

Evaluating the long-term integration concerns of Vermont's resettled refugee communities: a qualitative pilot study with southern Sudanese refugees

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



VRIP

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George J. Wright¹

The Vermont Refugee Integration Project (VRIP) aims to decrease social and institutional marginalization of Vermont's resettled refugee communities and improve the quality of their long-term integrations through research evaluation and community-strengthening solutions. This report is based on research conducted by VRIP with Vermont's southern Sudanese refugees between November 2003 and February 2004. Information generated from the research will help to raise refugee needs awareness among Vermonters, better connect refugees to the social capital and resource opportunities available to them, inspire cooperation between refugee groups and social service providers, and build a knowledge framework necessary for expanded and improved refugee service capacity.

Funding for this project was generously provided by the Vermont Community Foundation and the Windham Foundation.

The research

The research design incorporated three data collection methods. The first method consisted of individually administered questionnaires delivered in an interview format. An English-language Hopkins Symptom Checklist – 25 inventory was included in this method. The second method involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews. And the third method used in data collection was unstructured, direct observation of the study group over a period of four months. The information gathered was then analyzed for convergence and corroboration of participant experience.² Confidentiality waivers were signed prior to data collection, and all data remains password protected with the researcher. Professional interpreters were used when necessary. Advantages and shortcomings of the research design are detailed in the full report.

The participant pool was limited to individuals who fell within the following parameters:

- resettlement in the United States between January 1, 2000 and January 1, 2003;
- processed through the Kakuma youth resettlement initiative;
- current primary residence in Chittenden County, Vermont.

Forty individuals participated in the questionnaire phase, and 20 of those individuals were selected for the full-length interviews, based on a variety of demographic characteristics. The primary pool of 40 consisted of:

- thirty individuals resettled into Vermont and ten secondary migrants;
- residencies in five cities or towns in the immediate Burlington area;
- age range from 21 to 28 years of age with an average age of 23;
- all male and all ethnic Dinka.

Key findings

Employment and finances

- The median wage of the questionnaire group is \$8.50, representing a \$0.50 average wage growth figure from the young men's median first wage in Vermont. Seven individuals have experienced negative wage growth since their arrival in Vermont. These figures suggest that the young men's wages are not only low (just \$1.75 above minimum wage), but they are also generally stagnant. The young men work primarily in low-skill labor and service

¹ Researcher, Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program / Immigration and Refugee Services of America

² Miles & Huberman 1994

positions. Future enhancement of the young men's earning potential is likely dependent on their ability to pursue post-secondary education and skills training opportunities.

- The young men are financially insecure. As members of Vermont's 'working poor class', they live well below Vermont's Livable Wage (\$3.42 below the standard for a single, urban-dwelling individual). Their difficulty paying for basic needs is compounded by population-specific financial concerns: the sending of remittances (\$183 per month on average), a fervent pursuit of post-secondary education, and international phone carrier charges. Unforeseen costs such as car expenses and court fees have had pronounced negative effects on the financial situations of some of the young men.

Housing

- Only twelve questionnaire participants are fully satisfied with their current housing arrangements. An additional twelve individuals noted that they are 'not satisfied' with their housing. Of these twelve, ten tested symptomatic for depression on the Hopkins mental health inventory (the remaining two individuals were non-responders for the Hopkins test). Interestingly, individuals who lived with one or more housemates who tested symptomatic for depression were more than twice as likely to be symptomatic, themselves.³
- The young men have maintained group living arrangements, begun during their initial resettlement, as a way to preserve ethnic social support and regulate the relatively high cost of housing in the greater Burlington area. The average rent payment among the questionnaire group is \$291 per month, while the Fair Market Rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Burlington in September 2002 was \$627. Despite these savings, the interview data suggests that a portion of the young men are anxious to pursue more independent living arrangements. A lack of awareness about available housing subsidies has inhibited some of the young men from realizing this goal.

Education

- Nearly all of the young men surveyed (39 of 40) are enrolled in some type of education. Twenty-one individuals are enrolled in high school, and seventeen are attending post-secondary opportunities. One individual is enrolled in intensive English language training.
- Thirty-one participants noted that they do not have enough time to complete their studies, and seventeen said they are not satisfied with their performance in school.
- The pursuit of post-secondary education is the primary short and long-term goal of most of the young men in Vermont. It is also an overarching social and psychological construct, which, for some, shapes their personal and cultural identities, and their perceived roles in the reconstruction of southern Sudan.

"First of all if I'm cleaning, I continue to working. And I have to say 'Wow. When am I going to do this job for? How long am I going to do it? And what will pull me out from this job? What will make me to be somebody else?'" (22)

Transportation

- Thirty-two individuals own or part-own a car – four of these individuals do not have drivers' licenses. Individuals have taken two drivers' license road tests, on average, since their arrival.
- Twenty-one participants have had one or more serious problems with their cars (e.g. accidents, repossessions, secondary financial problem from owning a car, etc.). Three 'car problem' themes emerged during the interviews: difficulty paying for vehicle expenses, difficulty maintaining a vehicle's proper running condition (usually based on the poor quality of cars owned or because of accidents), and negative interactions with the police. Every mention of the police during the interviews pertained to driving an automobile.

Social service requests

- The young men remarked that they most need social service assistance in the following areas: housing (20 requests); education (14); employment (10); immigration related concerns (8).

³ $r=0.67$, $p<0.0005$ (N=36)

Ethnic social network

- The young men's local ethnic network is communal and very closely knit. They spend the majority of their non-work and non-school time with one another. The young men's ties to their ethnic social network, both locally and transnationally conceived, are purposeful in the following ways:
 - as social relief from acculturative and post-traumatic stressors;
 - for dissemination of problem-solving information regarding integration concerns;
 - to preserve attachments to homeland (both real and imagined);
 - to strategize for family reunification.

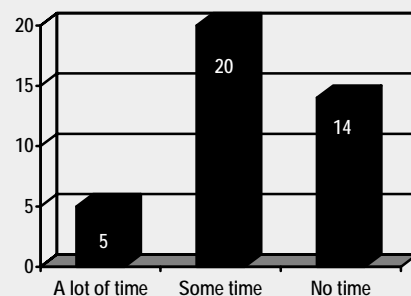
"But being in the Sudanese community it is just like I am still at home. So whenever I feel like depressed, I would rather go to where the Sudanese are, and we will speak in Dinka, and I will kind of forget about everything."
(18)

- Most of the young men maintain frequent contact with family members and friends overseas. The average number of international contacts per week among questionnaire participants is 2.4 contacts. Although telephone is the most commonly used method of communication, a surprisingly high number of individuals use e-mail and Internet chat boards when contacting individuals in other countries: 25 and six, respectively.
- Thirty individuals reported that they would like to return to Sudan in the future, either to visit or to remain, if possible. Six individuals said they are unsure about whether or not they would like to return, and four individuals said they do not want to return to Sudan
- Participants were asked with which ethnic, nationality, or social group they most identify. 'Dinka', 'southern Sudanese', and 'Sudanese' were most commonly chosen (all more than 20 selections), although 'Vermonters' was chosen by ten individuals.⁴ Of the listed group names, 'American' and 'black' were the least chosen (six and three, respectively).

Ties to American social network and comfort with place

- The young men's ties to American social networks are constructed within dynamic activity spaces – regularized contexts that socially evolve over time. For the young men, these are work and school, and less frequently, recreational places (e.g. bars, nightclubs, sports facilities, etc.). The young men described various social barriers faced in these spaces, including compatibility of age, cultural preferences, overt identification by institutional mechanisms as 'different', and their inability to use slang.
- Sixty-three percent of individuals remarked that they have experienced discrimination in one or more of the following categories since their arrival in Vermont: employment, housing search, education, volunteers. Percentages for employment and housing are particularly high: 35 and 30 percent, respectively.
- Although their frequency of contact with American-born peers is generally limited, the young men have maintained relationships with individuals they identify as 'volunteers'. Twenty-eight individuals reported two or more contacts with volunteers per month.
- Fully half of survey participants remarked that they feel uncomfortable or not permitted to go to one or

Non-work, non-school time spent with American-born peers (number of respondents)



⁴ Participants could circle as many choices as they wished and could add group names not listed.

more places in the immediate Burlington area.⁵ Interview participants noted their enjoyment of Vermont's natural landscape (excluding winter weather).

Mental health

- Twenty participants, out of 36 surveyed, showed symptoms of depression on the Hopkins 25 inventory, while fourteen showed symptoms of anxiety.

Secondary migration

- One of the young men originally resettled into Vermont through the 'Kakuma youth' initiative had out-migrated from the state, while ten individuals had in-migrated to Vermont at the time of data collection. Despite the imbalance in these flows, the relatively small numbers involved and general historical patterns of refugee post-resettlement migration suggest that Vermont's resettled Sudanese population is stable.
- The most prominent factor influencing migration was access to secondary-level education opportunities. Reunification with family and friends also factored significantly in migrants' decisions to move.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study evidences the value to resettlement and other social service providers of recording refugees' integration testimonies. As a largely qualitative measure of the young men's transition, this research provides a comprehensive account of the concerns, goals, and barriers faced by one of Vermont's resettled refugee communities. While much of the information recorded in this research deepens providers' understandings of this particular ethnic group, some of the data and analysis can be used to identify and assess the shared concerns and social service needs of other resettled communities in Vermont. It is hoped that this study will spur future research with Vermont's other resettled communities.

The researcher has developed seven recommendations based on specific research findings, which, when applied, could improve the quality of social services for refugees in Vermont. Most recommendations suggest progressive implementation over the next one to three years.

1. The 'refugee's perspective' should be incorporated into all aspects of service provision, evaluation, and development.
2. The Refugee Program and State Refugee Coordinator should more vociferously advocate for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against refugees in Vermont.
3. The design of refugee assistance initiatives should acknowledge refugees' transnational identities.
4. Refugee-specific mental health services should have been a central component to the young men's resettlement in Vermont. These services should be built into the Project PROGRESS resettlement model as a primary service.
5. The Refugee Program, in partnership with other agencies, should continue the cultural orientation trainings, begun in camps overseas, by offering localized, service provider awareness sessions during the initial resettlement period.
6. The Refugee Program and area education and skills training providers should develop a formalized system which streamlines interested refugee adults into continuing education and skills training / re-certification opportunities. This step would best enable refugees' upward economic mobility.
7. The Refugee Program and State Refugee Coordinator should aggressively support plans to develop a refugee mutual assistance association (MAA) in Vermont.

⁵ The researcher distinguished between one's emotional comfort or discomfort in place (what was being asked) and whether or not someone was legally permitted or had access to transportation to go a given place (not what was being asked).