as differences in “daily skills, social and proper public etiquette,” and culture. Petitioners criticized refugees’ lack of knowledge about local rules and laws, involvement in fights, and unfriendly and unethical behavior in public places (loudness, littering, unattended children). A West Fargo resident shared perceived negative impacts of refugees in the neighborhood:

My family works hard and built a new bilevel in west Fargo to get out of the apartment we were in to get away from the riff raff and have a better life. These pieces of garbage are now moving into all of the houses around us because they move in either five generations of their family or more common [commonly] have three different families living in a three bedroom house with at least fourteen people in a house so that they only have to work on [one] day a week to pay for it. The problem I have with them is not only the ten cars parked all over the lawn and driveways, but these people are extremely rude and stand in groups of three or four in their yard when we are outside and just stare at us! We've tried to go over and say hi to them but they look at us and don't answer back. There's a lot of strange behavior out of them and we now hate our neighborhood and want to leave our home that was supposed to get us away from these trashy substandard people who love to throw their garbage all over their yard so it blows into ours along with all the cigarette butts they throw in our yard.

Many petitioners believed that refugees are unwilling to integrate into American culture and feared that this might lead to negative cultural changes in host communities. In asserting this belief, petitioners used phrases such as “no interest in joining our society or culture,” “no intention of becoming a part,” “don't integrate into society,” “do not even try to assimilate,” “won't assimilate,” and “not assimilating.” They justify their assertions by referencing refugees’ apparent reluctance to change their traditional dress, eating habits, social conduct, work ethics, and English language skills. The seeming reluctance of refugees to adapt was seen as a threat to the local cultural values. Some petitioners expressed dissatisfaction over recent changes in traditions and practices in order to cater to the needs of the refugees. Examples included: not being able to “say the pledge” in schools, “not being able to bring a bible to school,” “providing school signs in Farsi,”¹⁰ and giving driver’s license written test in a refugee’s first language. Others expressed a fear that with the increased number of refugees “holidays and traditions,” and cultural “heritage” will be lost.

¹⁰ Farsi is a language primarily spoken in Iran and Afghanistan.

According to Sears and Henry (2003), when in-group and out-group ethics are not consistent, dominant in-group expects out-group to conform to the dominant group's traditional moral values. This trend was reflected in the data. Some petitioners demanded that since refugees are in the United States, they should "change" or "adapt" to the American way of life without expecting any adaptation on the part of the host community. As one Fargo petitioner claimed, "not only that they feel we should change our ways our beliefs and so on...NO they came here therefore they should change their ways and become custom [accustomed] to ours [our] ways."

Few petitioners described a set of social and ethical standards, seen lacking in, but expected from refugees. These standards were couched in terms of the American identity. That is to say, these standards reflect petitioners' conceptions of what it is to 'truly' be American. Standards included the following: conformity to rules and regulations, adopting American cultural values, working hard to provide for family, learning to speak English, cleanliness, and demonstrating a "rock solid" loyalty to the United States. In the words of one Grand Forks resident, "If they [refugees] drop food or anything in apartments pick it up. I see crackers n [and] meat they drop and they do nothing. Either learn to adapt and work your way up or leave is how I see it." A Manvel resident shared similar ideas, "If they leave their society to come to the US they should leave all the foreign garb [clothing or garbage] in the foreign places and conform to the USA. Shower, eat American food, and ACT LIKE AN AMERICAN."

Some petitioners expressed hostility toward refugees that they interpreted as being unwilling to integrate into the local culture. Petitioners suggested that if refugees are unwilling to integrate they should "go back" to their own countries. A Manvel resident stated: "YOU [refugees] WANT YOUR WAYS IMPLEMENTED GO BACK TO YOUR HOME THEN YOU CAN HAVE YOUR WAYS." When some petitioners expressed hostility over refugees' lack of integration, two petitioners identified the reason for lack thereof and proposed a solution. A West Fargo resident identified lack of "adequate support system in place to successfully assimilate refugees to the community" as an issue to low integration. A Fargo resident proposed that "there needs to be a clear system in place to help immigrants and refugees adjust to the societal/cultural differences."

Conclusion

Some of the perceived negative impacts identified in this study include 1) refugees exert pressure on public services and taxpayers without contributing to the local economy as employees or taxpayers, 2) refugees exert pressure on school services by overcrowding, placing pressure on teachers, and reducing attention paid to American children, and 3) refugees increase crime rates in North Dakota. These findings are consistent with prior research conducted on impacts of authorized and unauthorized immigrants, and asylum seekers in America and Europe (Cox 2013; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007; O'Rourke and Sinnott 2006; Naidoo 2005 Burns and Gimpel 2000; Hovey et al. 2000). Consistencies in findings suggest that certain perceived negative impacts are common to multiple immigrant classifications, and local and global communities.

Given the scope and explorative nature of this study, the findings raised more questions that need answers. For example, this study identified that host communities believe that refugees increase crime rates, refugees exert pressure on public services and resources, and refugees subtract more from the government and taxpayers than they contribute to the local economy. However, the accuracy of these perceptions are not often widely known. Not knowing the real impacts of refugees on local communities is a

hindrance for implementing the appropriate policies and strategies to address any existing issue. Poorly planned strategies and policies can have negative impacts on both refugees and local residents. Researchers, refugee resettlement agencies, and policymakers can use the findings of this study as a starting point to further investigate and gather evidence on presumed perceptions prior to developing plans and reviewing policies.

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