

Planning Resettlement: Assessing Governance Gaps in the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program

by

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Dedication

My dissertation is dedicated to the community leaders from refugee backgrounds, working to better the lives of your community members. I am in awe of your generosity, resilience, and dedication. Thank you for sharing your experiences with me.

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List of Abbreviations

501(c)3 – Internal Revenue Code Section 501(c)3 or non-profit status

ACS - Americans Community Survey

CPS - Child Protective Services

DHS - Department of Homeland Security

DSS - Department of Social Services

GNPA – Good Neighbors Planning Alliance

IOM - International Organization for Migration

LCG - Local and County Government

LRA - Local Resettlement Agency

NYSERSP - New York State Enhanced Services to Refugees Program

ONA - Office of New Americans in Buffalo, NY

ORR - Office of Refugee Resettlement

PRM - Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration

RCO - Refugee Community Organization

R&P - Reception and Placement

RSC - Resettlement Support Center

UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

USCIS - US Citizenship and Immigration Services

VOLAG - Voluntary Agency (private or state agencies that provide reception and placement services for refugees resettling in the United States)

WNYRAC - Western New York Refugee and Asylum Consortium

WRAPS - Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System

Abstract

Cities, especially those that have faced population loss and austerity measures, may engage in welcoming work to support refugees and immigrants in efforts to revitalize their cities. Local and county governments may have an office or implement a plan dedicated to new Americans; they do not just provide lip service but deploy monetary resources. In theory, welcoming work bolsters the U.S. refugee resettlement program by supporting refugees in adjusting to a new home. This research examines the welcoming work and governance gaps that refugees experience in two cities and their surrounding counties: Buffalo, located in Erie County, New York and Grand Rapids in Kent County, Michigan.

Utilizing a qualitative research approach including document review and interviews, I examine how urban planning impacts the refugee experience and adjustment to a new homes. I first examine comprehensive plans and welcome plans to understand whether and how these documents address the needs of refugees. Comprehensive plans are required in some states and are a crucial tool for planners to create a vision for the future with input from community members. Welcome plans, sometimes referred to as immigrant integration plans, are less common. They often are spearheaded by government agencies in an effort make their localities more welcoming and inclusive to immigrant populations. The analysis shows that welcome plans are more thorough in including needs of refugees, while comprehensive plans primarily cover select topics such as housing, safety, and employment. Secondly, through interviews and a focus group, I examine how local and county governments engage and interact with other refugee support organizations, including local resettlement agencies and refugee-led community

organizations. While it is common for support organizations to point to local resettlement agencies as key players in supporting refugees, they generally do not see the work that refugee-led community organizations do and are unclear as to how local planners are involved in resettlement. Additionally, communication and collaboration between these entities is lacking, resulting in a lack of understanding of what each entity does as well as missed opportunities for greater impact.

Lastly, I examine how official welcoming work is perceived and experienced by refugees, in comparison to unofficial support offered by grassroots groups. Data show that while local and county governments attempt to support refugee communities, they largely miss the mark, either through their engagement processes or by cherry picking from among the variety of challenges refugees face to include in the plan. On the other hand, refugee-led community organizations, while not perfect, are more effective at serving refugee communities as their work shares some principles and modalities of insurgent planning (Miraftab, 2009) .

Research findings show that the welcoming work by local and county governments is done in a way that ostracizes refugee communities, even as they have good intentions and invest resources. Further, a lack of collaboration with and leadership from refugees themselves prevents buy-in to the welcoming work. This results in perpetuation of a harmful rhetoric, with cities – especially rust belt cities in need of retaining population – seeing refugees as a way of “saving” or “revitalizing” their cities, rather than being places where refugees have the tools and support to flourish in their new homes. I outline a way forward through a collaborative approach to resettlement that can also weather changes in political views.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Much dialogue around resettlement views the final resettlement country as a refuge, yet scholars describe resettlement “as a broken promise, not an impossible one” (Tang, 2015, p. 19). For example, arrival in the United States (U.S.) does not mean resettlement goals are achieved, as refugee’s lives can still be in upheaval, as refugees receive federal resettlement services for only ninety days, an insufficient amount of time to adjust to a new home (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.).¹ Limited resettlement services and an “...urban reality characterized by racialized geographic enclosure, displacement from formal labor markets, unrelenting poverty, and the criminalization of daily life...” all contribute to compounding challenges that confront refugees (Tang, 2015, p. 5).

As the U.S. has remained one of the top² countries to resettle refugees worldwide, understanding how effective the federal resettlement system is, and the roles of different actors in that process, is crucial for amending the program to support the success and wellbeing of refugees. Upon arrival to resettlement cities, officially sanctioned local non-profit agencies (LRAs), funded by the U.S. State Department’s Reception and Placement Program, administer resettlement services (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). LRAs can seek out additional funding, but much of it can only be used to serve refugees that have been in the country five years or less (Office of Refugee Resettlement, n.d.). The characteristics of cities where refugees

¹ The ninety-day period can extend to eight months depending on the type of resettlement package families choose to be a part of. Even if they decide to extend the amount of time, the same financial package is provided.

² The U.S. was once the top resettlement country, but after cuts in refugee admissions made by former President Trump, Canada surpassed the U.S. in terms of number of refugees resettled (Norman, 2019).

are settled and amenities available (such as the current housing market, transportation systems, and the regional political climate) take on an even more important role because of the insufficiencies in the federally-funded resettlement program. Because of this, local and county governments (LCGs) are one of the crucial players in resettlement, yet they do not have a formal role. I argue that LCGs too often assume that LRAs are fully meeting the needs of refugees, which results in refugees self-organizing through the work of refugee-led community organizations (RCOs) that receive limited support or recognition.

Unlike individuals that arrive in the U.S. under other immigration statuses like labor migrants, immigrants, and asylees, national and local resettlement agencies decide the geographic location to place people with refugee status. Refugees have been resettled in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico, yet little is known about how resettlement outcomes differ in dissimilar contexts, and the extent to which the unique mix of physical, economic and social environments that vary across host communities influence refugee outcomes. Historically, refugees were resettled in traditional immigrant gateways like New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles, but in recent years immigrant gateways have changed, and refugees are often resettled in smaller metropolitan areas (Singer, 2004; Singer & Wilson, 2006a). This locational decision can depend on family connections and availability of specialized services (Singer & Wilson, 2006b), but is often determined based on whether LRAs have immediate capacity to administer resettlement services. Additionally, over the past decade and a half, rust belt cities, and other cities that have lost population and suffered from austerity urbanism (i.e. deep cuts to the public sector and city infrastructure services, etc.) have increasingly tried to attract migrants – and refugees – to help restore these cities (Gonzalez Benson et al., 2022; Pottie-Sherman, 2018). These cities subsequently experience further growth

through secondary migration, as refugees that initially settled in one location move to cities with large populations of refugees from the same ethnic group or places with employment opportunities.

Meeting the needs of refugee residents brings various challenges for municipal and county governments. Language barriers, a potential distrust of government, cultural differences, and a lack of public sector resources can all contribute to a mismatch in the services available in a given city and the needs of diverse refugee populations. Scholars have studied how municipal immigration offices and urban planners interact (Harwood, 2022), but we have yet to understand how effective the work that these offices engage in is. Research shows how RCOs often fill the governance gaps of refugees to meet many needs of their communities (Allen & Slotterback, 2021; Gonzalez Benson, 2020; Gonzalez Benson & Pimentel Walker, 2021; Piacentini, 2015), but missing from the literature is how RCOs and LCGs interact with one another.

This research examines the gaps in services refugees experience in two rust belt cities and their surrounding counties where government leaders have advocated to receive large populations of refugees: Erie County, New York (where Buffalo is located) and Kent County, Michigan (where Grand Rapids is located) (Licastro, 2019; Mirand, 2022; Stateside Staff, 2015; Vande Bunte, 2015). Utilizing a qualitative research approach, I examine the governance gaps in U.S. refugee resettlement at the local level, and the role that urban planning offices play in contributing to or addressing the challenges that refugees experience. My research findings are organized around three main sub-questions: First, how do city comprehensive plans and welcome plans address the needs of refugees, if at all?; secondly, how do local and county governments engage and interact with other refugee support organizations, both formal and informal?; and thirdly, how is the official welcoming work that local and county governments

engage in and other public-sector support offered to refugees perceived and experienced by refugees? How does this compare to the unofficial support offered by grassroots groups?

Findings from this research are useful for planners, policymakers, LRAs, and the larger U.S. resettlement program to create a more effective network of support for refugees and a more holistic resettlement program. The knowledge generated also contributes to literature on planning for the multicultural city, informing how planners can appropriately and effectively engage refugee communities, fostering greater inclusion in urban governance.

A brief history of planning and planning for refugees

The goals and approaches that have characterized the field of urban planning have changed over the years, from being a primarily top-down, technical discipline that largely focused on architecture and urban design, to addressing a broader swath of urban issues and using more holistic and inclusive planning processes. Today, urban planning routinely uses participatory approaches and attempts to meet the needs of diverse populations, yet I argue that refugees have largely been left out of its purview. In this section, I offer a brief history of the field of planning to place refugee resettlement in its broader, urban planning context, and I introduce a tool that planners may use to foster more inclusive communities: the welcome plan.

A change in perspective: Planning shifts from a top-down approach

Traditionally, the field of urban planning relied on geographic models, examining human need through a spatial context (Kochtitzky et al., 2006). For over a century, planners operated largely as the experts, utilizing a top-down, technical approach. Planners – then and now – utilize comprehensive plans as a way to create a long-term vision for their communities. In the 1950s, the federal government funded expert-driven urban renewal and slum clearance projects,

displacing the urban poor for redevelopment plans, many of which did not materialize. By the 1960s, however, as an awareness of the social and economic destruction that was caused by urban renewal emerged, planners began to shift their approach. Planners began to think about their work as responsive to community need, working in a way that is inclusive and engaging of community members, and opening up planning decision-making processes to the public (Forester, 1994). Advocacy planning was born, a form of activist planning where the formal planner engages with civil society, rather than deciding what is best for a community without their input (Sager, 2022). Over the past sixty years other approaches have built on advocacy planning in an effort to both be responsive to community demands and ensure adequate representation. As austerity measures of the 1980s and 1990s resulted in a loss of funding for governments, the definition of who is a planner has also expanded.

While advocacy planning aims or intends to gather input from those that planning serves, especially vulnerable populations, the planning profession still routinely overlooks and marginalizes many populations (Kochtitzky et al., 2006). Multicultural planning emerged in the 1990s as a more proactive attempt to meet the needs of diverse groups (Sandercock, 1998), discussed more comprehensively in Chapter 2. This approach aims to make planning more inclusive, responsive, and engaging; for immigrant populations, welcome plans are one way that planners can operationalize the idea of multicultural planning, beyond the routine (and often mandated) comprehensive plans that planners write.

Creating welcoming communities for new Americans

While the field of planning has evolved over the decades to with the aim of meeting the needs of more diverse populations, one blind spot that remains is refugee populations. Welcome

plans - typically intended for immigrants or new Americans in general, not just refugees,³ -- bring various stakeholders together to outline a vision, goals, and recommendations for new American populations in a specific location. These plans, however, are still not readily used, and are often not led by urban planners themselves. However, according to the national non-profits Welcoming America and the American Integration Council, as of this writing, only 28 cities or counties across the country have received funding and technical assistance from these organizations in writing a welcome plan (though it may be possible that other counties or municipalities have developed welcome plans published without support from these entities) (American Immigration Council & Welcoming America, n.d.). Empirical analysis about how these plans have been used by urban planners is limited (Harwood, 2022).

Welcome Plans can be a venue for collaboration among different entities, and show a dedication to serving refugee (and other new American) populations. They also have the potential of engaging refugees in identifying the mix of needs that may be overlooked in comprehensive plans. Yet, these plans can also fall short in many ways. While some studies have examined welcome plans (Harwood, 2022), there remains a lack of empirical data about how these plans support refugee integration and about the extent to which the welcome plans include refugees in the first place. Sometimes the text comes off as trying to convince native-born residents to accept refugee populations (focusing on the economic contributions of refugees), rather than genuinely supporting refugees. Additionally, welcome plans can perpetuate a narrative of refugees and immigrants as drivers of economic revitalization, especially in cities and regions that have experienced population loss and downscaling (Pottie-Sherman, 2018). This

³ While this research focuses on refugees, because welcome plans are generally for a broader population of people with varying immigration statuses, an example is used in the findings that refer to other immigrant groups (from a LatinX background) that most likely did not come to the U.S. with refugee status. This example is used, as it demonstrates how data from the plan were analyzed and incorporated into the plan.

reinforces the economic austerity-angle that cities and planners may be operating under, viewing an influx of refugees as a “tool” for saving cities that have been subject to downscaling.

The remainder of the introduction outlines how refugee resettlement works in the U.S., as an understanding of that is crucial to comprehending the collaborating players in resettlement: the parameters of the federal resettlement program, demographics of recent refugees to the U.S., and geographic placement of refugees.

Refugee resettlement in the U.S.

Below I outline what the resettlement program in the U.S. looks like: the history of the program, how the resettlement program works, the geographic placement of refugees, the local impacts of the program, and local involvement in the program. This framing helps to understand the programmatic parameters and limitations that institutions and organizations work within.

Who is a refugee?

Refugees are people who have been forced to flee their country to escape persecution, violence, or war (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017). The number of people fleeing dangerous situations exceeded 70 million in 2018, the highest level that UNHCR has seen in many decades, and over 2 million need to be resettled to final countries in 2023 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023). As many refugees are unable to return to their home countries or integrate into second countries, one solution is resettlement to a country willing to accept them. Resettlement “is a life-saving tool to ensure the protection of those most at risk or with specific needs that cannot be addressed in the country where they have sought protection” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019). Few people are granted this opportunity: in 2018 less than one percent of those with refugee status were resettled

outside of their asylum country (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). While few have been granted refugee status in the past, the climate crises, increase in war and persecution, and extreme drought resulting in hunger will surely increase the number of displaced people and refugees worldwide (Podesta, 2019; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019), thereby also increasing the need for final-country resettlement.

Despite the widespread use of the term “refugee”, this term can be problematic. “Refugee” refers to a certain visa status, rather than a static marker of a person’s identity. Still, people are often called refugees for many years after arriving in the U.S. How long should someone be considered a refugee? Is it just during the time in which they are a client of a resettlement agency, or until they receive a green card or citizenship (if they decide to pursue that route)? Some have reported that the term can be traumatic, as it brings the person back to a very challenging time of their life. Some prefer the term “new American” instead of “refugee.” But, when does a person become an “American” rather than a “new American”? Furthermore, immigrants who enter the U.S. via other means are also referred to as new Americans. Despite these problems, for the purpose of this study I utilize the term refugee to refer to people that arrive in the U.S. through the official U.S. resettlement program. I forgo the term “new American”, as it encompasses people with many different immigration statuses, and the scope of this study focuses on the population that is eligible for a certain set of services.

History of resettlement in the U.S.

Refugee resettlement began in the U.S. in 1945 when President Truman allowed ‘welfare organizations’ to sponsor refugees, as long as they covered the financial costs and a relative was living in the U.S. (Mayda, 2017). Subsequent acts in support of refugees - mostly persons fleeing communist countries - were enacted over the next 30 years. As a result of the Vietnam War, an

interagency task force was set up to resettle hundreds of thousands of people from Southeast Asia (Mayda, 2017). Chaos⁴ ensued from the lack of coordination; as a result, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which is what refugee resettlement operates under today (Mayda, 2017). With the Refugee Act of 1980, the U.S. “...adopted the U.N. definition of a refugee, standardized resettlement services for refugees and, finally, established into law the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), an office within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services” (Mayda, 2017, p. 8).

How the U.S. resettlement program works

Resettlement is a long and arduous process that often takes many years. I outline the process of coming to the U.S. as a refugee and conclude with descriptions of the local involvement and local impact of refugees since they, unlike other immigrants, have predetermined destinations in the U.S.

Demographics of refugee arrivals

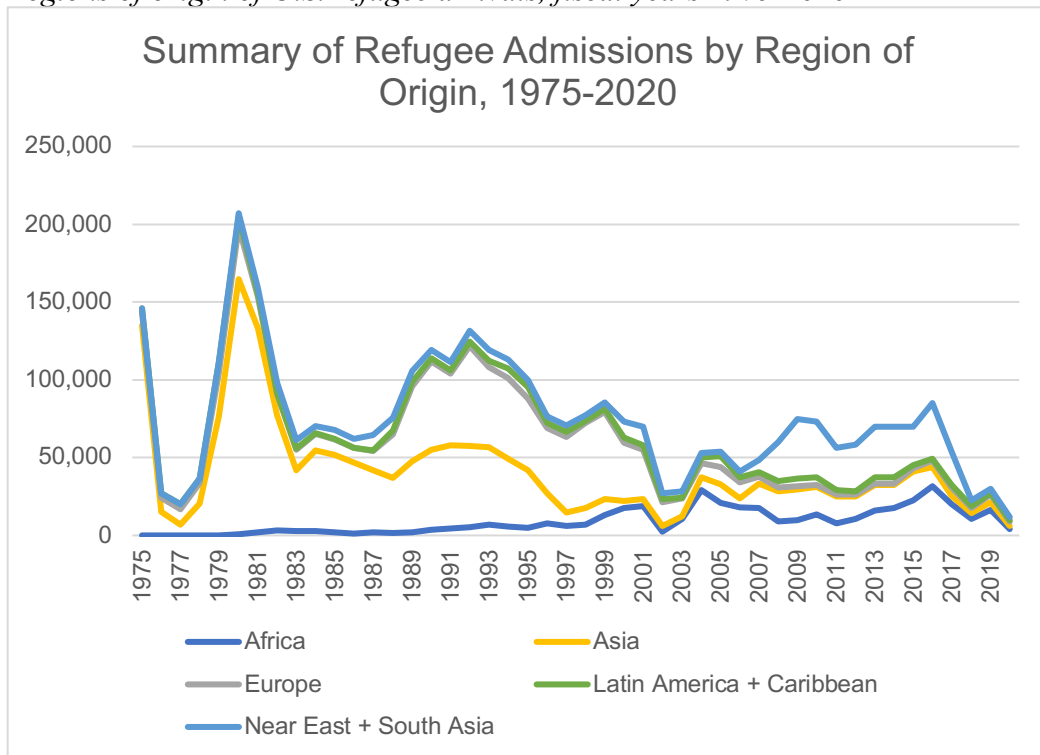
Refugees in the U.S. come from all over the world, with their country of origin changing over time. In 2000, most refugees came from Europe and Africa, but by 2010 most refugees originated in South Asia (Lai, 2021). In 2020, almost 60% of refugees came from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burma, and Ukraine (Lai, 2021). Depending on where they come from and the circumstances of their departure from their home country, refugees may either move to a designated refugee camp, but over two-thirds live in urban areas (UNHCR, 2009). While data are

⁴ In 1951 the United Nations adopted the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, thus creating a definition for those with refugee status. While the goal of the Convention was to protect human rights, the U.S. used it to enforce their anticommunist agenda, selectively admitting refugees only from communist countries (Tang, 2015, p. 37). No formal office existed to help with resettlement, so in 1980, the Refugee Act was signed into law by President Carter, amending immigrant legislation. In addition to increasing the number of refugees admitted to the U.S., the Act also aligned U.S. law with that of the UN’s Protocol on the Status of Refugees and established the Office of Refugee Resettlement to oversee the process of resettlement (Tang, 2015, p. 38).

not available regarding how long refugees that are resettled in a final country spend in interim counties, on average, it is believed that they spend about five years in an interim country (Devictor, 2019). Between 2010 and 2020, 36% of resettled refugees were men (age 15 and older), 33% were women (15 and older), and 31% were children (14 and under) (Lai, 2021).

Figure 1

Regions of origin of U.S. refugee arrivals, fiscal years 1975-2020



Source: (Office of Admissions - Refugee Processing Center, 2020)

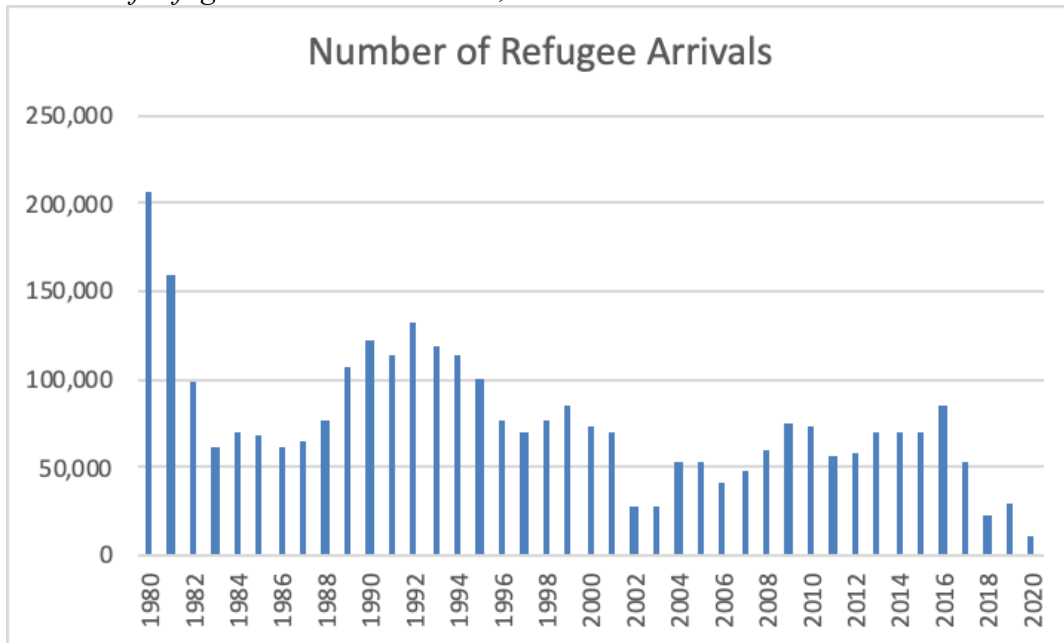
Presidential determinants: Creating instability for the program

Each fiscal year, the U.S. president sets a threshold for the number of refugees that will be resettled in the United States, but the number actually resettled is typically lower than this (U.S. GAO, 2012). Historically, around 80,000 refugees have been resettled in the country each year. While the Trump administration’s policies brought admissions of refugees to an all-time low of 15,000, President Joe Biden raised the admissions number to 125,000 refugees for the 2021-2022 fiscal year (Amos, 2020). The fluctuation in resettlement numbers poses challenges to

the structure of the resettlement program, as LRAs cannot engage in long-term planning, and as a result of the slash in arrivals during the Trump administration, over 100 local resettlement agencies had to close their doors (Watson, 2021). Many programs needed to be rebuilt when President Biden increased resettlement numbers (Watson, 2021).

Figure 2

Number of refugee arrivals in the U.S., 1980 – 2020



Source: (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, n.d.)

The complex process of coming to the U.S.

The resettlement process for refugees coming into the U.S. can take years. Protracted refugee situations are complex, and those with refugee status can live in asylum countries for decades before moving to a final resettlement country. Because this research focuses on the refugee experience once refugees arrive in their final resettlement country, I briefly outline the process of resettlement prior to arrival.

First, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) must grant refugee status to individuals and families. To be referred for resettlement in the U.S., a U.S. embassy or a trained nongovernmental organization compiles a case (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and

Migration, n.d.). Alternatively, if an applicant has a close relative already in the U.S., they do not need a referral (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, n.d.). Once the application is submitted, Resettlement Support Centers (RSCs) compile information about the applicant for a security screening, interview, and adjudication by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, n.d.). A USCIS officer reviews the information and conducts an interview, determining whether the person is classified as a refugee (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, n.d.). If USCIS conditionally approves the applicant for resettlement in the U.S., the RSC prepares the cases for health screenings (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, n.d.). Additionally, the RSC obtains “sponsorship assurance” from a resettlement agency in the U.S., that will deliver Reception and Placement (R&P) services upon arrival (funded by PRM) (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, n.d.). Once complete, the case is referred to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to organize transportation to the U.S. (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, n.d.). Transportation is paid for by the Department of Transportation in the form of an interest free loan; refugees are expected to pay it back once they have been in the country for six months (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, n.d.).

Prior to arrival in the U.S., refugees receive a copy of “Welcome to the United States”, a book aimed at providing cultural orientation prior to arrival (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, n.d.). While the book is available in various languages (Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange, n.d.), this presumes that refugees are literate. At certain destinations throughout the world, the Department of State hosts pre-departure orientations (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, n.d.). Additionally, a mobile application is available that provides a cultural orientation (Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, n.d.).

Once refugees are accepted in the U.S. refugee system, the U.S. Department of State consults and contracts with the nine national voluntary resettlement agencies (also referred to as VOLAGS) for geographic placement and provision of refugee services. Funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), VOLAGS work with their LRAs to administer resettlement services. There are both faith-based and non-faith based organizations, with nine in total: Church World Service, Ethiopian Community Development Council, Episcopal Migration Ministries, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, International Rescue Committee, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and World Relief Corporation (Office of Refugee Resettlement, n.d.). Refugees are first assigned to a VOLAG, and then subsequently the VOLAG assigns them to a LRA (U.S. GAO, 2012). The PRM funds the resettlement of refugees for the initial 90 days (LRAs can ask for an extension of up to eight months, but they do not receive any additional funds); local affiliates receive \$2,275, per refugee from PRM (Jordan, 2023). The majority must be used to directly support refugee clients, but a portion can be used for staffing and infrastructure costs (Bruno, 2017). Finally, the ORR, which is located within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), funds a variety of social services including cash and medical assistance (U.S. GAO, 2012).

The geographic placement of refugees in the U.S.

Annually, VOLAGS compile proposals for approval by PRM, coordinating with their affiliate LRAs to determine capacity (U.S. GAO, 2012, p. 11). Once slated to come to the U.S., VOLAGS determine what city their clients will be resettled in through a weekly meeting of all the VOLAGS. Resettlement historically occurred in traditional immigrant gateways like New York City and Los Angeles because these cities were expected to have the “service infrastructure

required to respond to the needs of specific and diverse refugee groups” (Okour, 2019, p. 15). Starting in the 1990s, the Office of Refugee Resettlement launched a Preferred Communities Program, which shifted resettlement to places that may have been non-traditional for refugees, but had lower living costs and low rates of unemployment (Okour, 2019; Singer & Wilson, 2006a). Additionally, if the incoming refugee has a family tie in a U.S. city, VOLAGs work to ensure that they will be resettled in that city (Singer & Wilson, 2006a). A person’s educational and employment history may also be taken into consideration. For example, someone who has a rural background and no education will most likely not be resettled in the Washington DC metro area due to the high cost of living.

Because it takes years to develop a resettlement program, the same communities are often resettling refugees year after year (U.S. GAO, 2012, p. 12). In writing their annual proposals to PRM, the VOLAGS propose a number of refugees to be resettled with each of their local affiliates (U.S. GAO, 2012, p. 11). Local affiliates report to the national VOLAGS both their own capacity and the capacity of the surrounding community in resettling refugees (U.S. GAO, 2012). How community capacity is defined is up to the local affiliates to discern; in the GAO report from 2012, the authors note that different ways that local affiliates evaluate their capacity for resettling refugees. Some prioritize the surrounding communities (such as employment rates, housing availability, and healthcare options) while others prioritize the capacity and previous success of the LRA (U.S. GAO, 2012, p. 11). Scholars have found that a lottery effect based on state placement – which suggests that resettlement outcomes are better in states with more resettlement services – is not as pronounced as once posited, meaning that the location people are resettled in is not as impactful as once expected (Fix et al., 2017). Even though VOLAGS look to their LRAs to notify them of capacity, they ultimately have the capability to adjust the numbers

that they report to PRM. And because funding is tied to the number of incoming refugees, LRAs are often motivated to continue resettling refugees in order to keep the operations going.

A few states, including New York (petitioned by LRAs), provided funding to protect the network of LRAs when resettlement numbers were slashed during the Trump administration (Dewey, n.d.). While local and state government officials may voice their opinions on whether they do or do not want refugees to move to their jurisdictions, they do not have any power to impact that. Governors, such as Greg Abbott of Texas, have unsuccessfully attempted to shut down the resettlement program in Texas (Kanno-Youngs, 2020).

Finally, refugees are able to move freely once they are in the U.S. Many relocate to cities where there are others from their same country of origin. Between 2010 and 2020 the following percentages of refugees were resettled in the following states: Texas (10%), California (9%), New York (6%), Michigan (5%), Arizona (4%), Washington (4%), Florida (4%), Ohio (4%), Pennsylvania (4%) and Georgia (4%) (Monin et al., 2021). The remaining 45% of refugees were resettled in other states, with no more than 4% per state (Monin et al., 2021).

The impacts of refugees on local communities

Incoming refugees both benefit and strain communities. In a government report, authors found that refugees stimulate the economy, “bring new perspectives and customs”, attract international business, contribute to the social security system, and stabilize population decline (U.S. GAO, 2012, pp. 17–18). On the other hand, refugees can put a strain on local communities' services and resources, such as school districts, health care providers, and other social services (U.S. GAO, 2012, p. 18). For localities that have language access programs, the cost of interpreters can be high. The ORR offers discretionary grants to school districts that serve large numbers of refugee students (U.S. GAO, 2012, p. 18). Some schools do not know about

available funds, do not have the capacity to apply for them, or have a small number of refugee students (U.S. GAO, 2012, p. 19). Furthermore, because refugee students may be arriving with different educational backgrounds, they may lower the school's performance outcomes (U.S. GAO, 2012, p. 19).

The limited federal funding for resettlement does not often allow refugees to receive the needed support to be independent at the end of the three month period (again, which may be extended with no additional financial support to eight months), so many utilize local resources after this point, such as food pantries, homeless shelters, and other social services (U.S. GAO, 2012). While the federal government makes decisions about immigration, they do not bear the full costs of this decision - it often falls on localities (Xi, 2017, p. 1231). On the other hand, while refugees may need to utilize more resources when they first arrive, much research shows the positive impact and contributions of refugees on their host communities by providing significant economic benefits, revitalizing neighborhoods, and contributing socially and culturally (Bahar, 2018; Legrain, n.d.; National Immigration Forum, 2018).

Research settings

To examine the governance gaps in U.S. refugee resettlement at the local level, and the role that urban planning offices play in contributing to or addressing the challenges that refugees experience, I carried out a comparative case study of Kent County, Michigan, and Erie County, New York (along with the major cities in these counties, Grand Rapids and Buffalo, respectively) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Kent County, Michigan and Erie County, New York



Kent County has a thriving industrial center, while Erie County has a post-industrial economy. Between 2012 and 2016, 3,709 refugees were resettled in Kent County and 7,332 were resettled in Erie County⁵ (P. Bose, n.d.). In 2021, about 8% and over 7% of residents in Kent and Erie Counties were foreign-born, respectively. See Table 1 for the population change in both counties over time.

Table 1

Population change in Erie and Kent Counties, 1970-2022

Population	Year		
	1970 (1970 Decennial Census)	2000 (2000 Decennial Census)	2021 (ACS 5-year estimates)

⁵ This does not account for refugees that may have moved there voluntarily after being resettled in another county in the U.S. (referred to as secondary migration).

Total Population	Erie County	1,113,491	100.00%	950,265	100.00%	949,715	100.00%
	Kent County	411,044	100.00%	574,335	100.00%	654,958	100.00%
Native-born	Erie County	1,046,489	93.98%	877,379	92.33%	889,871	93.70%
	Kent County	395,331	96.12%	536,181	93.36%	600,703	91.72%
Foreign-born	Erie County	67,002	6.02%	42,886	4.51%	68,844	7.25%
	Kent County	15,713	3.82%	38,154	6.64%	54,255	8.28%

Source: (Manson et al., 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021)

Kent County, Michigan

Kent County, located in the Western part of Michigan, is home to just over 650,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Many refugees in Kent County live in the Cities of Kentwood or Grand Rapids, and one resettlement agency is located in each city. Grand Rapids is the county seat and second largest city in Michigan after Detroit. Located along the Grand River about 25 miles from Lake Michigan, Grand Rapids is an industrial city known for its manufacturing plants. Unlike Buffalo, Grand Rapids has not experienced debilitating population decline: in 1950 the population was just over 176,000, and by 2020 it was just under 200,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1950, 2020). Grand Rapids is a pre-emerging immigrant gateway: it had low percentages of foreign-born residents during the 20th century, but higher growth rates in the 1990s (Singer, 2004).

Unlike in Southeast Michigan, which is where refugees from Iraq and Iran have primarily been resettled, refugees in Kent County come from all over the world. In fiscal year 2020, the top

five countries of origin and the numbers of refugees resettled from there in Michigan⁶ were the Democratic Republic of the Congo (202), Iraq (103), Afghanistan (54), Burma (38), and Eritrea (25) (Office of Admissions - Refugee Processing Center, 2020). In fiscal year 2023, the top countries of origin for refugees resettling in Michigan were the Democratic Republic of the Congo (169), Iraq (30), Burma (29), Afghanistan (22), and El Salvador (7) (Refugee Processing Center, 2023).

In Michigan, state refugee services are housed in the Office of Global Michigan, which is located in Detroit. Local affiliates of VOLAGS administer services to refugees. Refugees arriving in Grand Rapids are resettled either by Samaritas or Bethany Christian Services. Other organizations have also emerged that largely support the refugee population including Treetops Collective, a group that supports refugee women. Numerous RCOs exist.

Kent County was awarded a Gateways for Growth Strategic Planning Award which supported the creation of the Kent County Welcome Plan, published in 2020. While a collaborative effort, this work is led by the county, housed in the Office of Inclusion. No office exists at the county or city levels that solely supports refugee or new American communities. A refugee advisory council has been formed at the state level, but is in its early stages of development. Kent County and Grand Rapids are both part of the non-profit Welcoming America's Welcoming Network, "both a network and a movement, driven by the conviction that communities make better decisions when residents of all backgrounds, identities, and perspectives are meaningfully engaged" (Welcoming America, n.d.-c). At this time neither Grand Rapids or Kent County is Certified Welcoming by Welcoming America, which is a more

⁶ Data on country of origin are only available at the state level.

formal designation showing that policies and programs are in place to support immigrants (Welcoming America, n.d.-a).

Numerous challenges exist for refugees in Kent County. Similar to Buffalo, the cold winters may be an adjustment for many refugees. Jobs that many refugees take upon arrival, including in manufacturing, are outside the city and not easily reachable by public transportation. A dearth of housing options exists, and for large families it can be especially difficult to secure affordable housing. Still, there are many opportunities for refugees in Kent County. Manufacturing jobs are available, and companies are ready and willing to work with populations who may not have English language proficiency. Additionally, the large existing community of refugees means that there are many supports in place through RCOs and religious institutions.

Kent County made national news in 2022 due to the tragic killing of Patrick Lyoya, a 26-year-old refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo by a Grand Rapids Police Department officer, Christopher Schurr. Lyoya, along with his family, moved to the U.S. in 2014, after escaping war in the Congo and spending much of his childhood in a refugee camp in Malawi. The family sought asylum in the U.S. to flee violence and start a new life. Entering adulthood when arriving in the U.S., Lyoya went to work to help his family make ends meet (Breslow, 2022). He worked a variety of jobs, including at an auto manufacturing plant, a turkey farm, and at an appliance store (Breslow, 2022). Lyoya had two young daughters (Breslow, 2022).

Recordings of the incident, which occurred in the morning, show that Lyoya was pulled over and exited the vehicle. He did not immediately attempt to flee the scene. Eventually, there was a brief foot chase before Schurr tried and failed to use a taser, then proceeded to shoot Lyoya in the back of the head while he held him face down on the ground (Breslow, 2022). A

passenger remained in the car, a friend of Lyoya's that he was driving to work. Lyoya's killing highlights how many refugees are fleeing violence in their home countries, but then confront a deeply anti-Black rhetoric in the U.S. that results in violence in their new homes, as well as a fear of police, as will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Erie County, New York

Erie County is located in the Western portion of New York State, bordering Lake Erie. The county is largely urban and suburban, with more rural counties surrounding it. In 2020, just under one million people lived in the county, with about a quarter of the population residing in the city of Buffalo, where the majority of refugees in the county live, and where the resettlement agencies are located.

Buffalo is the second largest city in the state, and the county seat. Bordering Canada and Lake Erie and at the head of the Niagara River, Buffalo is a postindustrial city. At the beginning of the 20th century, Buffalo was the eighth largest city in the country. Due to its location at the Western end of the Erie Canal, Buffalo connected the Eastern seaboard to grains transported from the plains. In the early 1900s, many immigrants found a home in Buffalo due to employment opportunities in steel and grain mills.

By 1950, the city's population had reached over 580,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1950). Due to closure of steel mills and the opening of the Saint Lawrence Seaway, thus making the Erie Canal obsolete, population decline commenced. Racial redlining caused businesses to close and people to leave the city for the suburbs. By 2000, the population was just over 290,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In recent years, Buffalo has begun to experience a resurgence, with a slight population increase which is sometimes attributed to the influx of refugees (Rose, 2015).

Buffalo is characterized as a former gateway: a city that had a high percentage of foreign-born individuals in the early 1900s, with a drop off after that (Singer, 2004).

Refugees from all over the world are resettled in Buffalo, but data are only available at the state level for country of origin. In fiscal year 2020, the top five countries of origin and the numbers of refugees resettled from there in New York State were Eritrea (37), Syria (45), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (115), Ukraine (121), and Burma (131) (Office of Admissions - Refugee Processing Center, 2020). In fiscal year 2023, the top countries of origin for refugees resettling in New York State were Guatemala (45), Colombia (61), Afghanistan (77), Burma (122), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (175) (Refugee Processing Center, 2023).

Refugee Services, which is located within the State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, implements refugee services at the state level in New York (NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, n.d.). Local affiliates of VOLAGS administer services to refugees. In Buffalo, there are four affiliates: Journey's End Refugee Services, Jewish Family Services, Catholic Charities, and the International Institute of Buffalo. Additional organizations across a range of sectors also exist to support the refugee community. In healthcare, examples include Jericho Road Community Health Center and Best Self Behavioral Health. Stitch Buffalo and the West Side Bazaar support entrepreneurial efforts of refugees. Other organizations, such as Grassroots Gardens of Western New York, help residents start community gardens in the city. While they intend to serve refugees, they may struggle to reach this community because of language barriers. Additionally, a range of refugee-run organizations exist.

In Buffalo, an Office of New Americans (ONA) was established at the city level in 2016. The ONA initially resided in the city's law department, and works as a liaison between refugee

and immigrant communities, the city, and other organizations to understand how to best serve this community (City of Buffalo, n.d.). The ONA now resides in the Office of Diversity, Opportunity and Inclusion. At the county level, no office exists that represents refugee and new American communities, but in 2016 Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz called for the creation of a New Americans Advisory Committee as part of his administration's "Initiatives for a Strong Community" (Erie County, 2016). It is unclear whether this committee is still functioning. The City of Buffalo is part of Welcoming America's Welcoming Network, but they are not Certified Welcoming (Welcoming America, n.d.-c).

In an effort to protect the existing structure of the resettlement program, in 2017 New York State initiated the New York State Enhanced Services to Refugees Program (NYSERP) (New York for Refugees et al., 2021). This program, the first of its kind in the country, provided state funds to support refugee integration across the state. Oregon also started a program providing state support for refugees, and at the time of this writing, advocates in California are working towards a similar program (New York for Refugees et al., 2021). Due to support from NYSERP funding, only one resettlement agency across the state has closed its doors (New York for Refugees et al., 2021). Not only does NYSERP funding help maintain the existing resettlement structure, but it provides funding for resettlement agencies to support services beyond the initial 90-day resettlement period.

Refugees in Buffalo face various challenges. As many refugees come from warmer climates, the cold weather may be an adjustment. Refugees may face harmful environmental exposures, such as lead in the older housing stock or in soils they may garden in, due to environmental racism and lack of funding for lead abatement (Erie County Department of Health, 2018). While Buffalo is surrounded by various waterways and some refugees may use

them for fish sources, these are also contaminated (Food Systems Planning and Healthy Communities Lab, 2015). In the initial orientation upon arrival in Buffalo, refugees are warned against regularly consuming fish from these waterways, but this is a time when a lot of information is shared. In previous research, refugees in Buffalo report making fish paste from fish caught here and selling to refugees across the state (Judelsohn et al., 2017). Transportation can also be a challenge, both in the limited public transit options, and limited English language skills that make using public transportation difficult (Okour, 2019). Additionally, Buffalo has one of the highest poverty rates: almost one-third of residents live below the poverty line, and this is even higher for children (Scheer, 2021). Economic opportunities are limited, and the schools in the Buffalo Public School district typically underperform and are in a lottery system, making it difficult to navigate. Still, many opportunities exist for refugees in Buffalo due to the low cost of living and the existing refugee community here.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

To examine the governance gaps in U.S. refugee resettlement at the local level and the role that urban planning offices play in contributing to or addressing the challenges that refugees experience, I draw on four bodies of literature: immigrant and refugee integration, austerity urbanism, planning for multicultural communities and insurgent planning, and previous research on the role of RCOs.

Before delving into the governance gaps that exist, it is first important to understand what the general goal is for refugees in the U.S., determined by the programs set up to assist them. While the ORR says it is to “achieve their full potential” (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2022), in practice, it is for refugees to achieve self-sufficiency (Refugee Act of 1980, 1980). One way to do this is through “integration” of refugees, which is a broad term often used but rarely defined; as such, the first part of this literature review is organized around how scholars define and critique integration, and how this concept is or is not imbued in the resettlement program. The second portion of the literature review synthesizes how scholars theorize the different actors in resettlement – LCGs and RCOs – and the ways that they do or do not engage with refugee populations. This section answers how planners have and can engage in multicultural communities, and how municipalities respond to austerity cuts through welcoming work. I then outline how the principles of insurgent planning can offer a more holistic approach to welcoming work, whether applied by planners or non-planners. I conclude this section with an overview of the type of community engaged work that RCOs are involved in.

Integration in resettlement

The idea that refugees (and immigrants more broadly) should strive to be “integrated” into U.S. society is a common trope, but the use of the term “integration” and its understanding has changed over the past forty years as scholars have (re)defined and critiqued the term. In this section, I illustrate how the term integration was initially used as a more holistic and sensitive approach to explain how immigrants and refugees can adapt to a new home, as integration both allows for maintaining one's culture while experiencing and being welcomed into a new one (Berry, 1997). I then introduce a more nuanced conceptual framework that scholars developed, outlining various domains of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). I conclude the chapter by outlining the critiques of the concept (Favell, 2022; Schinkel, 2018), and describing other ways to consider and prioritize refugee outcomes. Understanding how integration is theorized and described is crucial when examining the refugee resettlement program, as the program is intended to promote integration among the clients served.

Defining integration

Berry (1997) developed a theoretical framework for adaptation of immigrants to their host society which includes four approaches: assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration (Xi, 2017). Assimilation occurs when the immigrant group does not maintain their cultural identity and instead chooses to solely assume the host country's culture (Berry, 1997). Alternatively, separation is when the immigrant group chooses to maintain their own culture and not adopt the host country's culture (Berry, 1997). Marginalization occurs when the immigrant remains isolated and does not engage with the local culture, and integration is when the immigrant both engages in “cultural maintenance” while participating in the culture and social network of their new home (Berry, 1997, p. 9).

Integration is considered to be the best approach to acculturation, and is defined as “...a maintaining of one’s original culture while engaging in daily interactions with other groups” (Berry, 1997; Robila, 2018, p. 2). While the concept of integration has been critiqued for various reasons outlined below (Strang & Ager, 2010), it is the one type of adaptation that requires a two-way process: both migrants and the host society have to be open to change and diversity (Gonzalez Benson, 2016, p. 20).

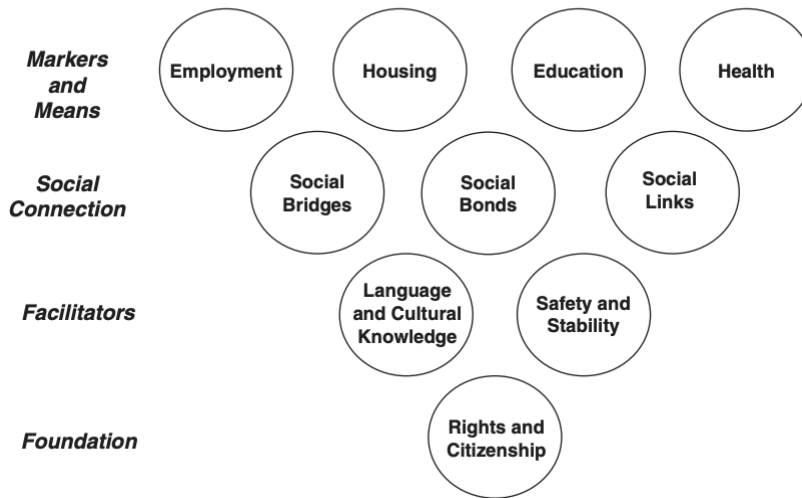
What impacts integration for refugees? In the U.S., where initial locational decisions are decided for the refugee client, one may think that the place a refugee is resettled can impact their integration experience. Yet, scholars have found that some key integration outcomes such as “employment, rates of underemployment, and incomes” do not vary across states when looking within refugee groups’ levels of integration and success in resettlement (Fix et al., 2017, p. 2). This narrow focus on employment outcomes, however, offers a limited understanding of the factors that may be affecting refugee outcomes (Ager & Strang, 2008). A broader view of resettlement - beyond employment outcomes - needs to be adopted for success.

In response to this limited view, Ager and Strang (2008) developed a more holistic conceptual framework to understand integration in refugee resettlement (see Figure 4), which has become an important guide and policy objective for refugee resettlement in other countries (Mulvey, 2013; Yi Cheung & Phillimore, 2013). Ager and Strang’s framework proposes that successful integration falls into four thematic areas, which include ten broad domains to characterize refugee outcomes (Ager & Strang, 2008). The four domains include “achievement and access across the sectors of employment, housing, education and health; assumptions and practice regarding citizenship and rights; processes of social connection within and between groups within the community; and structural barriers to such connection related to language,

culture and the local environment” (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 166). The authors found that community stability, language, cultural knowledge and safety and security fostered integration, and argue that a successful resettlement program provides services that address all of these domains (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Figure 4

A Conceptual Framework Defining Core Domains of Integration



Note: This figure was produced by Ager and Strang, published in 2008, summarizing the core domains of refugee integration. From “Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework,” by A. Ager and A. Strang, 2008, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21(2), p. 170.

As seen in this diagram, integration requires work from both refugees and the myriad entities that work with them. Measuring whether integration has or can be achieved is challenging, and while much depends on factors of a place, a refugee’s personal background and experience has an impact as well (Robila, 2018). Next, I outline how integration is included in the U.S. resettlement program.

Integration in the U.S. resettlement program

Unlike other immigrants that arrive in the U.S., refugees have access to a resettlement system that supports them upon arrival and, in theory, should support integration (Bloemraad, 2006; Hooper et al., 2016). Scholars have found, however, that a holistic view of integration does not permeate all aspects of the U.S. resettlement program and the time caseworkers have to work with their clients hinders implementation of effective resettlement policy (Fee, 2019). Researchers have also found that practitioners often consider integration in the U.S. to only be about economics and education, which differs from the more expansive view of state-led programs in European countries and Canada (Capps et al., 2015). While the ORR website states that the goal of the resettlement program is for participants to achieve their full potential in the U.S. (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2022), studies have shown that this is not what is prioritized in practice (Gonzalez Benson & Taccolini Panaggio, 2019). Caseworkers at local resettlement agencies are working with the confines of the federal resettlement program, which results in both insufficient financial support and much oversight (Darrow, 2018; Fee, 2019). Fee (2019) argues that “caseworkers rely on discretion as they put resettlement policy into practice,” and that caseworkers develop coping mechanisms to meet the dueling needs of their clients and funders (p.477). This is done by what Fee (2019) calls “paper integration,” “utiliz[ing] paperwork to separate policy from practice in order to protect themselves and appease their refugee clients” (p.477). This has occurred because of the bureaucratization of the resettlement program in the 1990s, resulting in competition for funding among non-profits and caseworkers viewing clients as caseloads, rather than whole people.

As a result of the structure of the changes in the federal resettlement program, scholars have found that the main goal of federally-funded local resettlement organizations - how success of both refugees and the non-profit organizations is measured - is to help clients gain

employment and financial independence as quickly as possible, focusing on what it means to “successfully” resettle, rather than long term integration (Frazier & van Riemsdijk, 2021). Other scholars have found that refugee resettlement processes in the U.S. center around “economic self-sufficiency by supporting quick employment and English language proficiency” (Okour 2019, pg. 39), which covers only two of ten of the domains that Ager and Strang outline (Ager & Strang, 2008).

In another study, scholars argue that this “work-first” approach to resettlement prioritizes helping refugees gain employment, rather than providing more comprehensive, holistic support (Gonzalez Benson & Taccolini Panaggio, 2019). In part, these official refugee resettlement agencies may be singularly focused on employment because they are restricted to working with clients for only eight months. Research on the network of unofficial support organizations that refugees also depend upon suggests that longer-term, holistic support is needed - beyond simply securing a low-income job. This is evident in the array of other organizations that have emerged to support refugees. Because refugees are expected to become economically self-sufficient so quickly, what scholars Frazier and van Riemsdijk (2021) call “refugee third-sector organizations” (RTSOs) emerge to “expand the offer of refuge in resettlement” (p. 3113).

Critiques of integration

While integration is the goal of many major resettlement programs in Europe and in the U.S., the concept has rightly received much criticism. Ager and Strang’s Conceptual Framework of Integration (2008) has been critiqued for the indicators they developed and scholars’ question whether the indicators are useful as standalone pieces of information. For example, Phillimore and Goodson (2008) examine the indicators that Ager and Strang include under “markers and means” (employment, housing, education, and health), pointing out that even if the indicators are

appropriate, measurement challenges exist (Ager & Strang, 2008; Phillimore & Goodson, 2008). Their study examined the markers and means of refugees in Birmingham, UK, finding that “often it is the interrelationship between indicators that is important and offers the greatest potential to deepen our understanding of integration experiences,” rather than indicators on their own (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008, p. 321). More comprehensive data collection efforts are needed to actually measure integration in a meaningful way (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008).

In addition to challenges around measurement, the field of migration studies is rather new. While the field is gaining traction, it is “fragmented [and] or uncommunicative across subfields” (Favell, 2022, p. 5). Because of this, universal understandings about key terms like integration do not exist. When conceptualizing integration, Favell argues that the process of making some residents (ones born there) “legal” while others are “illegal” (ones not born there) creates radical inequalities (Favell, 2022, p. 6). Favell reflects on the issues with institutionalized immigrant integration:

In this way, a significant part of routine migration studies invariably assumes who are the ‘natives’ and who are the ‘immigrants’ who need ‘integrating’, and that given national borders, territories, states and societies and their international hierarchy, are already settled terms, rather than something that needs explaining. (Favell, 2022, p. 6)

Once this assumption is made, “integration is something reserved for a particular kind of sanctioned, disadvantaged ‘immigrants’ who become a symbolic focus of the ongoing ‘inclusive’ and ‘diverse’ nation-building project” (Favell, 2022, p. 13). Favell emphasizes the problematic use of this term, solely reserved for populations that a host community wants to use both as a tool to diversify, while expecting them to conform to the norms of society.

Schnikel (2018) argues that immigrant integration research occurs under “failed multiculturalism” and that the use of this term in social science research continues to propagate the idea of the migrant other (Schinkel, 2018, p. 1). Schinkel outlines the different ways that the concept of immigrant integration in research is problematic:

...integration ceases to be a property of a social whole, and becomes individualized by turning into a property of individual people, such as migrants, their children, unemployed persons, or convicted criminals. In other words, in conventional integration research, individuals can be integrated in various degrees. But this individualization of integration is entirely without the theoretical underpinnings. Instead, it rests on commonsensical notions of ‘society’ and its individual ‘members’ and on the historically particular plausibility of the individualist (neo)liberal assumptions of this society as consisting of individual members to whom any ‘misfit’ between the two can be one-sidedly attributed. ‘Integration’ thus changes from a system state to a state of being of an individual. Lack of immigrant integration thus turns out to have to do with the being of immigrants, and the resulting picture of course ends up pitting ‘society’ over against individuals that are racialized in particular ways, because in order for their being to affect their integration, that being must be somehow problematic. (Schinkel, 2018, p. 3)

Schinkel’s point - that integration becomes morphed into the state of being of a person - highlights the importance of a strong, supportive resettlement system. This critique of integration is warranted, especially in the U.S., where individualism is fostered and refugees are expected to become self-sufficient quickly, placing the onus on the immigrant to become “integrated”. Furthermore, whichever entity is providing services to the refugee - whether it be a local government, local resettlement agency, or refugee-led organization - may have their own

understanding of integration, and may further their own interests, rather than the larger refugee community's.

As earlier discussed, Berry (1980) states that integration requires not only a maintaining of one's own culture, but also engagement in the dominant culture in a new country. This definition does not put any responsibility on the dominant culture to take part in learning of the refugee's own cultural, social, or religious practices. Yet, since Berry's definition came out, scholars have built on this concept of integration. Ager and Strang's (2008) conceptual framework of integration includes domains that, for integration to occur, require acknowledgement and efforts from the dominant culture. For example, the authors report that social links, or connections with the state, are a crucial part of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). Without some effort from the state, (for example paying for translators or expanding outreach efforts to channels that will reach refugee populations), it is challenging for social links to occur.

These scholars make valid points about the failures, challenges and limitations of integration. Despite the myriad issues with this term and concept, integration serves as the basis for much of the resettlement policy globally. While it is important to question and critique the concept of integration, that is not the purpose of this study, which takes the concept at face value to understand how different entities attempt to foster integration of refugee populations.

Entities involved in refugee integration: Local governments and refugee-led organizations

As seen in Ager and Strang's conceptual framework, various entities are required to support effective refugee integration. Two of these are local and county governments and refugee-led organizations. In this next section, I outline the roles that these entities play and how local and county governments can effectively engage with diverse populations.

Local and county government's role in resettlement

The Refugee Act of 1980 attempted to provide state and local officials with a role in resettlement (Xi, 2017). While municipalities could not explicitly deny refugees from being resettled in their localities, Congress suggested that local and state governments and the local voluntary agencies consult with each other in order to resettle people in localities that were prepared to handle this incoming population (Xi, 2017). While two amendments were made to the Refugee Act of 1980 (in 1982 and 1986) to try to include local and state governments in decision making for resettlement and to “consider locality-specific factors in developing and implementing a placement policy,” the current resettlement program fails to meaningfully include local and state governments in determining where refugees will be resettled (Xi, 2017, p. 1211).

The current resettlement program also fails to consider local needs and overlooks many local assets in determining where refugees will be resettled (Xi, 2017). In the U.S., LCGs, in theory, should be integral to the refugee resettlement support system, as they often are the ones that shoulder challenges related to influxes of refugee populations (Xi, 2017). The role of local government in resettlement has been more thoroughly studied in other countries such as Canada (Cullen & Walton-Roberts, 2019; Dam & Wayland, 2019) and rural Australia (Boese & Phillips, 2017), perhaps because local governments have a more explicit role in actually administering resettlement. However, in the U.S. context, there is less known about the role of local government in resettlement. Some studies provide inroads (Harwood, 2022; McDaniel et al., 2017, 2019; Okour, 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2018), but there remains gaps in knowledge pertaining to how refugees are included in local policy processes and how different entities involved in resettlement work with one another, tackled in this dissertation.

As the U.S. refugee resettlement program currently operates, national VOLAGS communicate minimally with local governments. Xi (2017) notes that because of the way the resettlement program is run - with resettlement agencies funded to work with their clients for eight months and not involving local and state officials (even though under the Refugee Act of 1980 they are supposed to be) - LCGs end up with much of the financial burden of resettlement, especially after the eight month period is up (Xi, 2017). And while LCGs in the U.S. do not play a formal role in delivering resettlement services (as they do in other countries), refugees are residents, LCGs still impact resettlement experiences as they have a responsibility to serve *all* residents (U.S. GAO, 2012). Additionally, although it may not look like they take an active role in resettlement, LCGs are supporting the needs of refugees financially (for example by resourcing additional programs in schools or supplemental health services) (Xi, 2017). Additionally, some LCGs may proactively engage in welcoming work, such as launching an Office of New Americans which advocates for refugees, or public officials may speak out in support of the refugee resettlement program (Licastro, 2019). Whether or not local officials speak out for or against refugee populations, the environments and urban services that urban planners influence have an impact on the lives of residents. This next section outlines how welcoming work came to be a response to austerity measures that impact LCGs.

Local governments: Engaging in welcoming work as a result of austerity urbanism

Neoliberalism, an economic structure that promotes privatization and the downsizing of government, was introduced to the U.S. in the 1980s by President Regan (Goldsmith, 2020). This resulted in austerity urbanism, where governments roll back social policies and programs in response to budgets being slashed (Goldsmith, 2020), restructuring urban governance (Peck, 2012). While public services are cut, market driven approaches are posed as the solution (Peck,

2012). Although austerity measures began over 40 years ago, they have “been enforced with renewed systemic intensity in the period since the Wall Street Crash of 2008” (Peck, 2012, p. 626). Austerity measures harm some and benefit others, with impacts being unevenly distributed across cities (Peck, 2012). Socioeconomically disadvantaged residents suffer the most under austerity measures, as social services they may need to access are reduced, while corporations and wealthy individuals pay little in taxes and benefit (Goldsmith, 2020). These measures are upheld by those in power for various reasons, including preventing resistance (Goldsmith, 2020).

Decreases in funding and a move towards privatization put strains on local governments, and they employ diverse strategies in response to this. Scholars have deemed a more balanced approach to austerity urbanism “pragmatic municipalism” where municipalities employ “a mix of cuts, deferrals, and revenue supplements to address the financial challenges” (Warner et al., 2021, p. 389). Depending on how progressive those in leadership positions are, citizen engagement varies in determining what measures are employed (Warner et al., 2021). More predatory measures and budget cuts are seen in cities with high poverty rates (Warner et al., 2021).

Austerity measures put pressure on cities to retain and hopefully grow populations, especially for cities with declining populations and a low tax base. In some cases, in-migration is viewed as solution to this problem. Pottie-Sherman (2018) explains how immigrants and refugees are viewed in U.S. rust belt cities in two different ways. The first centers on immigrants and refugees helping resuscitate the declining economic health of those cities back to life. For instance, urban growth advocates view immigrants as vital for revitalizing Rust Belt cities and connecting them to the global economy, aligning with the region’s narrative of resilience in the face of globalization (Pottie-Sherman, 2018). The second, while focusing on social justice rights

for immigrants and refugees (such as housing market discrimination), emphasizes the economic advantages of immigrants and refugees as a way to appeal to city officials and the business community (Pottie-Sherman, 2018).

In the latter approach, LCGs often enact welcoming policies, which are used as a way to address population decline (Pottie-Sherman, 2020; Watson, 2019). Examples of welcoming policies and initiatives include becoming Certified Welcoming (through the national non-profit Welcoming America), having a welcome plan, or by becoming part of a network of localities that claim they are welcoming. Researchers who have examined the role of planners in immigrant welcoming initiatives (Harwood, 2022; McDaniel et al., 2019) through interviews, comprehensive plans, and immigrant integration plans reveal that planners in self-identified “immigrant welcoming cities” continue on with business as usual, largely not engaging in immigrant welcoming initiatives, with planners making small changes in land use regulations as needed in support of immigrant populations (Harwood, 2022). While planners can play a substantial role in the lives of refugees, Harwood (2022) found that immigrant affairs staff and planners rarely interact with one another or know about the work of the other. Welcoming work falls short, not only because of the lack of communication between immigrant affairs staff and planners, but because it often comes from a place where governments are in need, looking for refugees to solve the problems of a city under stress.

Welcoming policies have grown in use and popularity in recent decades both because of austerity measures and radical changes in federal immigration policy (such as cuts to the numbers of people admitted to the U.S. with refugee status during the Trump administration). While these federal changes significantly impact individuals in the U.S., local level policies

towards immigrants impact their lives as well, as local and county governments play an integral role in both integration of refugees and service provision to refugees (McDaniel et al., 2019).

Planning for diverse populations

The professional conduct that planners should adhere to involves planning and working for diverse populations (AICP, 2021), which can take many different forms. Literature on the need to include refugees in local government decision-making is non-existent; yet, urban planning literature on multiculturalism and planning for diverse populations began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s has long promoted including diverse voices in order to plan more inclusive communities (Forester, n.d.; Hartman, 2012; Marcuse, 2011). One way that local governments can gauge the needs of refugees - who qualify for green cards after one year and citizenship after five years in the U.S. - is by including them in planning processes and ensuring representation in government. Multiple scholars have outlined the challenges that come with planning for diverse populations (Sandercock, 1998a, 2000; Umemoto, 2001). More recently, scholars have built on the work of Sandercock and Umemoto and called for planning scholars to build on the original ideas of multiculturalism, arguing for “intercultural” communities as the foundation for planning (Agyeman and Erickson, 2012). They argue that intercultural differs from multicultural in that it “implies a deeper, pluralist transformation of society, institutions and space” (Agyeman & Erickson, 2012, p. 360), stressing dialogue rather than solely difference. Fainstein, responding to work in the 1990s where scholars were more explicit about the concept of justice, argues for three governing principles of justice, one of which is diversity (2014). She argues that while “structural transformation cannot be achieved at the municipal level, a change in the rhetoric around urban policy from a focus on competitiveness to a discourse about justice can improve the quality of life for urban residents” (Fainstein, 2014, pg. 1). While the discussion about

multiculturalism has become more routine, the ways in which participatory planning has been executed is still critiqued. One scholar examines attempts at diverse participatory planning efforts, and how “uncritically involving groups defined by race or ethnicity.... may reinforce stereotypes in the policy making process” (Beebeejaun, 2006, p. 3).

Engaging refugee populations may bring additional challenges, such as needing language interpretation, having to build trust (as many refugees may not trust governments) and educating refugees on how to navigate city services (Allen & Slotterback, 2017; Gichunge et al., 2015; Hadley et al., 2010; Judelsohn et al., 2017; Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007; Miraftab, 2000; Nawyn, 2006; Piacentini, 2015). Scholars have found that - especially in localities with large native-born populations - planners do not consider or include immigrant integration goals (Kim et al., 2018). While immigrant-focused plans are rare, in mainstream planning practice planners historically have been dismissive of immigrant needs in their use of rational planning, which claims to be “culturally neutral” (Vitiello, 2009, p. 246). The issue with rational planning strategies is twofold. First planners take a technical position, not a political one, which results in a blanket, one size fits all approach for engagement (Grenegs, 2002). Secondly, planners may simply not be aware of the differing needs of refugee populations;⁷ even in the top ten resettlement cities, refugees only account for between an estimated 0.32% (Chicago, IL) and 1.76% of the population (Buffalo, NY) (US Census Bureau, 2015), a small portion of the population. Yet, over time, some planners have sought to engage more with immigrant communities. In one study, researchers highlight the work of planners engaging with refugee-led organizations to translate materials and hold public meetings at times that refugee communities could generally attend (Allen & Slotterback, 2017). The extent of this engagement with refugee communities, however,

⁷ For example, as of April 20, 2023, a search of the Journal of the American Planning Association only turned up 51 articles that include the term “refugee.”

is still insufficient, as planners did not take into account cultural and religious considerations, such as religious holidays, gender disparities, and challenges with literacy (Allen & Slotterback, 2017). Similarly, in a previous study on the role of local governments in ensuring food security of refugee populations, my colleagues and I found that, while local governments have the ability to support plans that foster healthy lifestyles, in major resettlement cities, local governments are not meeting the unique needs of refugee populations (Judelsohn et al., 2020).

While planners have a role and responsibility to engage refugee populations, this issue is a double-edged sword. Scholars have found that non-citizens may not want to make themselves visible politically, or “exercise their right to assembly because of their concerns about fear and safety” (Lee, 2019, p. 279). While refugees arrive in the U.S. legally, they may be unaware of U.S. norms over what is culturally acceptable or expected in terms of civic engagement, and additionally may have other issues that they are dealing with and do not have the bandwidth to engage.

Inclusive governance through insurgent planning

In addition to multicultural planning strategies, inclusive governance can be built through radical planning, and specifically, insurgent planning (Miraftab, 2009). From its inception, radical planning has placed much emphasis on inclusion and participation in planning processes (Miraftab, 2009). Holston (Holston, 1998, 2008) and scholars within the field of planning (Miraftab, 2009; Miraftab & Wills, 2005; Sandercock, 1998b, 1998a) define insurgent citizenship as situations where residents mobilize their power through the city rather than through their labor. Miraftab calls for insurgency to be part of (radical) planning practice as a method of fostering redistributive equity (Miraftab, 2009). She argues that insurgent planning

practices can be transformative, as it challenges neoliberal governance in that it demands effective inclusion (Miraftab, 2009, p. 41).

Miraftab (2009) suggests that insurgent planning has three characteristics: it is transgressive, counter-hegemonic, and imaginative. First, insurgent planning is “transgressive in time, place, and action” in that public actions span “formal/informal arenas of politics and invited/invented spaces of citizenship practice” (Miraftab, 2009, p. 46). Invited spaces are those spaces that involve citizen participation that have been authorized and encouraged by political authorities (Miraftab, 2009, p. 35). Insurgent planning is transgressive in that it transgresses boundaries, building solidarity across boundaries and groups (for example, transnational solidarity across borders) (Miraftab, 2009, pp. 46). Additionally, insurgent planning transgresses time, involving history in understanding present day experiences, allowing us to place events in the bigger picture, looking at historical events as examples and lessons (Miraftab, 2009, p. 46).

Secondly, insurgent planning is counter-hegemonic in that it “destabilizes normalized relations of dominance and insists on citizens’ right to dissent, to rebel and to determine their own terms of engagement and participation” (Miraftab, 2009, p. 46). Insurgent planning creates or “invents” spaces for residents to assert rights. For example, residents living in an informal settlement do this when they occupy land. Through this action, they are claiming their right to the city (Holston, 2008). Lastly, insurgent planning is imaginative, and offers hope for other alternatives. Whereas neoliberal governance often suggests no other alternative, insurgent planning allows for idealism in planner’s work towards a just society, by offering hope and alternatives not traditionally offered (Miraftab, 2009, p. 46).

As scholars like Harwood outline, planners - even when supporting welcoming work - tend to not engage in thoughtful, imaginative, or substantive ways with refugee populations

(Harwood, 2022). And while much insurgent planning occurs by residents or in more informal places, government employed planners can both support residents involved in and enact principles of insurgent planning by learning from, working within and validating the invented spaces of citizenship that residents create, and following the three principles of insurgent planning outlined above. Insurgent planning provides an alternative approach for both formal and informal planners to actually plan for and welcome refugees in effective ways.

Refugee-led community organizations

Another set of actors in resettlement are RCOs that typically serve clients from their own communities. Immigrant organizations, such as RCOs, are often undercounted in research because of their informal and grassroots organization (Gleeson & Bloemraad, 2011).

Conventional theories describe RCOs as playing a social and cultural role in their community members' lives, their mutual aid work, and community building work. Yet they do much more: scholars have shown that these groups play multiple the roles, engaging in a range of welfare support activities (Gonzalez Benson, 2020), helping people navigate healthcare systems (Gonzalez Benson et al., 2019), providing culturally preferred emergency response services (Pimentel Walker et al., 2021), and creating a place to both connect with others from the same geographic or religious background (Allen, 2010).

Gonzalez Benson (2020) developed a theoretical framework for how RCOs engage in “welfare support activities” for their clients, who generally arrived in the US as refugees (Gonzalez Benson, 2020). She found that grassroots RCOs engage in five types of welfare support activities: case and crisis management, outreach events, cultural and social events, targeted sustained programs (such as cultural classes or job training), and advocacy and liaison services (Gonzalez Benson, 2020, p. 8).

Since many refugees may have obtained their refugee status because of their religious affiliation or lost many of their families and social networks, religious institutions also play an important role for refugees (Allen, 2010). Allen (2010) examined the roles that two religious institutions play in the social capital of refugees, and how these institutions connect immigrants to the broader society, including a Catholic church that welcomed Christian residents originally from Sudan and a mosque started by different clans that are part of the Somali community. The mosque lacked the existing, strong infrastructure that the Catholic church had, therefore limiting the bridging capital (connections across groups that are typically divided) that the Sudanese refugees had. Additionally, divisions among Somali clans caused strains in the mosque, creating challenges in having one identity through the mosque (Allen, 2010). Religious institutions can be an outlet for connecting with other groups, and forming social bridges.

Scholars call for RCOs to be consulted throughout resettlement and humanitarian crises (Pincock et al., 2021), yet not all RCOs should take these organizations at face value. While RCOs are led by the refugee community, they are not always representative of the entire refugee community. One scholar found that diversity within the community was not addressed when one RCO was helping to make a decision with a government agency (Richlen, 2023). While RCOs can bridge their communities with government agencies, it is important to recognize that there is much heterogeneity in refugee communities and much nuance that outsiders do not see.

Chapter 3 Methods

As noted above, this research is based on a comparative case study of two sites - Erie County in New York and Kent County in Michigan - that draws on mixed methods, including a total of 29 interviews, one focus group, and a document review. In this chapter I explain why the case study is an appropriate methodology to answer my research questions, how I selected these two sites, and detail about my data collection and analysis. I conclude by describing the limitations of the study and a note on my positionality as a researcher.

Use of comparative study and site selection

Case studies are “...an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context...” (Yin, 2009, p. 19). They work especially well in the social sciences to understand singular complex problems in depth as well as complex processes between various governmental and non-governmental agencies, providing depth and detail to all actors involved (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2009). Unlike quantitative research that focuses on discrete variables, cases allow us to see covariation across cases and to understand how aspects of a case fit together (Ragin, 1992). Case studies are also often used when a new phenomenon is being explored and empirical research is limited (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

The case study approach is appropriate for this study for various reasons. One key reason is because of the dearth of data exist related to refugee resettlement in the U.S. Two data sources are publicly available that provide information about resettled refugees. First, the Annual Survey of Refugees “offers a window into refugees’ progress during their initial five years after arrival,”

with datasets from 2016 through 2019 available to the public (*Annual Survey of Refugees*, 2022). While data include topics relevant to this study like social connection, health, and economic self-sufficiency, variables are not tied to the geographic location of the respondent, making the data unsuitable for this study, as it is tied to place (*Annual Survey of Refugees*, 2022). The second dataset available is the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS) data. These data are limited, only providing the numbers of refugees resettled by state, not municipality (*Refugee Processing Center*, n.d.). The second key reason that the case study approach is useful here is because of how little is known about how urban planning practices and policies and institutional interactions at the municipal, county, and state level impact resettled refugees.

Because there is little prior research to build on, a case study allows for the generation of theories and hypotheses that can then be tested using other methods in the future, such as surveys (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Because of the complex problems in resettlement and the multitude of actors involved in the process, the research naturally lends itself to a case study.

Case selection

I arrived at the two cases of Erie and Kent Counties by systematically comparing U.S. cities across a number of variables that focus on refugees, city and county characteristics that impact refugees, refugee services offered, and indicators suggesting that refugees are welcome. See Table 2 for city level data (for cities in the county cases selected) that were considered in selecting cases.

Table 2*City level data derived from integration frameworks*

	Employment			Housing	Transportation		Foreign-Born Population	Local/State integration policy		
	% Employed civilian population 16 years and over in manufacturing	Unemployment rate for civilian population in labor force 16 years and over	Income below poverty level	Gross Rent as 10-29% of Household Income in the Past 12 Months (\$)	Population density (per sq. mile)	% Uses public transit for work	Foreign born population	Office of New Americans or New Americans Policy	Sanctuary City/County /State Policy	Plans or studies for new Americans
Buffalo, NY	8.80%	9.90%	25.90%	36.70%	6,413	11.90%	8.94%	Yes, local + state	None	City New Americans Study
Grand Rapids, MI	16.10%	8.50%	17.70%	38.90%	4,367	4.10%	9.98%	Yes, state	Kent County (2019)	Kent County Welcome Plan

Source: (Ager & Strang, 2008; Gonzalez Benson et al., 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016)

In selecting these cases, I narrowed down the list to cities in the U.S. where over 3,000 refugees resettled between fiscal years 2012 and 2016 (Office of Admissions - Refugee Processing Center, 2012). Variables came from the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS) and the American Community Survey (ACS). The Refugee Processing Center hosts the WRAPS, which provides data on the movement of refugees who will be resettled in the US. Availability of WRAPS data has changed over time; during the Trump administration data was pulled from the Refugee Processing Center website (Lai et al., 2012), but data on the region that refugees arrive in the US from, data on the state that refugees are resettled in by country of origin, and historical arrivals are available. These data are published every fiscal year, but data only go back to fiscal year 2012 (*Refugee Processing Center*, n.d.) Additionally, ACS 5-year data was included, which is released every five years and includes information about people and housing. I utilize data that include the number of people resettled as refugees at the city level

from 2012 through 2016, as this is what was available at the time. Dr. Pablo Bose (Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Vermont) created a dataset that he shared with me, combining Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS) and the American Community survey (ACS) population data.

From the ACS 2012-2016 data, I select additional variables at the city level based on domains from Ager and Strang's Conceptual Framework of Integration (see Table 2 and Figure 4). I looked at the following employment and economic variables (part of what Ager and Strang call "markers and means"): the percent employed civilian population 16 years and over in manufacturing (to understand low-income employment), unemployment rate for civilian population in labor force 16 years and over (to understand general unemployment), and income below poverty level (to see the city-level poverty rates). Additionally, Ager and Strang include housing under "markers and means," so gross rent as percent of household income in the past 12 months was included to understand how affordable housing is. While transportation is not included in Ager and Strang's framework, I chose to include variables related to transportation given the transportation-related challenges that refugees often experience (P. S. Bose, 2014; Okour, 2019; Smith et al., 2022; Szajna & Ward, 2015). This includes population density (per square mile) and the percent that uses public transportation for work. Level two of Ager and Strang's Conceptual Framework of Integration includes social connection, through social bridges, social bonds, and social links (Ager & Strang, 2008). To understand the presence of foreign-born populations, and potential for social bonds across foreign-born groups, I calculated the percentage of the population that is foreign born between 2012 and 2016 (ACS data). Lastly, I conducted a search of local and state level policies that explicitly pertain to immigrant and refugee populations. Because integration happens at the local level, it is important to

examine whether or not cities and counties engage in activities and policy making that attempts to welcome new American populations. Examples of this type of work include having a plan specifically for immigrant populations, an office dedicated to new Americans, or an advisory board or committee of immigrant leaders that advises and guides a government. This variable is important to include in choosing cases, as my main research question asks about gaps in services that refugees experience. I expected to find that places where policymakers are more welcoming to refugees - as evidenced by already engaging in welcoming work - will be, in theory, more successful in meeting the needs of their refugee constituents.

Based on the variables outlined above (see Table 2), in Fall of 2020, I looked at the list of 231 cities that resettled refugees between 2012 and 2016. I narrowed this list down to four: Buffalo, NY, Grand Rapids, MI; Atlanta, GA, and Fort Worth, TX. These four cases provide a nice comparison, as they have similar challenges around Ager and Strang's domain of markers and means (see Figure 4), but policymakers in both Georgia and Texas have expressed anti-immigrant sentiments (America's Voice, 2021; Kanno-Youngs, 2020). With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, I was not confident that it would be possible to collect sufficient qualitative data for four different cases across the country. Because of this, I chose to narrow my focus to two cases where different levels of government have been supportive of refugee populations in different ways. Cases were selected where local and county government support around resettlement is more prevalent, as it provides an opportunity to examine how effective welcoming work is and may provide guidance for other locales (studying a geography where state officials have either actively spoken against refugees or at least have not engaged in work to support refugee communities does not provide examples for other state entities to model). A final, practical factor is my prior research ties to both locales, which facilitated access to key

stakeholders and networks - particularly important for carrying out interviews in the midst of the pandemic.

While I initially narrowed down cases at the city level, after cases were selected, I scaled up to the county level. Researchers define cases as “an integrated system” (Stake, 1995, p. 2). The county level is a place where various levels of policy (federal, state, county, and municipal) interact to affect refugee outcomes. Additionally, findings from preliminary interviews led me to scale up from the city to the county level, as many refugees choose to leave the city limits when they seek out their own housing, and many services they utilize are offered at the county, rather than the municipal or city level.

Erie County, New York and Kent County, Michigan

The case counties, Erie County, New York and Kent County, Michigan, provide various similarities and contrasts (see Table 3). Selecting these two counties allows a comparison of state, county, and municipal level policies. Both counties have generally been welcoming of refugee populations and have seen increases in foreign-born populations in recent years (see Table 3). Many in leadership positions, for instance, have spoken in favor of welcoming refugees. In Erie County, Mayor Byron Brown has verbally supported refugees, claiming a Mayor’s National Day of Immigration (City of Buffalo, 2017). Both the previous mayor of Grand Rapids, George Heartwell (a Republican, in this position from 2004-2015) and the current mayor Rosalynn Bliss (democrat, 2016 - present), have spoken publicly about their support for refugee populations, and that it is important, and part of American values, to welcome those fleeing violence and persecution (Muyskens, 2017; Stateside Staff, 2015).

Table 3*Landscape of resettlement in Erie County, New York and Kent County, Michigan*

	Population (ACS 2020)	Refugees Resettled (R & P FY2012-2016)	Foreign Born Population (ACS 2020)	Refugee resettlement agencies (#)	Organizations involved in Welcoming Network	Presence of Office of New Americans
Erie County, NY	918,873	7,332	66,608 7.3%	4	-City of Buffalo -International Institute of Buffalo	- State Level - City Level
Kent County, MI	652, 617	3,709	53,942 8.3%	2	-Kent County Administration -City of Grand Rapids -Samaritas	- State Level

Source: (Office of Admissions - Refugee Processing Center, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020)

Additionally, both the City of Buffalo and Kent County are part of a global network of local governments, Welcoming America. Welcoming America is a “nonprofit leading a movement of inclusive communities becoming more prosperous by ensuring everyone belongs, including immigrants” (*Welcoming America*, n.d.-b). There are various avenues for engagement with Welcoming America, from hosting an event during Welcoming Week, to becoming a member of their Welcome Network, or for local governments to become Certified Welcoming (“What Is Welcoming?,” n.d.), which is a “formal designation for cities and counties that have created policies and programs reflecting their values and commitment to immigrant inclusion” (*Welcoming America*, n.d.-a). Becoming Certified Welcoming requires the heaviest level of involvement in terms of engagement with Welcoming America. Applicants must pay a fee, and if the municipality fails the review, it is made public. Neither Kent nor Erie county or cities within the counties are Certified Welcoming (the more intensive of the options), but both counties have

municipalities and nonprofits that have signed up to be part of the Welcoming Network. To join the Welcoming Network is a low stakes commitment: the application is brief and it is free to join. Members receive tools, access to trainings and connections to a network to assist in becoming a more welcoming place.

Organizations in both counties have also taken advantage of grant opportunities offered by Welcoming America and the American Immigration Council (formerly the New American Economy), including Gateways for Growth, which supports activities to promote immigrant inclusion. Three grant opportunities exist: customized economic research reports for a locality, tailored technical assistance to create an immigrant welcome plan, and planning grants to fund welcoming efforts (American Immigration Council & Welcoming America, n.d.). In 2016, the International Institute of Buffalo received funding for a research report authored by The New American Economy, providing a snapshot of demographic and economic information of new Americans living in Buffalo and Syracuse, NY (New American Economy, 2017). The same grant was received by Samaritas, for Kent County, with a report published in 2018 (New American Economy, 2018). Kent County went on to apply and receive another Gateways for Growth grant for technical assistance, drafting a welcoming plan for the county which was released in Fall of 2020 (Jankowiak, 2020).

Entities involved in resettlement included in the study

Various entities and organizations play a role in the lives of resettled refugees; this study focuses on the local resettlement agencies (LRAs), local and county governments (LCGs), and refugee-led community organizations (RCOs). See Table 5 for the number of representatives from each entity interviewed for this study. While refugees will engage with other entities or institutions, such as religious organizations, school districts, health care services, and county and

state offices such as the Departments of Motor Vehicles and Social Services, this study focuses on the role of planning and community organizations in resettlement.

Local resettlement agencies

Unlike individuals that arrive in the U.S. with other visa statuses, LRAs are the first point of contact for refugees resettling in the U.S. As detailed in the introduction, LRAs are funded by the federal government to administer resettlement services for 90 days, which can be extended to eight months (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.). LRAs range in breadth of services and capacity. Many are part of nonprofits offering a range of social services, while others cater specifically to refugee populations. Since the number of people resettled is determined by the president and therefore fluctuates, many resettlement agencies need to offer a range of services to remain open. During the Trump administration, for instance, the resettlement program was slashed, forcing up to one-third of resettlement agencies to close across the country (Refugee Council USA, n.d.).

While services vary, LRAs are mandated by the U.S. Department of State to set up and furnish initial housing and provide food and clothing upon arrival (U. S. Department of State, 2017a). LRAs also engage in other forms of service delivery, such as cultural orientation, school enrollment, and other case management services are provided (U. S. Department of State, 2017b). Interviews were conducted with representatives from both of the agencies in Kent County and two of the four agencies in Erie County.

Local and county governments

The second set of institutions that play a large role in the lives of resettled refugees are LCGs. LCGs can engage in “welcoming work.” The most obvious ways that the counties and cities do this in the scope of this study are through the Welcoming Plan (Kent County) and the

Office of New Americans (in the City of Buffalo). Other examples may include inviting refugees to be part of a refugee advisory council, hosting initiatives to recruit a more diverse group of public safety officers, or having language access lines available for government employees when they encounter individuals who have limited English proficiency. In this study, interviews were conducted with representatives from both municipal and county governments in Kent and Erie Counties, and comprehensive and welcome plans from municipal and county governments were reviewed.

Refugee community organizations

Lastly, RCOs also play an important role in the lives of refugees undergoing resettlement. Often informal, many do not have 501C3 (non-profit) status, resulting in one-third to one-half not being counted in official data (Gleeson & Bloemraad, 2011). RCOs fill in the gaps in services not addressed by resettlement agencies or any other local government offices. At the same time, researchers have found that RCOs play a crucial role empowering refugees by engaging in awareness raising with the dominant population and drawing on their own traditions of “reciprocity, solidarity and mutual help” (Piacentini, 2015). RCO leaders from both counties were interviewed for this study, and if their organization had a strategic plan, that was also reviewed.

Research approach, methodology and data collection methods

Given the exploratory nature of my research questions, I use a qualitative research approach. A qualitative approach “simply seeks to understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Bellamy et al., 2016; Merriam, 1998). With the dearth of data available about refugee populations, and the sensitivities needed when

working with this population, a qualitative approach allows for reflexivity, ensuring that the research centers the refugees perspective (Dona et al., 2020, p. 2). Many researchers studying refugee populations utilize qualitative approaches, as they allow for in-depth interpretations not possible with other methods. To understand how planning meets the multidimensional needs of refugee populations, how the work of planning is actually executed, and what other entities support refugee populations, I draw on content analysis of planning documents and semi-structured interviews. Combining these methods allows me to understand what is proposed on paper in planning documents, the community input on these documents, and if and how this welcoming work actually unfolds. Prior to conducting interviews, approval was sought from the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board (IRB), which classified the study as exempt from ongoing IRB oversight.

Data collection method: planning documents

I first examined the gaps in services refugees experience in locales where government leaders have advocated to receive large populations of refugees by conducting a content analysis of planning documents to examine how plans address the needs of refugee populations and whether refugees are included in the plan-making processes (see Table 4 for a list of plans included). In its most basic form, content analysis classifies many words into fewer words, making inferences from the text (Weber, 1990). In my review of formal municipal plans, policies, and other documents, I gauged the extent to which city governments engage and serve refugee communities and the priorities that are laid out. While this does not provide a thorough understanding of how municipalities take part in supporting refugees, official plans and policy documents indicate how immigrants are being included in local decision-making or considered in

resource allocation and what municipalities - and in theory, communities - see as the long-term vision for the inclusion of refugees and immigrants.

In an effort to examine challenges in the resettlement system, the different organizations involved in resettlement, and the powers at play, I reviewed multiple types of planning documents, from plans developed in municipal planning offices, to documents developed by local and county governments for refugees (see Table 4). At the municipal level, I reviewed comprehensive plans for both Buffalo and Grand Rapids, secured through internet searches. While comprehensive plans are not laws in and of themselves, the plan “identifies the goals, objectives, principles, guidelines, policies, standards, and strategies for the growth and development of the community” (NYSDEC, n.d.). Comprehensive plans are mandatory in New York and Michigan, and are a vision for a community, which are supposed to be created with significant community involvement.

I reviewed the most recent comprehensive plans for Buffalo, (Queen City in the 21st Century, published in 2006) and Grand Rapids (the Grand Rapids Master Plan, published in 2002), the two major cities in each county. Since comprehensive plans are a long-term vision, and the three municipal-level comprehensive plans were published in the early 2000s, reviewing earlier comprehensive plans was unnecessary since refugee resettlement accelerated after this period in both counties.⁸

Because of the length of the plans I reviewed (for example, the Grand Rapids Comprehensive Plan is 174 pages) and because some of the content was not relevant to this project (such as development scenarios, infrastructure beyond public transportation, and historic

⁸ Both Kent and Erie Counties have a comprehensive plan. In Kent County, it is the Kent County Strategic Plan Update (2022-2023) and in Erie it is the Erie Niagara Framework for Regional Growth (2006). While counties sometimes also have their own comprehensive plans, these are not included in the study.

architecture), I conducted a word search of plans, based on a list of keywords I deductively came up with based on Ager and Strang’s Conceptual Framework of Integration. A list of keywords can be found in Appendix A.

Table 4

Planning documents reviewed

Type of Document	Title	Geographic Area	Year Published/Years covering
Plans Specific to New Americans	Kent County Welcome Plan	Kent County	2020
	New Americans Study	City of Buffalo	2016
Comprehensive Plans	Grand Rapids Master Plan	City of Grand Rapids	2002
	Queen City in the 21st Century	City of Buffalo	2006

I also analyzed plans and studies in both Kent and Erie counties that focus on refugee communities. This included two documents focused specifically on new American residents: the City of Buffalo New Americans Study (published in 2016) and the Kent County Welcome Plan (published in 2020).

Data collection methods: Interviews and focus group

To supplement the content analysis of planning documents, I conducted semi-structured interviews and one focus group. While plans include a broad vision for a community, semi-structured interviews explore the “perceptions, experiences and attitudes” of participants that is often not captured in plans or other written documents (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). Semi-structured interviews allow for follow up, to ask “how” or “why” questions (Adams, 2015), which helped me ask about how the plans I analyzed came to be, how they have been received

by refugee leaders and local resettlement agencies, what is missing in terms of refugee services and how the gaps are filled.

To prepare for interviews, I started with a series of semi-structured questions that I developed from informational interviews, past research (Judelsohn et al., 2017, 2020), and areas identified in Ager and Strang’s conceptual framework of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008). Asking open-ended questions allows for flexibility, providing opportunity for different themes to emerge (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). While the interview tool served as a guide, the natural order of conversation took precedence over the questions laid out in the interview guide, as is routine in semi-structured interviews. I conducted interviews with various stakeholders involved both directly and indirectly with refugee populations (see Table 5). As is typical in semi-structured interviews, I conducted all but three interviews with one subject at a time (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001): two government officials requested another staff person be present and one local resettlement agency representative asked another staff person to join because of their expertise. I also conducted a focus group with eight leaders from different refugee communities that participate in a leadership group in Kent County (to my knowledge, a comparable group does not exist in Erie County).

Table 5

Sectors and geographical locations of interviewees

Sectors	Erie County, NY	Kent County, MI	National	Total
National and Local Resettlement Agency Employees	2	2	1	5
Municipal, County, and State Government Officials	4	6	0	10

Refugee Community Organization Leaders	2	5	0	7
Miscellaneous non-profit organization employees	4	2	1	7
Total	12	15	2	29

Interviewees included government representatives from state, county, and municipal levels, leaders from refugee-run organizations, and nonprofits. While some interviewees spanned multiple groups (for example, a community leader that also works at a local resettlement agency), I identified their group affiliation based on which group they identified with more strongly. There was heterogeneity in terms of country of origin of refugee leaders interviewed, but not in terms of length of time in the U.S. Although not directly asked, based on their country of origin, leaders had come to the US within the last 20 years. Non-profits include refugee resettlement agencies, national VOLAGS, faith-based institutions, and non-profit organizations that are not involved directly in resettlement but that serve former refugees. Additionally, one interview was conducted with a representative from a national VOLAG and one from a national nonprofit that works to make communities more inclusive to immigrants. In total, I conducted 29 interviews between April 2021 and December 2022 with individuals from various sectors. Interviews spanned this time period because of delays primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic and were interspersed with the content analysis of documents.

I used both stratified purposeful and snowball sampling methods to identify interview subjects. Purposeful sampling “...involves identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest” (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011 in (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 2). I used stratified purposeful sampling to identify actors from different organizations and institutions who are “especially knowledgeable about” (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 2) and who offer “major variations”

(Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 18) related to working with refugee populations, including local, county, and state government officials, local resettlement agencies, representatives from refugee-community organizations, and individuals from nonprofits - outside of resettlement agencies - that serve former refugees. I then identified contacts in these groups through internet searches, one community partner (a leader from one of the RCOs), and refugee-specific planning documents (the Kent County Welcome Plan and the City of Buffalo New Americans Study).

I then used snowball sampling in the email invitation and at the end of each interview when I asked if there was anyone else I should speak to. This method involves starting with initial contacts, which I identified through purposeful sampling techniques, and asking those interviewees and subsequent interviewees, to recommend additional contacts (Parker et al., 2019). Snowball sampling is a useful technique to use when the target characteristics of interviewees are not easily accessible (Naderifar et al., 2017).

The interview protocol was developed based on Ager and Strang's Conceptual Framework of Integration (Figure 4). Questions among interviewees varied slightly, but generally, semi-structured interviews included questions about the respondent's organization and scope of work, how the city impacts people's experiences and success of integration, and the role of local and county governments in refugee resettlement (an interview tool can be found in Appendix B). Since data collection took place over two years and during a pandemic, I carried out interviews over Zoom, phone, and in person. As long as interviewees approved, I recorded them for note-taking purposes (one respondent requested the interview not be recorded). Immediately after the interview I noted any major takeaways from the interview, as well as follow-up tasks and any suggested people to interview. I also transcribed all interviews. Once

funding was secured, I offered interviewees who participated in the interview outside of work hours \$30 for their time.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis is an iterative process to identify concepts and themes related to the guiding research questions (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). It requires reflexivity on behalf of the researcher, as we all come into research not as objective scholars, but with our own ideas of what we want to know and what we think we know (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). In this study, I analyzed data using the sociological tradition of textual analysis “which treats text as a window into human experience” (Bernard & Ryan, 1998, p. 498). Interview transcriptions offer insights into the experiences of those working in or alongside the refugee resettlement system. I utilize strategies from thematic analysis. Boytazis (1998) says that “thematic analysis is a way of seeing.” It allows the researcher to move through information in a way so that insights can be shared with others and to make sense out of materials (Boytazis, 1998, pp. 1–5). Coding of data allows me to relate to the data and ideas about the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). I started with a deductive approach, using an initial, broad codebook based off of Ager and Strang’s conceptual framework of integration. I read and coded transcripts initially with themes identified by Ager and Strang, and added codes inductively as they emerged from the interviews (Bernard & Ryan, 1998, p. 498). I reread and coded interview transcripts until themes emerged. A final codebook that includes all codes can be found in Appendix C.

I analyzed interviews for both what respondents did and did not say, as what respondents leave out is just as important as what is included. For example, when asked what organizations are involved in different aspects of resettlement, did a government official mention refugee-run organizations or only larger non-profits? When asked about any innovative programs or policies

implemented by their local government, did former refugee leaders talk about the Kent County Welcome Plan, or was it not even on their radar as something useful to the work that they do in serving former refugee communities? I utilized Dedoose software for coding.

As an outsider of the refugee community, I ran my findings by people with lived experience, a practice suggested to ensure that findings are valid (Ziersch et al., 2019). While I routinely spoke with leaders from the refugee community about my initial findings, once coding was complete, a refugee community leader from each county fact-checked my findings. I compensated both community leaders \$300 for their time and expertise.

Limitations

The population under study, the methodology used, and the unexpected limitations resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic created various limitations for this research. First, many methodological issues exist when conducting research with refugee populations (Temple & Moran, 2006). As noted, one reason for this study is because limited data exist and are not always publicly available regarding resettled refugee populations in the U.S., (H. Bernstein, personal communication, December 23, 2020), but that fact also constrained the kinds of questions and the number of case study locations I could include in this study. Unlike other immigrant groups, a government agency decides where refugees will initially be resettled in the U.S. While they are connected to a local resettlement agency and provided initial housing, there is no legal reason that they need to remain there. Secondary migration occurs when a former refugee moves to another location within the U.S. (Bloem & Loveridge, 2017), and unless a former refugee moves within the initial resettlement period of 90 days, information about secondary migration to another city is not tracked. Because of this, information about the size of refugee populations in a municipality is difficult to measure.

Secondly, this project began in 2020, a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had intended to work closely with refugee-run organizations and to conduct in person surveys with the broader refugee population across four cities. In conducting rigorous research that includes those being studied, scholars working with refugee populations call for researchers to include the direct voices of refugees, rather than hearing stories through others, such as service providers and healthcare workers (Ziersch et al., 2019). Unfortunately, the ongoing pandemic and uncertainty about how quickly in-person research could resume caused me to shift my plans. Determining an approach that could be completed remotely, the research design pivoted to focus on two counties. Because of the pause on in-person gatherings, the feasibility of conducting surveys with an already hard to reach population seemed unrealistic. The research design was adapted to collect data with English-speaking individuals through semi-structured interviews, the majority of which could be conducted over Zoom or by phone. The refugee voices included in this study are those of community leaders, and it was beyond the scope of this study to include all refugee community leaders, as many of them are not visible to people outside of the community they serve, therefore, limited refugees' voices are included here.

Lastly, the first research question examines what is included in plans, both comprehensive and welcome plans. Yet, it is beyond the scope of this study to examine plan implementation.

Considerations in research with refugee populations and my positionality

Undoubtedly, as a researcher I bring my own experience and expectations to my work, from the questions I ask, to how I understand and interpret data, to how I interact with research subjects. My interest in the topic is twofold. After growing up in Buffalo, New York and leaving

for five years, I came back to a neighborhood that looked very different from the one I left. Historically a neighborhood of Italian immigrants (including my grandparents who immigrated to Buffalo in the 1940s), it was now full of immigrants and refugees from all over the world, including Myanmar, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq and Sudan. These new residents were growing vegetables on once vacant lots, opening businesses, and changing the landscape.

My experience brings a few limiting factors. I have interacted with parts of the refugee community in Buffalo through an agricultural program at a resettlement agency and through a pilot research project I conducted from 2016 through 2018. As a researcher, I see this as having two impacts on my work. First, as one scholar recalls, “...prior experience and knowledge can block attempts to think imaginatively about the interpretive theories that underlay the situations studied” (Denzin, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990 in Sword, 1999, p. 275). Coming into the research with my previous experience may close off my mind to certain outcomes. My experience and expectations will nonetheless shape the questions I ask and the people I approach to speak to me. Because of this, Daly (1997) terms how researchers discuss their participants’ experience “second-order stories” (Daly, 1997, p. 355). As Sword (1999) points out, “the challenge for the researcher is to preserve participants’ meanings while being aware of personal and professional meanings that permeate analysis” (Sword, 1999, p. 275). Daly points out the difference between first-order and second-order stories:

Whereas the language of the everyday narrative is fully indigenous, the language of the second-order theory story is metaphorical and conceptual. Whereas the motive of the first-order story is to make sense of and perhaps change experience within one’s local context, the motive of the second-order story is to represent and

communicate the local narrative within a broader range of communities: the local one from which it arises, the community of scientists who receive the story for comparison and further interpretation and conceptualization, and a host of other professional and political communities who may use the story for a variety of social action aims. Acknowledging that stories will be used for a variety of purposes is to grant that the consumers of these stories bring their own interpretations and meanings to the text (Daly, 1997, pp. 355–356).

In order to ensure that the second-order stories I tell align with the experience of my participants, as stated earlier, I fact checked my research findings with two leaders from the refugee community. In the early writing stage, I met with one leader from a refugee community in Michigan and one from a refugee community in New York. This discussion of my emerging findings ground-truthed my interpretations.

Chapter 4 The Role of Comprehensive and Welcome Plans in Addressing the Needs of Refugees

In the previous chapter I outlined the three main entities included in this study that are involved in the lives of refugees in resettlement: LRAs, LCGs, and RCOs. These entities play distinct roles at different times and needs during someone's resettlement journey. For example, LRAs are responsible for the immediate onboarding upon arrival, while longer term, a RCO may assist with things like translation of mail or signing up for benefits. Additionally, a LRA may engage refugees in planning processes and civic-engagement.

In this chapter, I examine how city plans and welcome plans address the needs of refugees, if at all. I first outline the landscape of LCGs, LRAs and RCOs in Kent and Erie Counties. The ways in which these institutions and organizations can build trust with refugee communities is included. For example, these entities can ensure that refugee voices are heard and included in their planning processes, and there are various ways that power can be distributed to refugees. I then examine how LCGs do or do not include the needs of refugees in their planning processes, through both broader comprehensive plans and also through welcome plans which are specific to immigrant communities. I conclude the chapter with missed opportunities by LCGs for service refugee communities.

Local and county governments in Erie and Kent Counties

Local and county governments do not have an official role in resettlement, yet they are integral to the successful integration of refugees, as outlined in Ager and Strang's Conceptual Framework of Integration (2008). While there are many avenues for doing this, one way is

through welcoming work, which they can engage in in various ways. Some LCGs draft welcoming or immigrant integration plans, others may have an office dedicated to immigrant populations, and some may have immigrant or refugee advisory boards. Table 6 shows the timeline of refugee welcoming work in Kent and Erie Counties, showing how policy has changed over time.

Table 6

Refugee-related policy timeline for Erie and Kent Counties

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Erie County, NY	ONA formed at City of Buffalo	New Americans Study published in City of Buffalo Gateways for Growth research report released					ONA vacant	
							NY State Senate Bill S3076B introduced Funding secured for Welcoming Certification	New ONA employee starts
Kent County, MI				Gateways for Growth research report released	Kent County becomes a Sanctuary County	Welcome Plan launched in Kent County		House Bill 6276 introduced Welcome Plan Coordinator hired

In Erie County, the majority of refugees are resettled in the City of Buffalo, but over time many move to inner-ring suburbs. There are no official welcoming efforts active at the county level, but the City of Buffalo has an ONA. The ONA is not included in the city charter, and therefore it is not required by law (meaning, that if the next mayor wants to get rid of this office, they can). A recent change in leadership in the ONA resulted in the office being housed within the Office of Diversity, Opportunity and Inclusion, rather than in the Law Office where it

originally existed. It is unclear why this change was made, and what it means for the work done by the ONA, although I suspect it is because the previous director had a joint appointment as a lawyer with the city. Starting in 2015, the role of this office is to:

...ensure that Buffalo remains a welcoming city and a preferred resettlement site in the United States. ONA works to create economic and academic opportunities within the City's incumbent population and in its growing refugee and immigrant communities. Its mission is to promote access to City services, area resources and to implement policies that facilitate the successful integration of newcomers into the civic, economic, and cultural life of Buffalo. (City of Buffalo, n.d.)

This description of the goals for welcoming refugees is shared on the City of Buffalo website, but when asked how this would be accomplished, interviewees from the city were not able to articulate this. The new ONA director reflects on their vision for the office:

My biggest vision...being able to hear from the residents first. Because the problem is, I think people come into different spaces and say "hey this is what I'm going to do for you." Instead of saying "hey, what do you need?" Being able to get that communication rather easily, so people being able to reach me easily and say "hey, here are some issues we are dealing with and going to the different offices and making that transition seamless." And also making that transition seamless for more people coming into the country. (Interviewee 11)

While this vision is articulated, there is no description as to how this will be done. A LRA representative and leader in the field, reflects on the role and symbolism of this office, expressing hesitations about the ONA:

I guess the best of it is that it's an external signal that the mayor cares about refugees, that he created this office, that he stands at the podium and raises the flag from Burma on the appropriate day and goes to the events and things like that. So that's really the best of it. The negative side or the worst of it, the least of it, is that it doesn't really have a focus. And it hasn't, anyway, worked with the [local resettlement] agencies at all. And actually, Erie County, around the same time, the county executive created a task force on New Americans or something like that. And again, a little bit of a photo op, not super clear what the strategy was. (Interviewee 12)

As this interviewee expresses, without involvement of those working more directly with refugees (LRAs and RCOs), and without actionable items or a clear, transparent agenda, this person has little faith in the capacity and potential of the ONA.

At the county level, the Kent County Welcome Plan was published in 2020, and a welcome plan coordinator was hired in 2022 with the charge of implementing the plan. While the county led work on the Welcoming Plan, a change in county administrator resulted in decreased financial support, shifting what the welcome plan steering committee was able to accomplish (like Buffalo, funding for the work in Kent County hinges on support from leadership). A staff member from the City of Grand Rapids reflects on the challenges that occurred with this change in leadership:

We thought we had a plan because the county said that they were going to fund a full-time coordinator. And then the county switched administrators and they went from like, "Yeah we'll fund them, we'll house them," to "We're not going to do any of that." We went two years without a coordinator. We really lost momentum. (Interviewee 23)

Because the change in county administrator resulted in a loss of funding support for this position, funds that were earmarked for programming had to be used for salary support. One city employee notes the monetary challenges that came with this shift:

The county's not paying for that [Welcome Plan Coordinator salary]. We had to raise funds from banks and hospitals and that money was actually...used to pay for [Welcome Plan Coordinator's salary] was supposed to be used for programming to move some of these recommendations forward or having these large gatherings of that task force...Now we don't have any resources...It's frustrating that people don't follow through with their word. (Interviewee 23)

The welcome plan coordinator has a background in education and previously worked with refugee populations. While not from a refugee or immigrant background, they are fluent in Spanish, the second most spoken language in Grand Rapids. Prior to their hire, much of the work at the county was led by the chief inclusion officer for the county. While the welcome plan coordinator leads the implementation of the welcome plan, the plan itself was guided by an extensive steering committee.

Grand Rapids is the major city in Kent County, but the majority of refugees live in the nearby City of Kentwood. Neither municipality has a specific office for immigrants or new Americans, but they express verbal support for refugees living there. In response to former President Donald Trump's immigration ban, Mayor of Grand Rapids Rosemary Bliss issued a statement which included that she is "...disheartened and deeply concerned by the President's executive order on immigrants and refugees. This does not reflect the values of our community" (Boothe, 2017). In her statement, she goes on to discuss the local partners that the City of Grand Rapids works with to support immigrant communities (Boothe, 2017). Additionally, the City of

Kentwood City Commission adopted a resolution in response to Trump's executive order, showing unanimous support for refugees (City of Kentwood, n.d.).

Respondents report both disconnection and collaboration between staff at the City of Grand Rapids and Kent County. Representatives from the City of Grand Rapids are included in the Welcome Plan Steering Committee (Caudill et al., 2020). Yet, when a representative from the City of Kentwood was asked about the welcome plan, the representative seemed very confused, unsure what the point of it is and what the role of the county is in resettlement (Interviewee 26).

Refugee-led community organizations in Erie and Kent Counties

Both Erie and Kent counties have numerous RCOs, with a variety of statuses - from grassroots and informal, to having 501-C3 (non-profit) status. RCO leaders included in the study are from populations that arrived in the U.S. in the past 20 years. One community leader reflects on how they help their community: "I'm a pastor and I do a lot of things in the community. So basically, I help the community to do a lot of work. So, interpreting, taking them to appointments. Basically, I'm kind of like a social worker" (Interviewee 19). This person went on to report that they help their community in various ways so that others do not have to struggle in the same way that they did when they arrived. While RCOs are one avenue of support, there are many community leaders that may be working individually, rather than as a collective group.

Currently, the largest group of refugees in Buffalo are those originally from Burma, therefore there are many RCOs in the Burmese and Karen communities. One large RCO that has 501-C3 status and a physical space receives funding from a variety of sources to run a cultural after-school program for students and hold drop in hours for community members who need assistance with a variety of services. They currently have four employees and are going through

a strategic planning process. Other RCOs include one that has led to a farm that serves a broader community. There are other RCOs that exist, but these are not visible to the broader population.

Similar to Erie County, because of the informality of many RCOs, it is impossible to know the number of organizations in Kent County. There are at least two organizations that serve the Congolese community, and one that serves the Bhutanese community. One RCO leader reflected on the difference between the experience they had when they arrived as one of the first people from their home country in Kent County, versus today when there are RCOs to support their population: “The big difference is because now you have people with experience who are mentoring the newer ones, because that is almost the kind of job I do” (Interviewee 19). Additionally, there is a strong network of religious institutions in Kent County. Many services that RCOs provide are also provided by the many churches and other religious institutions.

Other supportive non-profits in Erie and Kent Counties

Both Kent and Erie counties have a plethora of additional organizations that support refugee populations outside of these LRAs, LCGs and RCOs. Some may be centered around activities like gardening, farming, or art, while others are geared towards service delivery. In some instances, these organizations solely support refugees, while in others they also support the larger population.

A framework for integration: Inclusion in comprehensive and welcome plans

In this section, I first examine how refugee populations are included in comprehensive plans and subsequently, in welcome plans (see Table 7). I analyze the plans using Ager and Strang’s Conceptual Framework of Integration (Figure 4) as a lens, as this provides a more holistic view of what is crucial for refugee integration.

Table 7*Inclusion of Domains of Integration in Plans*

	Erie County Plans		Kent County Plans	
Ager and Strang’s Domains of Integration	Queen City in the 21 st Century	New Americans Study	Grand Rapids Master Plan	Kent County Welcome Plan
Markers and Means				
Employment	X	X	X	X
Housing	X	X	X	
Education	X	X	X	X
Health	X		X	
Social Connection				
Social Bridges	X	X	X	X
Social Bonds		X	X	X
Social Links		X	X	
Facilitators				
Language and Cultural Knowledge	X	X		X
Safety and Stability	X	X	X	X
Foundation				
Rights and Citizenship		X		X

Comprehensive plans as a venue for refugee inclusion

While comprehensive plans are not specific to refugee populations, they are a long-range planning document that ideally meets the needs of all community members, developed with significant community input. They are not required in all states, but are in New York and Michigan. Comprehensive plans normally include the existing conditions of a place and provide a vision and recommendations. Welcome plans are not required anywhere, but are a tool that LCGs are starting to use in order to collaborate across entities and show support for new American populations. Unlike comprehensive plans, welcome plans have no blueprint or guidance, so LCGs have more freedom in drafting and organizing these plans.⁹

⁹ Welcoming America, a funder of welcome plans, may provide guidance on content and formatting of welcome plans.

The City of Buffalo Comprehensive Plan: Queen City in the 21st Century

Buffalo's most recent comprehensive plan is *Queen City in the 21st Century: Buffalo's Comprehensive Plan*, adopted in 2006. Since then, the Buffalo Green Code was adopted, which is Buffalo's zoning and land use plan, the first zoning code in over half a century. The research questions in this study address what planning for inclusion of refugee populations, particularly in terms of integration; a city's zoning and land use is irrelevant to this, and thus the zoning and land use plan is not included here. The City of Buffalo's comprehensive plan "... lays out a clear set of policies, development priorities, and action programs aimed at achieving the community's overarching goal for the city: to reverse Buffalo's decline in population and employment and rebuild it for the 21st century" (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 59).

The word "refugee" is not included in the comprehensive plan (this may in part be due to the fact that the plan was adopted in 2006, before a large influx of refugees in Buffalo was underway), but "immigrant" is included four times. Somalis are referenced once, but no other refugee groups are mentioned, and Somalis are mentioned in reference in change of country of origin: "From Germans to Somalis" (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006). The term "immigrant" is first used to explain the limited interactions that city residents have with people of other races and ethnicities (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 20). The term is next used when talking about diversity in the city:

Diversity in culture and opinion is appropriate and worthy of celebration, particularly in a democracy. But without a strong set of institutions to foster cross-group interaction and deliberation, these divisions are likely to hamper the region's ability to solve problems and find consensus over a range of regional concerns. This needs to be addressed. Yet the diversity of community can still be an asset. Buffalo's history shows how the people of

various ethnic groups – from the first German immigrants to the most recent Somalis – all found a place in the city where they could live, express pride in their identities, and share their culture with their neighbors. The city could be divided into ghettos and exclusionary enclaves or it could become a mosaic of neighborhoods where diverse ethnic groups and cultures flourish and visitors are welcome to enjoy the differences of their neighbors. It seems clear the latter course will better support the broad goals of this plan. (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 21)

While it is positive that the authors of the plan see diversity as an asset, they discuss diversity as a way for saving and revitalizing a rust belt city that has experienced immense population loss, not seeing this population as one they should necessarily support. In the quote above, ‘diversity’ is the focus, which is more about demographic context in the area, rather than about refugees’ integration or providing support for the sake of it. This viewpoint shows that cities see refugees as an economic asset and a way to support a suffering city: the onus is on refugees to revitalize the city, rather than the receiving city to do anything to support refugees in need.

The last two instances the term “immigrant” is used, the plan is referring to the Good Neighbors Planning Alliance (GNPA) Neighborhood Plans. They state that the GNPA should: Dramatically improve the welcoming of immigrants to Buffalo, and in the process breathe new life into our city. Collaborate with local resettlement agencies that bring diverse newcomers to the Buffalo area to provide immigrants with housing, education, social, and employment services. We need to strategically improve how these people are served and expand this inflow, as other cities like Utica, Minneapolis, and Cleveland have done. (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 87)

By saying “breathe new life into our city,” the writers seem to stress the view of refugees as saviors of a suffering city. But, juxtaposed with the acknowledgement that collaboration among agencies is needed to deliver services to this population (Chapter 5 explores collaboration among these entities).

Despite the limited mention of immigrants and reference to refugees, the plan’s seven priorities address aspects of Ager and Strang’s Conceptual Framework of Integration that could, conceivably, improve the quality of life of refugees. The priorities range from delivering quality services, to reconstructing the Buffalo Public Schools, and transforming the city’s economy (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 68). Like many comprehensive plans, the document focuses on economy, community, environment, and infrastructure. In the remainder of this section, I explore how domains that Ager and Strang (2008) outline are included in Buffalo’s comprehensive plan.

Various markers and means – what Ager and Strang (2008) call employment, housing, education, and health – are included in the plan (and are topics that are routinely included in comprehensive plans). As the plan strongly focuses on rebuilding the region and the economy, employment is mentioned numerous times. Section 1.3 of the plan covers national trends in employment, as well as sectoral shifts in the region (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 10). The plan also discusses the economy and employment in regards to transportation:

The City of Buffalo continues to support collaborative efforts to plan and implement an efficient regional transportation system that also improves the city’s economy. The transportation network created for Buffalo was designed to serve the needs of a significantly larger population than is here today. Nevertheless, former industrial sites lack adequate access to make them viable for reuse. The transportation network needs to

be extended to these areas to increase the integration and connectivity of the system across and between modes for people and freight. (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 17)

While the plan does not explicitly discuss connecting transportation to employment opportunities, it is alluded to here.¹⁰

As is routine in comprehensive plans, housing is discussed. With an old housing stock and significant outmigration over the years, much of Buffalo's housing stock is in poor condition, and in 2000, over 15% of the homes were vacant (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, pp. 23–24). The plan outlines some of the major challenges and the city's role in regards to housing:

The city faces a series of housing challenges. Local government is required to continue provision of affordable housing, including emergency housing for those in need. It must assure the maintenance of rental housing and promote renovation and rehabilitation for both rental and owner-occupied homes where it is cost effective to do so. It must provide incentives for increasing home ownership. It must demolish and redevelop vacant and abandoned properties that cannot be renovated or reconfigured. Importantly, the City needs to create the conditions for private sector residential investment. (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 24)

Through conversations with RCO leaders, many refugees want to buy homes as soon as possible, and networks for people come together to support these dreams. Whether refugees are knowledgeable of or can access programming around rental and rehabilitation assistance is unclear.

¹⁰ Transportation is not a domain that Ager and Strang include, but many interviewees mentioned it as a challenge.

Ager and Strang's domain "markers and means" also includes education. A subsection on public education is included in the "Challenges, resources, and context" section of the plan (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 30). The plan states the following:

Improving public education and restoring confidence in Buffalo's public schools is a crucial element in efforts to reverse the economic and population decline of the city.

Public consultations supporting the development of the Comprehensive Plan confirm the widespread perception that lack of confidence in the quality of public education in Buffalo has been a major factor behind the continuing migration of population from the city. While it is true that the Buffalo system has some excellent schools, failure to respond to the demands of "consumers" of public education will hobble all efforts to achieve the goal of the plan. (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 30)

The plan goes on to discuss the options of charter and private schools. The challenges that come with educating English language learners are not included in the plan. The Buffalo Public Schools are not run by the city, so there is only so much control that the city has.

Lastly, health is included of the domain of markers and means. Health is discussed multiple times throughout the plan in terms of urban design, park space, and tapping into the health care system, but not in terms of expanding access to care.

Ager and Strang's next domain is social connection, which includes social bridges, bonds, and links. Largely, this topic is not discussed in the plan. The plan does include a desire to promote social bridging: "...they [initiatives to restore and expand aspects of urban design] will provide the structure and framework for rebuilding the city, moving to the new economy and promoting social integration of the community" (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 91). Outside of this excerpt, there is nothing about strengthening social bonds or social links.

The third domain of Ager and Strang's framework is facilitators, which includes language and cultural knowledge and safety and stability. Cultural knowledge is included in the plan in the discussion of the breadth of arts, culture and heritage in the city and the challenges these organizations have in securing funding:

There is also great strength in multi-cultural and community-based organizations such as the African-American Cultural Center, Buffalo Inner City Ballet, Los Caribes, El Museo Francisco Oller y Diego Rivera, Gardner's Pick of the Crop Dance, Locust St. Neighborhood Art Classes, Neto Hatinkawe Okwehowe, and many others. Yet these are also times of extraordinary struggles for the arts, cultural and heritage organizations. The City government's own financial crisis forced the suspension of funding for dozens of arts and cultural organizations starting with the 2002-2003 fiscal year. With many organizations heavily dependent on public funding, the difficulties brought on by funding cuts have been severe. (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 33)

The authors of the plan include smaller arts organizations (there are plenty of large, well-funded arts organizations in the city), but do not offer suggestions for stabilizing them. Preserving or highlighting culture or language access is not included in the plan.

In terms of safety and stability, public safety is discussed throughout the plan. Two quotes exhibit examples of challenges related to crime and policing:

Crime and fear of crime is a key challenge for the Comprehensive Plan to meet. Public consultations for this plan confirmed the common understanding that city-dwellers are concerned about crime. If Buffalo is to reverse current downward trends in employment and population, effective action must be taken to ensure that Buffalo is a safe place to

live and work – and that people feel safe in the city, too. Improving public safety is a precondition for renewed growth in Buffalo. (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 21)

Here, the authors of the plan view safety as a precursor to economic revitalization. Yet, how to prevent and dissuade crime is not agreed upon:

Community Oriented Policing remains a popular approach to crime prevention.

Community policing programs focus on building partnerships between law enforcement officers and community organizations and residents to respond to neighborhood level concerns in a timely and effective manner. There has been some tension between community policing approaches and the district reorganization of the Buffalo Police Department. Although this will continue to be a matter of debate, it should be noted that community policing and efficient organization and management of police forces are not mutually exclusive. (Office of Strategic Planning, 2006, p. 22)

Similar to education, while the plan touches on issues of policing, the city has little control over this. The final domain, foundations (which includes rights and citizenship) is not included in the comprehensive plan.

As stated earlier, in comparison to welcome plans comprehensive plans are more prescriptive in terms of the topic areas they include. It is not surprising that there is limited information about social bonds and social links in the plan, and the limited information on refugee populations is expected due to the date of publication.

Grand Rapids Comprehensive Plan: Community Master Plan

The City of Grand Rapids Community Master Plan was adopted in 2002, the first in almost 40 years. The website states that the city is currently in a pre-planning phase for a new community master plan, a vision for the next 20 years. The forthcoming plan is expected to be

adopted in 2024 (City of Grand Rapids, n.d.). The words “immigrant”, “refugee”, and the term “new American” do not show up throughout the plan, which may be in part due to the time of publishing (prior to the boom in resettlement in the mid-2010s). The plan serves as a vision, blueprint, and strategy for the City of Grand Rapids (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, p. 2) and is organized around the following themes: “great neighborhoods, vital business districts, a strong economy, balanced transportation, a city that enriches our lives, a city in balance with nature, and partnerships” (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, p. 24).

What Ager and Strang (2008) refer to as markers and means (employment, housing, education, and health) are included in the plan. Typical for plans, an entire chapter is dedicated to building a strong economy “so that Grand Rapids’ residents prosper, and that revenues needed to provide important urban services and amenities are available” (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, p. 63). Often, refugees in Kent County work in industrial jobs, many which are difficult to get to on public transportation. The plan aims to change this:

The Master Plan recommends that major job centers be located on transit lines so that employees have the option of getting to work without their cars. In addition, the expanded use of transportation...Streets that carry major volumes of traffic should also be designed to ensure that they create an appropriate environment for pedestrians and cyclists, as well as cars and trucks. (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, p. 71)

Ensuring that various modes of transportation can be used to get people to work is crucial. While a minor detail, the language used above is illuminating as to the culture around personal vehicles. The plan states that “...employees have the option of getting to work without *their* cars” (emphasis added), assuming that everyone owns a personal vehicle.

As is typical in comprehensive plans, housing is discussed extensively. The plan refers to the “American dream” when discussing the prospect of home ownership. The authors of the plan share a vision for both owner-occupied and rental housing:

Home ownership for all income, racial, ethnic and disability groups will increase in many neighborhoods that have low rates of owner occupancy. Effective affordable housing and homebuyer assistance programs will help first time owners to achieve the American Dream. Grand Rapids will succeed in ensuring that rental housing is also a neighborhood asset. (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, p. 28)

While the plan includes a goal of a diverse group of people having the ability to own homes, it also includes an objective to “Provide quality rental housing” (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, p. 44).

As stated in the previous section, while transportation is not included in Ager and Strang’s definition of markers and means, issues related to transportation are often discussed among RCO leaders, and thus included here. In the plan, housing and neighborhoods are discussed in relation to transportation, with two objectives being “locate new higher density residential development to capitalize on transit and improve land use transitions” and “promote walkable neighborhoods by encouraging the development of a connected street system and allowing for a mix of uses” (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, pp. 44–45). In the implementation chapter, the authors acknowledge that in Michigan, automobile transportation reigns supreme, but that this needs to change:

Some of the recommendations of the Plan, such as viable transportation choices and traffic calming could be perceived as a challenge to the automobile. This perception is not necessarily reality. There is a growing recognition that sole reliance on the

automobile as a transportation option is not a sustainable strategy for the future of a city like Grand Rapids. The Action Plan recommends that we make the case that viable transportation options are a contribution to the long term economic viability of the region through fixed-route transit planning. (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, p. 173)

The authors of the plan acknowledge that public transit is needed for economic success in the city, yet language included in the plan shows that personal vehicles are typical.

Education is included in the plan through recognition of the importance of schools in community building. One objective is to “recognize the important role of neighborhood schools in building and maintaining communities” (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, p. 45). There are multiple school districts in the City of Grand Rapids (Michigan Department of Technology, Management, and Budget, 2013), which may be the reason for limited inclusion of education in the plan.

Ager and Strang’s (2008) next domain is social connection. Social connections are primarily included in the plan through discussion of their guiding principle of partnership, as well as diversity in neighborhoods. In terms of social links, the plan includes the following:

We make decisions and accomplish our plans in an open, inclusive and collaborative manner. We empower people to contribute their ideas, work toward consensus and take responsibility for achieving a shared vision of the future. We work in partnership – neighborhoods, businesses, investors, non-profits, institutions, schools, city government and surrounding jurisdictions – to capitalize on the synergy of pooled resources and expertise. (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, p. 4)

The authors of the plan recognize the partnerships needed in order to make the vision of the plan a reality. The plan goes on to discuss how the community was involved in the planning process:

The Master Plan process was designed to maximize community involvement and to gain consensus on Plan recommendations. Community participation was structured to balance the need to take the planning process to the people and the need to bring people from across the city together to share perspectives and confirm citywide directions as key milestones. In each step of the planning process, community input helped to define the direction and refine the content of the Master Plan (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, p. 22)

How this actually happened is unclear, and because twenty years passed between publishing the plan and this study, I did not ask study participants whether they recall if they heard about opportunities for participation. In terms of social bonding and social bridging, the plan states “neighborhoods need community/recreation centers for classes, meetings and other activities,” (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, p. 90) yet in interviews, respondents reported that these spaces haven’t been provided by the city for refugee groups.

Ager and Strang’s third domain, facilitators, includes language and cultural knowledge as well as safety and stability. While language and cultural knowledge are not explicitly discussed, the topic of diversity is mentioned numerous times. Diversity is talked about in the context of what constitutes the building of a strong neighborhood. The importance of a diverse array of housing options is also discussed, but within this discussion the plan states that “neighborhoods should be blessed with strong local churches”, omitting other religions from the plan (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, p. 28). In terms of safety, “provide safe

neighborhoods” is included as an objective (City of Grand Rapids Planning Department, 2002, p. 45).

Ager and Strang’s final domain foundation includes rights and citizenship. This domain is not touched on at all in the plan. Similar to the City of Buffalo comprehensive plan, the lack of information about immigrants and refugees in the plan may be because of the date of publication, which is years before the resettlement of refugees in Kent County ramped up.

Local and county government welcoming work

While not required or routine, local and county governments are beginning to engage in plan making for new American populations. This is both in an effort to retain and grow populations and to support new Americans. The national non-profits Welcoming America and the National Immigration Council have partnered to fund what they call Gateways for Growth grants. Through this program, 28 LCGs have developed welcome plans (American Immigration Council & Welcoming America, n.d.). There are no specifics that need to be included in a welcome plan, unlike a comprehensive plan; formatting of and topic areas included in the plan are up to the authors.

Kent County received one of these grants and published a plan in 2020. The City of Buffalo has not pursued a Gateways for Growth grant, but they did conduct a study which was published in 2016, titled the New Americans Study. Because of its similarity to a welcome plan, it is included here.

Kent County Welcome Plan

The Kent County Welcome Plan was published in 2020, funded by a Gateways for Growth grant from Welcoming America. A steering committee of seven people led the planning process, with representatives from the City of Grand Rapids, Kent County, the West Michigan

Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the Grand Rapids Chamber, and Samaritas (one of two local resettlement agencies in Kent County) (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 4). None of the steering committee members come from a refugee background. The steering committee frames the plan in the following way:

We know how important a broadly diverse population is for the success of our state. Immigration is key to increasing diversity in our population and boosting our economy. Without immigration growth, the state of Michigan would be poised to lose population for the second census in a row. Perhaps even more impressive, the economic power of Grand Rapids' immigrant community alone grew by more than \$100 million in just one year, and immigrants in Grand Rapids hold nearly \$1.5 billion in spending power. At the core of this initiative is the belief that Grand Rapids and Kent County are home to everyone who lives here, and it should feel like it too. Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for New Americans in Kent County is not only the right thing to do, it also contributes economically to the area's wellbeing. We want New Americans to stay in the area; they'll stay if they feel welcomed, included, and valued. (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 5)

This framing puts population and economic growth at the forefront of the plan, viewing new Americans as a way to save cities and regions in decline. Welcoming and inclusion is included, but as a way to foster growth.

As stated earlier, welcome plans do not have the same history and requirement that comprehensive plans do. Therefore, it is not surprising that domains in Ager and Strang's (2008) Conceptual Framework of Integration are more often included in the Kent County Welcome Plan, as the authors have more flexibility to include what they deem important and respondents

reported needs in these categories. The first domain, markers and means (encompassing employment, housing, education, and health) is incorporated through various priorities and goals. In terms of employment, priority one is the “freedom to work in my desired profession” (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 6). This is an important and unsurprising priority, as many refugees are unable to utilize the skills they bring and are thus underemployed. Additionally, goals in the section “maximize the economic potential of New Americans” include to “enhance business resources for New American entrepreneurs and business owners” and “help New Americans maximize and leverage their skill sets and promote best practices to hire and retain New Americans” (Caudill et al., 2020, pp. 16–17). Between these goals and the ways in which New Americans are discussed – as major economic contributors – economics and employment are major themes throughout the plan.

Education is included in the plan numerous times. Priority four is “Being actively involved in my children’s education, safety and future” (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 6) and a goal is to “prepare and support New Americans to successfully complete secondary education ready for college enrollment and completion, or work” (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 21). These examples encompass many domains, such as social links and language (parents having the ability to work with and communicate with their child’s educators) as well as employment.

Lastly, housing is not included in the plan which is surprising, as many respondents talked about the competitive housing market in Kent County. Health is not explicitly included, but one goal in achieving equitable access to services is to “supplement support for refugees beyond the current three months offered by the federal government” (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 26), which presumably includes accessing healthcare.

Ager and Strang's next domain is social connections, which include social bonds, social bridges, and social links. This domain is included once in the welcome plan, through the following goal: "increase connectedness among and between communities to foster a deeper sense of belonging in Kent County" (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 13). This encompasses social bonds and bridges, but leaves out social links between refugee populations and those in government or other positions of power.

The third domain, facilitators, includes language and cultural knowledge and safety and security. There are numerous examples from the plan that encompass these themes. In terms of language and cultural knowledge, priority two is the "freedom to maintain my culture, religion and traditions" (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 6), an understandable desire. In terms of language, priority three is "achieving desired level of English" (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 6) and goals later in the plan are to "improve English as a Second Language (ESL) services to adapt to New Americans' current language and life needs" (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 20) and "improve ESL services to adapt to the current language and life needs of New Americans" (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 23). Language also is included in relation to employment. The plan states the following goal: "Increase organizations' capacity to serve their customers through the hiring of staff with language and cultural competency skills that are reflective of the communities they serve" (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 24). The examples of language and culture knowledge included throughout the plan balance both the desire for refugees to maintain the rich cultures and traditions they bring, while adapting and learning new language and cultures in Kent County.

Safety and security are also included numerous times in the plan. Priority four is "being actively involved in my children's education, safety, and future" (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 6). Ensuring that all Kent County residents feel safe is also a priority. The plan states that the county

should “Enhance relationships and communication between NA and law enforcement to better serve and protect the community and keep officers safe” (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 28), followed by various recommendations and strategies to do this. The weight on this section of the plan was heightened, and most likely felt a bit hollow, after the killing of Patrick Lyoya by a police officer, two years after the release of the plan. The last domain, foundations, includes rights and citizenship. This is only included once, through the following goal: “Support New Americans to be in elected office and on commissions, boards, and key decision-making tables” (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 15)

Overall, the Kent County Welcome Plan is quite comprehensive when it comes to including domains found in the Conceptual Framework of Integration. How these are actually received by the greater refugee community will be explored in chapter six.

City of Buffalo New Americans Study

Lastly, the City of Buffalo New Americans Study was published in 2016 prior to the opening of the Office of New Americans. The plan states the following:

The findings of this study underscore the need for community leadership and strategic direction in addressing the concerns of immigrants and refugees. Mayor Brown has acted on this need by requesting funding and – with the unanimous support of Common Council – opening the Office of New Americans. (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 5)

The city hired a consulting agency to execute the study, and the study team also included local representatives from a college and the United Way (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 4). The research team reviewed census data and enrollment figures, and also conducted focus groups and stakeholder interviews (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 4). The study identifies four categories, which contain 27 strategies, many of which are outlined below. The four categories are as follows:

welcoming, settling in, strengthening, and moving forward (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 5) Similar to the Kent County Welcome Plan, the City of Buffalo's New Americans Study is more comprehensive in including domains from the conceptual framework of integration (2008) in comparison to the comprehensive plans reviewed. Again, this is expected, as the study is specifically for new American populations.

Markers and means (employment, housing, education, health) are all included in the study. Six of the 27 strategies are related to employment: "promote business districts," "develop effective vocational training," "expand employment programs," "increase entrepreneurial efforts," "facilitate professional careers," and "expand workforce opportunities" (City of Buffalo, 2016, pp. 9–14). These strategies can provide opportunities for refugees to engage in entrepreneurial efforts and jobs that match with the skills they bring.

Unlike the Kent County Welcome Plan, housing is included through two strategies. The first is to "expand resettlement into new neighborhoods" (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 8), as housing prices have skyrocketed in the West Side of Buffalo where many refugees initially resettled. This strategy also connects refugees with other groups, as the plan shared that a housing coalition in a predominantly Black neighborhood has developed a plan to incorporate refugees and immigrants into the community. The next strategy is to "ensure adequate housing" (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 9), which is especially challenging with the old and deteriorating housing stock in Buffalo. The plan suggests the following:

Buffalo Urban Renewal Agency can coordinate efforts among housing inspectors, non-profit providers, resettlement agencies, Ethnic Community-Based Organizations, and landlords to ensure that all are aware of property standards and how to work together to avoid landlord-tenant conflicts. (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 9)

What is missing from this strategy is an effort to get refugees into owner-occupied housing, which is one of the main priorities within refugee communities.

Education is covered through four strategies in the study. Similar to the Kent County Welcome Plan, the study suggests “pursu(ing) opportunities for parental involvement” (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 12). Additionally, another priority is to “provide specialized training for school personnel” (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 11). Two strategies are included in an effort to increase education access: “encourage participation in enrichment programs” and “improve access to adult education” (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 12). These strategies meet the needs of both youth currently enrolled in school and adults interested in furthering their education. What is missing are programs for those that have aged out of school, but still need to graduate, and also programs to ensure that people can use skills and degrees they obtained in their home country.

Just as the Kent County Welcome Plan outlines, the only strategy in the New American Study that skims the topic of health is to “enhance post resettlement services” which would help refugees navigate health services and appointments (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 6)

Ager and Strang’s next domain is social connections, which encompasses social bonds, social bridges, and social links. Each of the 27 strategies listed in the plan have a description of potential partners to engage in achieving this strategy, often including refugee-led community organizations. Additionally, two strategies explicitly address social connections. “Encourage community engagement” refers to LCG and the broader community engaging with refugee populations to celebrate their cultures (social bridges) (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 8). The second strategy addresses social bonds, as it is to “establish a community space” (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 10). The plan includes the following:

A consistent request from refugees is to develop a multi-purpose space to house services for their community. Representatives from Ethnic Community-Based Organizations have

indicated that they would be able to assume greater responsibility for providing assistance within their communities if such a facility were available. (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 10)

At this point in time, no space has yet to be made available.

The third domain, facilitators, encompasses language and cultural knowledge and safety and security. This domain is represented numerous times in the study. The following strategies touch on language and cultural knowledge: “improve language access” and “facilitate cultural exchanges“ (City of Buffalo, 2016, pp. 6–7). Another strategy is to “increase language access for health and human service providers” (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 11). These strategies increase communication and cultural understanding between refugee populations, service providers, and the broader population. Local advocates have pushed for the Erie County Language Access Law, which would require county departments to have language services available in six languages (Dennison, 2022). As of this writing, it has passed at the senate level.

Two strategies touch on safety and security. One is to “engage with the police department,” which goes on to suggests collaborative efforts towards community policing (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 10). The study discusses issues of trust with police, and language barriers that police have. Another strategy, if implemented, will be used with the police department, which is to “provide cultural sensitivity training” (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 15).

Lastly, the domain of foundations, which includes rights and citizenship, is seen through four strategies in the plan. The first, tangentially related, is to “promote civic participation,” as “refugees are generally unrepresented in civic organizations” (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 8). While this does not explicitly pertain to rights in citizenship, forums for refugee involvement and representation in city government can impact refugees’ rights. The next pertinent strategy is to “pass a welcoming city ordinance,” which would require city employees to take part in trainings

to prepare them for working with refugee residents (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 15). Similarly, the next strategy is a cultural sensitivity training for city employees (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 15). The last two strategies are to “expand the Office of New Americans capacity” and to “establish a New Americans advisory council” (City of Buffalo, 2016, pp. 15–16). Having a dedicated office in the city, along with a council to provide ongoing advice, would strengthen the direction of work in Buffalo. Unfortunately, more than five years after the publication of this study, this council does not exist.

Overall, the City of Buffalo’s New Americans Study is quite comprehensive in terms of covering the domains that Ager and Strang present (2008). Topics traditionally covered in comprehensive plans, such as housing, employment, and transportation are included, as are topics specific to refugee populations, such as social connections and language access. Still, with only one person staffing the ONA, it is up to a single person to spearhead implementation of the plan. How effective this has been will be explored in chapter six.

Welcoming work: Too little too late

In the previous section, I outline the content of comprehensive and welcome plans in Kent and Erie Counties, viewed through the lens of Ager and Strang’s Conceptual Framework of Integration (Figure 4). The comprehensive plans for the City of Buffalo and City of Grand Rapids include domains from the framework that are typically found in comprehensive plans, like housing and employment or economic development. But, many topics relevant to refugee integration, like rights and citizenship and social connection, are not. On the other hand, the Kent County Welcome Plan and the City of Buffalo’s New American Study both thoroughly cover domains from the framework. In this section, I reflect on where this work falls short, whether

through rollout of the plans,¹¹ collaborations, and engagement of refugee communities in plan making processes and work in general.

While comprehensive and welcome plans are one way of supporting the needs of refugee populations, executing a study or writing a plan does not mean that they are effective. How LCGs engage with refugee communities in planning processes, both in having leadership from refugee communities represented in leadership positions, and in having representation from the broader refugee community, is the next part of the picture. In order to craft useful plans or host events pertinent to refugee communities, it is crucial that plan makers listen to those voices. Lastly, having buy-in from community leaders is essential for the broader community to see the point of the plan.

No interviewees mentioned the comprehensive plans, which may be due to two reasons. First, the comprehensive plans for Grand Rapids and Buffalo were written almost 20 years ago, so those – especially those working or involved in resettlement – may not see them as relevant, since the major influx of refugees began after publication. Secondly, as discussed in the introduction, planning has not been viewed as having a role in resettlement. Outside those that directly worked on the Kent County Welcome Plan or City of Buffalo New Americans Study, other interviewees did not bring it up on their own.

Throughout interviews with leaders of different refugee communities, many people commented on missed opportunities – when LCGs missed the mark. One of the first challenges with the welcome plans is rollout. While Kent County had a lot of momentum when it came to seeking funding and writing the welcome plan, the plan was set to be published in 2020, an unfortunate time due to the pandemic. Those involved in leadership of the plan noted that it

¹¹ While I do comment on how aspects of the plans are received, this is not an assessment of actual plan implementation.

included many innovative proposals coming out of needs that emerged during the pandemic, such as a diversity, equity, and inclusion council at the county. One set of interviewees reflect on the ways in which steering committee had to pivot their work:

Interviewee 1: [The county] led a lot of initiatives to try to help get public safety information out to people of non-English speaking backgrounds. So, they [the county] did a lot of work with us and with Hispanic Center and a few other partners that interact with the immigrant communities on a regular basis, whether it was about stuff that was happening downtown, there's curfews...

Interviewee 2: Crisis communications, vaccines.

Interviewee 1: So we did a lot of development work with them. In fact, we purchased a software application that can translate by text message. So, we can type in something in English through a company called Talking Points based out of California. But us and the county went in together and purchased the license so that we can test it out and see. We could type in a message in English, and it goes to somebody who we sign up on their phone via text message in their language. That's pretty cool. But yeah, a lot of the engagement in 2020 was just trying to figure out how to get people accurate information. And 2020 was chaotic. (Interviewee 22)

The funder of the welcome plan, Welcoming America, required that the unveiling of the plan be a public event, but likely because of pandemic restrictions, it did not have a broad reach.

Unfortunately, everyone was swept up in pandemic response work and the welcome plan launch was ineffective. One respondent reflects on this:

We just really hadn't got to work on it yet so much in a public way to build that trust. And so, I think the welcome plan hasn't had the opportunity to be, well, if you say that was a

test, I think in a way that we failed in the jury of [the] public, in the community's opinion, because it wasn't really making a meaningful impact on them at that point. But I think as we think about the pandemic and just the timing of hiring a new coordinator like [name], she just got started. It's just regrettable that we hadn't pushed it out and given it time to be more well understood and known, and then to be worked on. (Interviewee 22)

This steering committee member acknowledges the failures of the dissemination of the welcome plan, yet does not offer solutions to remedy the situation.

In the City of Buffalo, the Office of New Americans, which was a result of the New Americans Study, was launched in 2015. Multiple leaders from RCOs and LRAs discussed the lack of visibility and work from the Office of New Americans. But during my interview in 2022, the Director of the Office of New Americans suggested that changes may be happening: "...I am putting together a new Americans advisory council, with new Americans from the community, to put them on a board. So, this is a real thing, it is not lip service. I am currently working on being a Certified Welcoming City" (Interviewee 11).

Another way that interviewees mentioned LCGs missing the mark is by actively not listening. One leader reflects on the school district both not taking them up on their offer of helping while also not listening to their suggestions:

So, the [school] district tried...I jumped in and said, you know, how can [name of RCO] help? But they were doing their own thing. ... I don't attend that meeting anymore, because I don't see any improvement. ...I don't know what they do, but whatever they do, I don't really attend anymore because I feel like I don't see any progress of our parents and kids being helped at that level. So, where we want them to be, I don't know if it's politics or whatever it is... We told them to try to hire people for them, or have teacher

assistants who are bilingual. If you don't want to hire, give them incentives or overtime payment to help these kids. And it's not happening. (Interviewee 4)

This RCO leader offers the support and services of their organization (which happens to run an after-school program), while also providing tangible suggestions as to how to improve the experience for refugee students in the classroom. Without engagement or change from institutions, RCO leaders lose faith and interest in offering help. This leader also reflected on how they provided the school on some insights in planning community events:

Sometimes [the resettlement agency that provides interpretation] does a whole thing, nobody comes, they [the school] has all the interpreters line up. Only like five, six, ten people you know from the Karen Burmese group, but there's five [different] interpreters. If you want to see numbers of people, you have to contact the leaders, the church leaders. You cannot just send an email "hey you know..." that's not how it works. I have told them, I have been telling them for 10 years. They don't do it. (Interviewee 4)

In this instance, the school is checking something off their list (having interpreters) to create a seemingly inclusive event. Yet, they do not take the next step and contact community members in a way that is useful to them, so that they actually know about and can attend the event. This type of surface level inclusion results in community leaders becoming disengaged.

These welcome plans are a missed opportunity. Staff time and resources are going into research and writing of the plans, which shows that LCGs have something on the line. At the same time, these initiatives are often spearheaded by one innovative person, and thus they hinge on support from that one person. For example, in Kent County, a change in county administrator resulted in the budget for the position of welcome coordinator being pulled. In order to fund the welcome plan coordinator, the budget for programming had to be used. Institutional buy-in and

thoughtful community engagement, where broad members from the refugee community are included, especially in positions of leadership, is needed.

Conclusion

This chapter explores comprehensive planning processes and welcoming work and how those facilitate the role of LCGs in meeting the needs of refugees, applying through Ager and Strang's Conceptual Framework of Integration (2008). I find that comprehensive plans typically don't cover domains in the framework that are not routinely covered in plans, like language and cultural knowledge or social connections; welcome plans are much more thorough in including these domains. Language included in these plans shows that cities see diversity as a way for revitalizing a city, viewing the refugee as a solution, rather than a resident to serve. The chapter concludes by outlining how LCGs' welcoming work have missed the mark, as building relationships and trust is the first step in effective programming and services. Data illustrate two instances where LCGs failed, either by not listening to leaders from the refugee community, or by using previous work as an excuse, without buy-in from the community.

In the next chapter, I outline how these entities – LRAs, LCGs, and RCOs – perceive and collaborate with one another in an effort to adequately serve refugee populations. As the federal resettlement program is limited, it is crucial that these three entities work towards a common goal of supporting refugees so that they can live to their full potential in their new homes.

Chapter 5 The Players in Resettlement: Collaborating Across Entities

In chapter 5 I explore the collaboration between LRAs, LCGs, and RCOs, answering the following question: how do local and county governments engage and interact with other refugee support organizations, both formal and informal? As the goal of resettlement is broad and rarely obtainable within the confines of the funding provided by the federal program, collaboration across entities is essential. In the first section, I describe the goals of the U.S. resettlement program, and how LRAs and LCGs attempt to enact these goals. In the second section, I explore the different roles these entities play in assisting refugees in their new homes, as well as how these different entities perceive one another. Findings show that the broad goals of the resettlement program require collaboration across entities, which in practice, does not happen. LRAs, LCGs, and RCOs tend to not understand what other organizations do or how they can collaborate together towards a common goal. I conclude this chapter with how and when the three entities collaborate with one another.

Local resettlement agencies: Under-resourced and limited in scope

As noted earlier, the goal of the U.S. refugee resettlement program is to “provide new populations with the opportunity to achieve their full potential in the United States” (Office of Refugee Resettlement, n.d.). Yet, the LRAs - those that actually deliver services initially - are not provided with adequate resources to help their clients achieve their full potential. In fiscal year 2017, the per-refugee grant (the amount LRAs received from the federal resettlement and placement program to administer services), was \$2,075 (Bruno, 2017). LRAs must use \$1,125

directly to support refugees, and \$950 can be used on staff time and infrastructure costs (Bruno, 2017). In fiscal year 2022 this amount was raised to \$2,275, still an insufficient amount, especially since this must cover the cost of securing housing (Jordan, 2023). Because resettlement organizations are mandated to work with their clients for only three months after arrival (although they can have a non-monetary extension to eight months pending refugees stay in the city they were resettled in), there is only so much that case workers can do. To fill this gap, many LRAs secure other avenues of funding to support their work, through donations or public or private funding sources (Fee, 2019). Even when LRAs are able to secure additional funds, services are limited in holistically assisting refugees. The small amount of funding from the federal program, and the fluctuation in numbers of those resettling in the U.S. leads to additional funds being spent on maintaining staff and services (Fee, 2019).

The insufficient funding of the federal program results in LRAs often only having the capacity to deliver basic services. Refugee resettlement processes in the U.S. center around “economic self-sufficiency by supporting quick employment and English language proficiency” (Okour, 2019, p. 39), and the success of refugees and LRAs is measured by this. As stated earlier, the ORR runs a Preferred Communities Program which places refugees in cities with low unemployment rates in hopes that they will find employment quickly (Okour, 2019). Nationally, this “work-first” approach to resettlement prioritizes helping refugees gain employment, rather than helping them access English language services or additional schooling so they gain the credentials needed to secure jobs in sectors where they already have skills, or low-skill work (Gonzalez Benson & Taccolini Panaggio, 2019). Scholars criticize the approach of resettlement agencies, claiming that resettlement agencies take an outsider perspective, treating refugees as a homogenous group (Westoby, 2008), not considering their individual needs. For example, a

refugee who was a nurse in their home country is likely to need additional schooling to be able to work as a nurse in the U.S. Unfortunately, a focus on getting a job as quickly as possible, rather than utilizing and expanding on the skills someone already brings, is typically the focus.

As outlined in Chapter 3, LRAs, LCGs, and RCOs each play different roles in resettlement. These entities are key supports for adjusting to life in the U.S. and can provide support at different times in the resettlement process. In this section, I outline the different LRAs, LCGs, and other supportive non-profits in Kent and Erie counties (see Table 8). I have intentionally left out the names of the RCOs to maintain the privacy of these organizations.

Table 8

LRAs, LCGs, and RCOs in Kent and Erie Counties

	Local Resettlement Agencies	Local and County Governments (only those included in this study)	Other Supportive Non-Profits
Erie County	- Catholic Charities - Journey’s End Refugee Services - Jewish Family Services - The International Institute	- City of Buffalo - Erie County	- Stitch Buffalo - Jericho Road - Grassroots Gardens of Western New York
Kent County	- Bethany Christian Services - Samaritas	- City of Grand Rapids - Kent County	- Treetops Collective - Refugee Education Center - African Resource Center

Local resettlement agencies in Erie and Kent Counties

Routinely, LRAs have the first contact with refugees upon their arrival in the U.S. LRA staff meet their refugee clients at the airport and bring them to their new homes, which they have set up with furniture and a culturally preferred meal. As explained earlier, LRAs receive funds

from the federal government for each refugee they resettle, but they must supplement with other funding sources in order to keep the lights on. One interviewee, a former director of an LRA, reflects on the challenges with this program, which LRAs have to navigate:

One of the biggest challenges...of the resettlement program is it's a 90-day program, which is just ridiculous. And so apart from the funding - which when I entered was stupidly low, now it's better - is the time frame. It's this micromanaged, hard ass kind of time frame that really doesn't align well with real needs. And there have been, I guess, signs of willingness to talk about how to revise it at the federal level, but that hasn't happened. And so again, agencies can struggle depending on their own finances, but it's impossible in the first 90 days to start to really do credit to some of these issues...And I don't know if you've ever seen the lists of the things the agencies are [required to do]... “Here's what you do in the first seven days. Then you do this.” You've got to have case notes. You get monitored. I mean, it's incredibly micromanaged. And so, the agencies, to a large extent, don't have a lot of latitude unless they have a ton of money that they can do other things with and a ton of staff. And that...certainly hasn't always been the case in my experience. (Interviewee 12)

As this interviewee outlines, working within the confines of the federal program is challenging not only because of the limited funds available, but because of the bureaucratization of the resettlement program over the past thirty years, resulting in detailed and rigid guidelines they must follow. Many LRAs seek out funding from other agencies that allows them to offer programming for refugees within their first five years in the U.S. (examples of programming include employment training programs and English language classes). Below, I go on to detail the LRAs and resettlement services in Kent and Erie counties.

Erie County local resettlement agencies

In Erie County, there are four resettlement agencies: Jewish Family Services, Catholic Charities, Journey's End Refugee Services, and the International Institute of Buffalo. Three of the four resettlement agencies run a variety of social service type offerings to the broader population in addition to their resettlement program. Journey's End Refugee Services is the only agency whose clients come solely from the refugee population.¹²

The LRAs in Buffalo work together closely towards shared goals and visions in order to have a unified, stronger voice. One LRA employee reflects on their collaborations:

The four agencies, plus Jericho Road, who does a ton of work with refugees and immigrants, [the] five of us are part of WNYRAC, which is the Western New York Refugee and Asylum Consortium. So, the five of us do a lot together, advocate locally together. You'll see us all of the news a handful of times a year. Just speaking together. We advocate for funding at the state level, advocate for different programs at the county level, you know, we work together with DSS [Department of Social Services] and the schools. And I think we have a much stronger impact when four or five of us are working together. (Interviewee 1)

Collaboration among LRAs is notable, especially since they are often competing for the same pots of money. Yet, collaboration across different entities is rare. Interestingly, the ONA, located within the City of Buffalo, is not included in the WNYRAC. While the first Director of the ONA was in their role, there was very limited interaction with LRAs. That may change with the new director, but is unclear at this point in time.

¹² At the final stages of writing this dissertation, a new partnership called The Refugee Partnership was formed between the four resettlement agencies in Buffalo and Jericho Road Community Health Center. The purpose of this partnership is to "...create one point of entry for refugees who can then be directed within the five organizations", since they all have different specialties (Hackford & Daughtry, 2023).

These four LRAs in Erie County receive support from the New York State Bureau of Refugee Services, which operates out of the Office for Temporary Disability Assistance (OTDA). One state representative reported that “...all of the refugee resettlement agencies are very strong [in New York State] and provide excellent R&P [resettlement and placement]. And so therefore I would say all of the cities do a great job” (Interviewee 2). The OTDA offers additional funding to the LRAs in Buffalo, such as refugee health promotion grants. During the Trump administration when numbers of refugees admitted to the U.S. were slashed, the NYSERP was introduced, to “support refugees and the resettlement agencies who were losing funding due to the lack of refugee arrivals, to try and keep them afloat and not have to let staff go” (Interviewee 2). That funding was approved again in the 2022-2023 budget, and New York was one of the first states to offer this funding support.

Kent County local resettlement agencies

Kent County is home to two local resettlement agencies, Bethany Christian Services and Samaritas. Bethany is one of the largest agencies that resettles unaccompanied minors in the U.S., and primarily resettles people in Kent County. Samaritas is smaller, and resettles clients in both Kent County and Kalamazoo County. In 2021, a former refugee and community leader was hired as the Associate Director of Community Engagement for Bethany. Traditionally, these agencies have been White-led and provide low paying jobs. One LRA employee reflects on the issue of a lack of leadership from the refugee community in LRAs:

We have to have former refugees lead one of these refugee agencies to make sure that we are fully supporting refugees. That's my perspective. Because if you're just *assisting* refugees in this, but you don't know where refugees are coming from, you don't know the challenge they're facing here, then you don't fully support them [and] what they need.

And they may have a lot of resources, but you don't know which are the priority for these refugees. (Interviewee 18)

This interviewee, who also leads an RCO, highlights that lived experience plays a part in delivering effective resettlement services, but that refugees with such knowledge are rarely hired for these roles.¹³

Because what LRAs can do is limited, other entities, such as LCGs and RCOs can play a significant role in successful resettlement. I argue that refugees' diverse needs would be met and a more holistic integration process would result if LRAs, LCGs, and RCOs were to collaborate. In this next section I outline how these three entities perceive the work of one another.

Perceptions of support in resettlement

To understand how different entities perceive and work with one another, interviewees in this study were asked the following questions: “What's the most important *type of support* that you think refugees receive in their host communities, in order to effectively integrate into their new home?” followed by, “Can you speak to the different organizations that are involved in these domains?” Domains referenced were those included in Ager and Strang's Conceptual Framework of Integration (Figure 4), including employment, housing, education, health, social connections, language and cultural knowledge and safety and stability, and citizenship.

Table 9 shows both the entities that interviewees report playing a role in resettlement, as well as the sector that the respondent is from. Unsurprisingly, most respondents view LRAs as playing a role in supporting refugees in resettlement, as they are the first point of contact,

¹³ It is important to note that while this person is both a community leader and an employee at a resettlement agency, community leaders do not always understand what others from the same home country need. For example, in the Bhutanese community, many community leaders tend to be upper caste and may not have relationships with people from other castes.

although not everyone agrees that the approach they take is correct. For instance, one RCO leader who was critical of how LRAs and other organizations support refugees said, “...none of those agencies, not the church, not the refugee resettlement agencies, not the school, not the employers, no one actively works in empowerment. They only work to provide help, which at times can be very time limited” (Interviewee 14). This respondent recognizes that different entities offer refugees some essential services, but not the skills or the tools necessary to thrive or become independent.

Table 9

Respondents that report the following entity playing a role in supporting refugees

Sector of respondent	Local resettlement agencies		Local/county governments		Refugee community organizations	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Local, county and state government (n=11)	11	100	9	82	3	28
Local resettlement agency (n=5)	5	100	2	40	3	60
Refugee community organization (n=8)	7	88	0	0	8	100
Other supportive non-profit (n=4)	4	100	0	0	3	75

One reason service delivery from LRAs may fall short is due to a lack of representation, with the majority of LRAs being White-led (and native-born) institutions. One interviewee outlines the challenges that emerge because LRAs have no staff from the refugee community:

I think that is the biggest unobserved or unnoticed challenge for refugees, is social capital, right? If you don't know anyone in that [local resettlement] agency, no one is going to...give [you] a job. Right?...No one is actively looking into how to solve that

problem...So, how do we increase our social capital, our social network, with open-minded people? That is the challenge. I shared this in an open forum - that in West Michigan, if you are not White and not Christian, it is very hard to find a job despite having academic or work experience or anything. So, a lot of people find it easy to work on those lines - factories - despite having qualifications [to do other, better-paid work].

(Interviewee 14)

This respondent reports that while local resettlement agencies are tasked with delivering services crucial to refugees upon arrival (including connecting them with potential employers), without representation or connections in the agency, refugees are unable to reach their full potential and utilize the skills they may have. LRAs are routinely in contact with employers in the area. One LRA representative says “Our employers are used to working with refugees and that word gets around to other employers; they are all friends and things like that. [Meaning they contact the LRAs to find potential employees]” (Interviewee 1). Some agencies have a position of employment specialist, whose job is to “assist refugees and immigrants to obtain their employment” (Interviewee 18). But as the previous interviewee implies is that while LRAs have connections with (typically low-wage) employers, their employment specialists do not equitably connect their clients with these opportunities. Not only is funding from the federal resettlement program insufficient, but the ways in which service is provided - generally, from people who do not have a refugee background - creates another hurdle. Without social bonds (with co-ethnic groups) and social links (connections with the state) (Putnam, 1993; Woolcock, 1998 in Ager & Strang, 2008) that a LRA employee usually has, the goal of providing adequate and equitable employment support to all clients is not fulfilled.

Unsurprisingly, LCG representatives see their own sector as playing a role in resettlement: nine of the 11 LCG representatives identified their sector as playing a key role in the lives of refugees. On the other hand, LRA and RCO representatives do not view LCGs as serving refugee populations. Only two of the five LRA workers noted that local governments play a role in resettlement, and none of the RCO or other non-profit representatives report LCGs playing a role. One LRA worker, who previously worked in government and as such, is likely to understand the role that LCGs can play, comments on this:

Local government has an extraordinarily important role... That's who runs the police department. That's who runs the fire department and the building inspection department. That's who runs the health department. The county runs the health department. So, these are services that are critical to someone's integration and safety and advancement. And some are more inclusive than others. (Interviewee 12)

Having this dual experience allows this LRA employee see the integral role that LCGs play, yet few actually know the important role that LCGs could play, and thus they may not try to coordinate with them.

When asked whether Kent County is welcoming towards refugees, one RCO respondent asked “Do you know what ‘West Michigan nice’ is?” (Interviewee 14)? This phrase alludes to a fake politeness that people exhibit. The refugee-community leader went on to say:

That [term, “West Michigan nice”] applies really well. However, there are some individuals who truly care for refugees, they truly invest their time, effort and energy in helping refugees, right? Because they are individuals. [But with local government] it is only in semantics. I have not heard elected officials or city [government] people actively

talking about how they can help us [refugees]. They just talk about the importance of refugees and how “the U.S. is all about immigrants” and things like that. But I haven't seen them making policies or city ordinances that will benefit refugees. To give an example, West Michigan is expecting [a] thousand new refugees this year. The housing market is crashing. You cannot find a house here. So how do we house those people? And then the city is like “okay, just do what you got to do”, but there's no support from them. (Interviewee 14)

This RCO leader recognizes the cultural phenomenon of “West Michigan nice” as simply paying lip service instead of offering genuine support to refugees. They are knowledgeable about the systems change that need to happen in LCGs, such as policies to support housing, and see that substantive efforts to make those changes are missing. While government officials exhibit niceties and recognize the importance of refugee populations in the U.S. in their rhetoric, there is no substantive change behind their words. As local governments like Kent County continue to actively receive refugees, this then leaves individual refugees, RCOs, and LRAs with the responsibility of finding housing in a tight housing market - something that the city government should address.

In a similar vein, another RCO leader, when asked about what role LCGs play in supporting refugees in Erie County, responded with the following:

Honestly, I would say nothing. That's...why we [refugee community leaders] have to be involved...The only thing I found they [the LCGs] did, which again, I'm still questioning...there's an Office of New Americans. How can it be led by someone who is not a refugee?...Yes, I know politics, skills...There are still so many refugees who have even more skills to navigate, to know how to navigate with the refugees, who I think,

they really don't have that opportunity, that chance to help them to navigate the system.

(Interviewee 3)

This respondent points to the fact (again) that refugees are not in leadership positions in either LCGs and in LRAs. Without refugees in these positions, RCO leaders do not see how these entities can be effective in the work they do, without the ability to take advantage of the insight and unique skill sets of residents who themselves had to learn to maneuver through various institutions as refugees.

Lastly, in Table 9, we see how individuals from LCGs, LRAs, and RCOs view the work of RCOs. This work was not as visible to staff who work in LCGs. For instance, only three of them (28%) identified RCOs as playing a role in supporting refugees. Three of the five LRA staff identified RCOs as playing a role. All RCO staff, on the other hand, and three of the four staff from other non-profits that support refugees, see the work of RCOs as impactful to refugees. While other researchers have pointed out that RCOs are often informal and not seen (Gleeson & Bloemraad, 2011), at a minimum, staff from LRAs who are steeped in the world of resettlement should have an understanding of where refugees are receiving support, so that LRAs can connect them with appropriate entities when they arrive.

When asked about organizations that aid in resettlement beyond their own LRA, one resettlement agency representative only mentioned the other LRAs in the city and health-related services. When probed about the role of RCOs, they replied:

I think certainly once...members of that community feel comfortable going to those community organizations they'll do that. I don't know how much those community organizations will work with DSS and stuff like that. But I imagine somewhat. That's a really good question and honestly, it's telling me I need to find out more about what

they're doing to kind of cross that bridge. You know, maybe we always think of the [official] agencies, that we're the ones who are helping integrate services, but maybe the community organizations are doing more than I think that they are. (Interviewee 1)

Throughout this dialogue, the LRA employee reflects, realizing that there may be much they do not know about the role of RCOs in supporting their own community members. This is a lost opportunity, as LRAs are the initial point of contact for refugees and can quickly connect them with religious and ethnic communities in order to build out the services and support networks available to refugees in their new homes. LRAs are working with refugees from a variety of backgrounds, and while LRAs tend to employ case workers that can communicate in the language of their client, case workers tend to have a limited bandwidth.

Scholars have previously discussed how RCOs are better able to reach their communities in effective and culturally appropriate ways (Gonzalez Benson & Taccolini Panaggio, 2019).

One RCO leader reflects on the work their organization did during the pandemic:

When COVID happened we...started distributing sanitizer and masks in our community. So, we were the first organization to distribute it to our seniors back then...So we did a pretty good job of publishing that on Facebook. We had a lot of other community members coming to us. And we did food distribution, [that was] culturally appropriate [food]. A lot of people in our community are vegetarian. A lot of food that was served in food banks was meat...So we bought food from local stores and distributed that, and that was on Facebook. And other communities did the same thing. The same thing happened with the vaccine. I think like 80% of seniors in our community are vaccinated now. Our fight for vaccines, for our community, made the health department give to other communities too. (Interviewee 14)

As seen in Table 9, in most instances, while RCOs have more direct contact with the community, their work is not visible to more formal institutions. In the case above, this RCO was able to communicate their successes to the health department, thus making strides for other ethnic groups as well. This was possible because of a champion at the health department. Once the work of RCOs was made visible to the health department, they distributed supplies and monetary resources to other RCOs as well. A LCG relationship that this respondent's RCO had made with the health department and the health department's recognition of the important social networks and trust that this RCO had established then benefitted other RCOs as well.

In sum, what these interviews revealed is that many entities see that LRAs play a major role in resettlement, but generally, LRAs, in turn, do not see the role of LCGs and RCOs. The next section builds on these findings, exploring existing collaborations across these entities.

Collaboration across entities

As stated earlier, the goal of the U.S. resettlement program is broad: to support the wellbeing of refugee populations (Office of Refugee Resettlement, n.d.). Yet it is widely known (as interviewees reinforced) that the federal funding allocated to the resettlement program is insufficient (Mathema & Carratala, 2020). If there is recognition that the federal government's official resettlement agencies are constrained by funding and capacity, I argue that a network of entities is necessary to meet the needs of refugees. My findings, however, show that levels of collaboration are insufficient and vary across Erie and Kent Counties. Ideally, through coalition building and collaboration, the diverse institutions that bring a range of foci and expertise can together meet the needs of refugees. For example, LRAs often have expertise and programming around job placement and employment training, whereas they might not have the bandwidth or knowledge on how to empower refugees to become civically engaged. An RCO may provide

training for the citizenship exam and information on voting. Another non-profit organization might work as a mediator between families and schools. Knowing what services are available and the gaps in services is crucial for ensuring the full range of comprehensive services. One LRA interviewee reflects on the work of relationship building between sectors:

The idea is that the resettlement program is brief. Even the integration programs funded by ORR [Office of Refugee Resettlement] are five years and have limited capacity to serve all the people that could qualify for those. And so, a lot of the heavy lifting comes from the community schools and healthcare and other social service agencies. And we just haven't historically been great partners. We haven't had a warm handoff. It's just been like you're done, bye. And we're really trying to change that. (Interviewee 15)

This LRA representative acknowledges both that the resettlement program is insufficient and that relationships are weak with the entities that do provide services. They emphasize that strengthening these relationships is crucial, as LRAs can connect clients with other appropriate organizations as soon as they arrive and later, when they can no longer continue supporting refugees.

Furthermore, because many needs and services cannot be met by the LRAs due to the financial constraints they are faced with, refugees turn to other organizations and programs that serve the broader community. An issue that arises is when individuals or organizations that do not typically work with refugees are serving refugee populations, as they may not know about specific challenges that these groups may face. While refugees are not by any means a homogenous group, certain groups face unique challenges. For example, people from a rural area who spent time - sometimes over a decade - in a refugee camp, may have never lived in housing with plumbing, or used a stove or oven. If they have a large family, they might not be aware of

housing regulations regarding occupancy numbers. Issues around housing are prevalent. A LRA representative reflects on challenges that arise when it comes to housing and refugee populations, specifically during a housing crisis:

And so, as you know, there aren't programs specifically for refugees in terms of affordable housing, and when they first get here they can sign up for Section 8 and housing vouchers and stuff, but then they're put on a wait list. And so, we have certain criteria from the state department for what type of housing that we put people in. So there has to be a certain level of quality, which is tricky because yes, we want people to have safe housing. But that tends to make that segment much smaller. We have relationships with landlords that we try to maintain, but you know, if clients in the past have not been great to their property, then they tend to have a difficult time re-engaging with us.

(Interviewee 15)

This shows a lack of collaboration that is needed to support refugees in one of the main challenges they face in their new homes: securing safe and affordable housing.

While many interviewees discussed barriers to collaboration, others shared stories of collaboration across entities, recognizing that their agency cannot provide an adequate breadth of services, and that holes in service provision are provided by other organizations. A Kent County official reflects on the network of agencies needed to support refugees in their new home:

I really think that our [the Kent County Welcome Plan] steering committee feels the same: there's not really one agency, one community, one person that can do this. This truly is systems work and in terms of the refugee resettlement agencies, you know, we need them. They [LRAs] are the ones that are the first entities that are going to engage with refugees when they arrive in our community. So, they have that firsthand knowledge

of which refugees are coming in from which agencies. How many refugee arrivals we are going to have. I don't pretend to be an expert in everything with refugees, but very thankful we have those strong partnerships... with both of our resettlement agencies, and with an organization called [non-profit, name redacted]. (Interviewee 16)

In part, because of their more recent work on the Kent County Welcome Plan and the work for refugees that takes place at the county level, Kent County seems to be more attune to the needs of refugee communities and the resettlement program than Erie County. Kent County understands that LRAs alone cannot support refugees, and that organizational structure is needed well beyond the initial resettlement period funded by the federal government, which they are trying to implement with the welcome plan. Their definition of a strong partnership comes in the form of the steering committee for the welcome plan. Unfortunately, as outlined in Chapter 4, no representatives from the refugee community were on the original steering committee.

In Erie County there are also champions for refugee representation and collaboration in the LCG. One Erie County official expressed how he recognizes the importance of representation from refugee-led organizations, stating, "...my intention is to not just rely upon the resettlement agencies or white-led organizations, but try to build capacity with refugee-led organizations" (Interviewee 10) by funding the work of their non-profits and making space for RCO's to have a voice through advisory committees. This representative also finds other ways to maintain relationships with RCO leaders, recognizing that RCOs fill a gap left by the federal resettlement program. Unfortunately, this was the only interviewee in Erie County who actively reported doing so.

While collaboration across LRAs, LCGs, and RCOs benefits the experience of refugees, collaborations between different refugee groups is also beneficial. When Ager and Strang (2008)

explore the concept of social bridging and integration among refugee populations, it is in terms of refugees and the broader community. While not explicit, the authors refer to bridging as relationships between refugees and those born in-country, rather than between different refugee groups. Yet, I also found that opportunities for solidarity and relationship building among different groups that share the refugee experience can strengthen the work of RCOs. Various interviewees touched on the fact that when refugees arrive, they often join or form groups within their own ethnic or religious communities. When refugee groups seek out spaces for community gatherings, they typically are not open to sharing with other groups (Interviewees 9 and 26). One interviewee reported that collaboration across different ethnic and religious groups is not seen until refugees have been in the U.S. for at least ten years (Interviewee 9).

Still, other interviewees did discuss refugees from different groups working together. A non-profit that serves majority refugee clients outside of direct resettlement services (which is not refugee-led), reflects on the network building work they do across ethnic groups:

That's part of why I started [non-profit organization], to build the bridges between the different communities. And so, I think we do a really great job at that, albeit at a small scale... [Our work is] not based in any religion or political view or culture, it's everybody. That lends itself to a very supportive community across all boundaries - boundaries being, you know, different cultures, different religions, all of that.

(Interviewee 5)

For this non-profit, bringing refugees together around a common interest that has nothing to do with their refugee status strengthens the refugee community, and may help those with conflicting backgrounds find a safe meeting ground. Another refugee that works at a non-profit that supports

refugees, U.S. born people of color, and indigenous populations similarly reflects on the benefits of a program that brings folks from various backgrounds together:

...we have our Farm to Launch program. It's a place where we have our cook, [name], he is a chef, he cooks our cultural food that we all come to eat. And on that table, the Farm to Launch table, there will happen the cultural connection, we share stories. If you don't know me, I don't know you, around that table we will get to know each other. Not because we are refugees we know everyone, no. We come around the table, we share stories, we begin to know one another. And when we begin to know one another, we begin to share resources. If I get information, I pass it on to you. If you get information, you pass it on to me. [Name of non-profit] has a bulletin board where if somebody needs housing, somebody needs school, somebody needs clothing, all the resources are on the bulletin board so people can access it. (Interviewee 8)

The two above quotes provide insight into the community building that happens and tools and resources that are shared through cross-cultural opportunities. Building community across different ethnic groups, especially among refugees from the same home country, can be challenging, as conflict between ethnic groups may be a reason why these individuals became refugees in the first place. Finding common ground, such as through an art form or entrepreneurial activity, can not only bridge divides, but strengthen the work of refugees, both around sharing information about resources available and learning from one another's experiences in the U.S. It is important to note though, that the two representatives from the above quotes run native-born, White-led non-profits that bring refugee groups together, rather than refugee groups themselves organizing this work. It is unclear if this is because they have connections or skills needed to do this work (both the administrative work of obtaining 501-C3

status or ability to secure funding) or whether it is because it may be more successful for an outsider of refugee communities to bridge groups.

While the previous two quotes came from organizations that formed over entrepreneurial pursuits, others formed in an effort to strengthen community ties as well as service delivery. One respondent reflects on how a non-profit in Kent County expanded their work to harness the expertise and reach of community leaders:

In the midst of the pandemic there were many people who were stepping up and making things happen. Big organizations like the health department or [resettlement agency] or just different people were relying on the network of the new American community in order to get major resources and services out, whether it was masks or food. The [name of RCO] was an exception. They were on the phone with individuals constantly and doing drive-bys [to check on] supplies that were needed. Large organizations had no way of actually doing that. So, realizing that all of these people are committed to communities but are not being paid to do this work or are not being seen as the leaders that they are because their work hasn't been legitimized by an organization...so how can we, as an organization, work alongside leaders that are doing that, but also build capacity so they are seen as the leaders that they are so that the skills and experience that they have is so valuable and should be wanted by organizations? Because once organizations begin to hire these individuals, their service delivery will begin to change and become more accessible. So that is how the system would change long term and it would allow us to serve far more women than we were able to serve before. So, each year we have eight different leaders from eight different language groups that come on and receive some

training, but then they recruit their own groups and work alongside them for a whole year. (Focus Group Respondent)

Leaders at this organization realized that more LCGs and LRAs need to tap into the power and reach that refugee leaders have in their community. Doing so, and including women that speak different languages, increases their reach to the broader refugee community. Supporting RCO women who are already engaged in their communities, doing work on the ground, and understanding the needs of their communities allowed the nonprofit to support work that is relevant and effective. It also ensured that RCOs leaders, who often operate without financial support, were compensated for the work they do. In an environment where nonprofits are competing for a limited pool of resources, identifying a gap and reaching out to another group to fill it is rare. Not only is this group realizing that RCOs can effectively fill a gap, but they are also providing the space and resources for RCO leaders to come together and support one another.

Lastly, and unfortunately, myriad examples exist of entities working in a silo. Whether it is outright refusing to work with other groups or not having adequate representation on committees, entities do not always work with RCOs or other organizations that directly serve refugees. LCGs or LRAs may be unaware of more grassroots groups, or value more highly the expertise of more formal organizations. On the most extreme end, some entities flat out refuse to work with other entities, whether it be the broader refugee community or more formal non-profit organizations. One LRA representative in Erie County reflected on a conversation with a government official tasked with working with refugee communities:

They said that they [the local government] would do employment. We all said, wait a minute, no, we [resettlement agencies] all run employment programs. It doesn't make any

sense for you to do employment. How about you do housing or public safety, something that we don't do? ... At the end of the meeting we said, 'Let's meet again and keep talking about it.' And [the government official] said, 'Nah, I don't want to.' (Interviewee 12)

Not only is this government official not working with or listening to the refugee community, but they are not even working with the white-led LRAs that work with refugee communities. It is unclear why this is happening, although this person talked about having a mandate from a politician that funds their work to focus on employment, so it may have been out of their immediate control (but still, this is an example of a political leader that is refusing to engage with refugee resettlement experts), regardless of whether they are duplicating work.

More often, certain groups may not realize the work and contributions of other groups, and therefore may not think to include others, instead of explicitly choosing to not work with them (as noted earlier, in Table 9, only 28% of respondents from government agencies report that refugee-community organizations play a role in resettlement, and therefore may not think to include RCOs). In Kent County, the steering committee for the Welcome Plan included representatives of LCGs, LRAs, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Hispanic Chamber. The launch of the plan unfortunately occurred in the midst of the pandemic. This, along with the lack of refugee leadership in the plan, resulted in the general refugee population being unaware of the work that was going on (Interviewee 22). Then, in April of 2022, when Patrick Lyoya was shot and killed during a traffic stop in Grand Rapids, Kent County responded to this tragedy by saying “we have a welcome plan” which at that point had no community buy-in. Community partners on the plan reflect on how the county reacted in this moment, and how the welcome plan was perceived in one interview I conducted with two LRA staff:

Interviewee 1: And so, I think when Patrick was shot and killed by the police officer here in town, that showed how the Congolese community and perhaps the African immigrant community certainly had feelings of distrust. And I think when the city or the county would engage with them, they wanted to say, “We have a welcome plan. We want to focus on language access, equitable access. We want to focus on safe communities and positive relationships with law enforcement.” But I don't think we had a lot to show for the welcome plan at that point for the community to say, yea, you're right. I think it just sounded like...

Interviewee 2:[it] sounded a little hollow.

Interviewee 1: Yeah. We just really hadn't got to work on it yet so much in a public way to build that trust. And so, I think the welcome plan hasn't had the opportunity to be, well, if you say that was a test, I think in a way that we failed in the jury of [the] public, in the community's opinion, because it wasn't really making a meaningful impact on them at that point. (Interviewee 22)

Here, LRA representatives recognize that this approach was inappropriate, and understandably not well received. Yet, there is no reflection on why they did not have refugee community representation on the steering committee prior. After the fact, in Summer of 2022 the county invited a leader from the refugee community to join. But other interviewees implied that this gesture may not easily resolve the legacy of mistrust that has built over time.

Conclusion

The findings in this chapter demonstrate how the entities involved in resettlement - LCGs, LRAs, and RCOs - all play different roles, with a range of strengths and resources. LCGs are home to many services and resources that refugees may utilize, such as the health

department, housing services, resources for entrepreneurs, and public safety. LRAs, as the first point of contact, are familiar with the challenges that refugees face and can connect them to resources that will be helpful in the longer term. RCOs are integrated within and trusted by the refugee communities, and leaders often can draw on the insight they have from the lived experience that is similar to their clients.

How staff from each of these agencies view one another impacts if and whether they will engage with one another in their efforts to serve refugee communities. I argue, as many RCO interviewees suggest, that meeting the goal of the refugee resettlement program - to support the wellbeing and holistic needs of refugees in their new homes (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2022) - requires a web of resources that work with one another be available to refugees. These interviews suggest two ways of collaborating can help to strengthen the work of these three entities. First, while collaborations sometimes exist between similar entities (for example, a network of multiple resettlement agencies in one city or region), it is less likely for collaboratives to exist that are cross-sectoral. A committee for new Americans which involves LRAs, LCGs, RCOs, healthcare providers, and other non-profits that serve refugee populations can strengthen collaborations. Meeting this goal would require collaboration and coordination from the different entities involved, as well as efforts to reach out to those that have not been historically included and engaged (in this instance, refugee communities themselves). Secondly, if LRAs and LCGs were to engage more proactively and regularly with RCOs and the broader refugee community, this may push people in positions of power to expand efforts to address the needs of this community, such as creating an advisory committee, ensuring that when public participation is sought, translation is available and they advertise in appropriate and effective venues.

Chapter 6 Approaches to Welcome Work: A Look at How State and Grassroots Organizations Engage Refugees

This chapter answers two questions. First, how is the welcoming work that LCGs engage in, as well as other public-sector support offered to refugees perceived and experienced by refugees? Secondly, how does this compare to the unofficial support offered by RCOs? I begin this section by highlighting the welcoming work that planners and other government officials undertake to address the needs of and support refugee populations, such as advisory boards, offices, and plans specifically dedicated to refugee and immigrant populations. I then discuss how engagement strategies used may not be the most effective when working with residents from a refugee background, and conclude by comparing the ways in which grassroots RCOs support refugee populations.

Local and county strategies to support refugees

In this section, I explore the work that LCGs engage in through county and municipal planning processes and plans. I also consider interactions with state-level government, as much of the work related to resettlement that shapes how county and city processes and plans impact refugees relies on the state level coordinators.

State level strategies: Differing levels of refugee representation

Every state that refugees are resettled in has a state level refugee coordinator. This person is “required to coordinate all of the public and private resources available in the state. And [resources] that come into the state through the federal government as it relates to refugee

resettlement and integration” (Interviewee 13). How coordinators land in this position varies by state, and where their position is housed also varies depending on the state. In Michigan, the state level coordinator is an open position that anyone can apply for, housed in the Office of Global Michigan (Interviewee 12). The Office of Global Michigan “was created to help grow Michigan's economy by retaining and attracting global talent; to promote the skills, energy, and entrepreneurial spirit of our immigrant and refugee communities, and strives to make Michigan a more welcoming state” (Office of Global Michigan, n.d.). The office supports resettlement in Michigan, lobbies with policymakers and provides employment and legal services. In New York, the state level coordinator position is a civil service position, where someone may move up into the role when a colleague leaves or retires. The position is housed in the Office of Temporary Disability Assistance, where employees also respond to disasters (so, in the wake of disaster they will leave their duties in refugee resettlement) (Interviewee 12).

The approach to including refugees and engagement with this population varies greatly across state coordinators. In Michigan, the state coordinator has engaged with others across the country doing this work, in an effort to learn from one another. One interviewee, familiar with resettlement in Michigan and New York, reflected that the current Michigan coordinator is creative and collaborative (Interviewee 12). This state coordinator is in a leadership position with a national network of state level coordinators that meet bi-monthly to network, respond to federal register notices, and meet with the ORR (Interviewee 13). While it is not a requirement to be part of this network, it shows that the coordinator is committed to improving the work in Michigan and learning from other states.

In 2021, refugee leaders worked with the Office of Global Michigan and the state coordinator to create a refugee advisory board. One refugee community leader reports that “it's

collaborative with them [Global Michigan and the State of Michigan]. So, they're supposed to be able to share with us what they're doing and then we're supposed to advise them” (Interviewee 17). The refugee advisory board aims to include refugee leaders in decision making processes and to create a seat at the table for refugees when it comes to allocation of resources. While relatively new, the board is still trying to discover its role. One board member reflects:

...We have been very limited in what we have access to. We only have a budget of \$3,000 to use for the year... [The process involved] them [the state] inviting us, to tell us this is what we're doing, this is the budget that we have. But the transparency has not been as...it's been difficult for them to invite us fully to be part of the whole process. So, that's something that we're still working on...[in terms of] having access to information and being invited in meetings where decisions are being made, even though that was the goal. So, we are finding things out at the last minute.... Actually, the last meeting that we had, most members felt like we are being underused in a way because of not having enough information and not being invited in those conversations and [not] getting access to what the state is working on that we are able to advise on. (Interviewee 17)

As this interviewee notes, the creation of an advisory board is a step in the right direction, but the details – the goals, the role and structure of the board, its mandate to access needed information, and the power that it has – are still unclear.¹⁴ While the initial goal was to “... advise [the] office [of Global Michigan] around resource allocation and ...coming up with structures for refugees” (Interviewee 17), in reality, that has not occurred, and as of yet, the board is playing little to any role.

¹⁴ At the writing stage of this dissertation, the Governor of Michigan’s executive team invited the refugee advisory board to give a presentation to try to move from a council to a commission, therefore granting them more power and clout.

While the State of Michigan has begun work in supporting refugees in a more engaged way, in New York, respondents at the state level in resettlement do not report any contact with the broader refugee population or with community leaders. All work is through the LRAs (Interviewee 2).

Welcoming work at the county level: A welcome plan and defunct advisory board

When engaging in comprehensive planning processes, local governments are tasked with seeking public participation in order to understand a broad vision for the future of their community. Ideally, planners will ensure that myriad voices are included in plan making processes by utilizing appropriate engagement strategies (for example, for refugees, ensuring that interpretation is available, working with refugee community leaders to inform their communities on the importance of civic engagement, and providing compensation for participation).

In Kent County, welcoming work has occurred at the county level through the form of a welcome plan. The Kent County Welcome Plan, published in 2020, is explicitly for immigrant and refugee populations. In writing the Kent County Welcome Plan, interviewees from the county report an extensive community engagement process taking place, while interviewees from refugee community *organizations* report not being included in these processes. The welcome plan coordinator hosted focus groups across a diverse range of participants based on country of origin (33 countries were represented), age, professional occupation, immigration status, and English proficiency (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 32). Focus group participants included the broader refugee community, but leadership from these communities was not consulted. Themes of the focus groups were centered around what the participant's top priority was and what was holding them back from achieving it (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 32). An interviewee reflects on the engagement strategy used:

There were 800 surveys, 25 focus groups...even the folks at Welcoming America, the team that we received the grant from, they are like...your guys' data is insane. We just got a lot of feedback and a lot of information from our new American community here to focus on what was an actual priority. (Interviewee 16).

As this interviewee suggests, a substantial amount of data were collected, especially in comparison to other welcome plan grantees across the country. The plan states that "...results were then articulated into a welcome plan..." (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 9), although it is unclear how data were analyzed. One local government representative reflects on their role in editing the survey instruments and challenges around what findings were included:

We got tons of responses on surveys. And then [I started] helping guide the coordinator at the time for the focus groups. We had several dozen focus groups. Then [it involved] taking all of that with the broader community. We have 35 plus organizational allies or just individuals that come together and say, "Okay, this is what we learned from the surveys. We dove deeper with the focus groups. This is what that says. This is what different communities say." As far as the Mexican community, [they were] very clear [focused] on [proposing] driver's license for all and others were similar. Like I have these degrees back home, I can't use them here. How do we figure that out and just other things? Then [we had to think about] really being a voice, because things get whitewashed. Driver's license for all didn't make it in one of the recommendations. I was really furious about that, but then I just got outvoted. "Okay, well this is stuff we can do locally. We don't want it to get too political." I'm like, "We don't want to have courage." I just didn't agree with it. I was like, "This is what they said, what we ought to do." They

did put it in the appendix, buried in the back, this was the thing but we want to focus on what we could do locally. (Interviewee 23).

This interviewee states that 35 people were involved in the analysis of the plan, but no explanation is provided about how the analysis occurred. This interviewee goes on to discuss how the findings were “whitewashed”, referring to how the Mexican community clearly discussed needing support to access to driver’s licenses for all as one of their two main priorities, but that it was not included in the plan.¹⁵ They point out that steering committee members were worried about being too political, instead of advocating for community member concerns, thus being disingenuous with their community outreach.

Towards the end of the plan there is a page on notes regarding the research results, which states the following: “Latinx focus group participants particularly expressed their fear and lack of faith in the law enforcement system and officials. They stressed safety, specifically for Latinx community members, and access to driver’s licenses for all as priorities” (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 33). Not all issues raised by refugees and immigrants in Kent County were included in the plan, even though the previous interviewee advocated for what the Mexican community members wanted.

Adversely, distrust and fear of police already existed in the community, and it was included as a priority area in the welcome plan. Priority “Ensure All Kent County Residents Are and Feel Safe” includes the goal of “enhance(ing) relationships and communication between New Americans and law enforcement to better serve and protect the community and keep officers safe” (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 28). While the COVID-19 pandemic sidetracked

¹⁵ While generally, the Mexican community in Grand Rapids did not arrive with refugee status, this example is included here as it refers to the Kent County Welcome Plan and how data were analyzed and taken into consideration. Additionally, Latinx residents have been in Kent County long before refugees began to be resettled there, but welcoming work begins with the second great recession, thus making this population visible.

implementation of welcome plan recommendations, the killing of Patrick Lyoya further highlights the fear and distrust of police.

While the process of the plan focuses on the voices of new Americans (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 9), other sections of the plan often read like the authors are trying to sell the general public on the positive impact of immigrants in Kent County. The opening page text reads:

We know how important a broadly diverse population is for the success of our state.

Immigration is key to increasing diversity in our population and boosting our economy.

Without immigration growth, the state of Michigan would be poised to lose population

for the second census in a row. Perhaps even more impressive, the economic power of

Grand Rapids' immigrant community alone grew by more than \$100 million in just one

year, and immigrants in Grand Rapids hold nearly \$1.5 billion in spending power. At the

core of this initiative is the belief that Grand Rapids and Kent County are home to

everyone who lives here, and it should feel like it too (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 5).

As outlined in chapter four, the Kent County Welcome Plan includes goals and recommendations under five priorities of New Americans, identified through community engagement processes. The priorities include the following: “1) Freedom to work in my desired profession; 2) Freedom to maintain my culture, religion and traditions; 3) Achieving desired level of English; 4) Being actively involved in my children’s education, safety, and future; 5) Having Americans understand my culture, religion, and circumstances” (Caudill et al., 2020, p. 6). Yet four out of five priorities – developed with input from the new American community - highlight more holistic issues and barriers outside of work, suggesting that there is a disconnect between how the county sees and presents new Americans (as an economic asset), and what

refugees' priorities are (balance in all areas of life, including employment, education, culture, religion, and language).

The Kent County plan clearly shows that substantial time and resources were invested into the creation of a plan. While Kent County seemed to have done considerable community engagement, community buy-in is nonexistent, thus implying that planners selected recommendations arbitrarily or in a top-down fashion, counter to the community engagement process they themselves touted.

Furthermore, studying the issues, writing a plan, and creation of an office is only part of the work. An equally important step that needs further investigation is understanding how the office's priorities or plans are received and implemented, and particularly, whether they are deemed useful by refugee populations.

In Erie County, more substantive welcoming work has occurred at the municipal level, although the county has done some engagement with refugee populations. In 2016, the New Americans Advisory Committee held its first meeting, initiated by the county (Erie County, 2016). In interviews, few knew whether this still existed or who to contact to gain more information, however, one interviewee said that the county board was "a little bit of a photo op, not super clear what the strategy was" (Interviewee 12). More recently, the Erie County Language Access Act was introduced and reached the senate (Dennison, 2022). This bill would do the following if passed (as of now it is passed at the senate level):

...require all Erie County departments and agencies to adopt a language access plan which shall include language services in the top six languages spoken in Erie County, a community advisory council to give community groups representation and power over

the planning and implementation, live interpretation, a specific timeline for the translation of vital documents, and more. (Dennison, 2022)

If passed, this bill is a huge step forward for work around language access in Erie County, connecting refugees and other immigrant groups to many more resources and services.

Welcoming work at the municipal level: Slow to include community voices

Despite many issues refugee face being addressed at the county level, in Erie County, welcoming work has occurred at the municipal level through the ONA and the City of Buffalo New Americans Study. The ONA was initiated in 2015, after the City of Buffalo's Mayor Byron Brown attended a conference in New York City where speakers discussed how an ONA can benefit immigrant communities. A government official reflects on the purpose of the ONA:

This was in the context of New York City, how the city should really have a connection to the various organizations because municipalities are aware that when immigrant communities come into their cities, they kind of group themselves and they make non-profit organizations, or they make clubs, or associations. And sometimes if there are issues, it's good to have a connection with the organization. So, the mayor really brought that idea back, and that was his idea to have a connection to the growing immigrant communities in Buffalo...so his framework was, we just want to have a connection. We want to have a real connection. (Interviewee 9)

The mayor viewed the ONA as a venue for collaboration and connection with refugee communities. When formed in 2015, the ONA was located in the city's law office. When a new director started in 2022, the ONA moved to the Office of Diversity, Opportunity and Inclusion (Interviewee 11). Interviewees did not comment on why this change occurred, but I suspect it is

because the previous director had a dual position as a lawyer for the City of Buffalo (rather than any change in institutional infrastructure to prioritize refugees).

Research for the New Americans Study began prior to the ONA forming in 2015, so the ONA director was not involved in the research, which was contracted out by the Department of Strategic Services (Interviewee 9). Preparation of the plan included a four-part data collection process. This included analysis of census data, numbers of refugees resettled in the city, and information on enrollment in higher education (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 4). Additionally, focus groups that centered on experience in resettlement and suggestions for improvement were conducted with people from seven nationalities (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 4). Building off of the focus groups, interviews were conducted with stakeholders that represented organizations that serve immigrant and refugee populations (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 4). Over 60 interviews were conducted, which “focused on assessing needs, barriers, strengths, and opportunities” (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 4). Lastly, a research review was conducted based on 25 indicators brought up in focus groups and interviews to understand best practices across the country (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 5).

Unlike the Kent County Welcome Plan, the City of Buffalo New Americans Study does recognize that immigrants face additional challenges due to their background in comparison to the general population. The message from the Mayor includes the following: “The study reflects a fundamental commitment to our newest residents and sends a strong message: we value and understand the contributions, and will work with our immigrant and refugee communities to address the unique challenges they face” (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 3). The purpose of the study is to “attract and retain the wealth of talent that is arriving from other countries, facilitate the creation and expansion of economic opportunities, and ensure that the city continues to support

its newest residents” (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 1). Through data collection, twenty-seven strategies were identified which are organized into the following four categories:

Welcoming focuses on improving the initial experiences of immigrants and refugees related to the resettlement experience, acculturation, and community organization

Settling In addresses issues of housing, neighborhoods, and public safety

Strengthening describes the importance of social services, healthcare, education, and employment to providing a solid foundation from which to prosper

Moving Forward outlines actions that the city can take to further the integration of immigrants and refugees, improve access to existing city services, and develop initiatives where the city is uniquely positioned to make a difference. (City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 5)

The plan also states the following:

The findings of this study underscore the need for community leadership and strategic direction in addressing the concerns of immigrants and refugees. Mayor Brown has acted on this need by requesting funding and –with the unanimous support of [the City of Buffalo] Common Council – opening the Office of New Americans. (City of Buffalo, n.d., p. 7)

The City of Buffalo website states that the ONA’s mission is to “create economic and academic opportunities” and “promote access to City services, area resources and to implement policies that facilitate the successful integration of newcomers into the civic, economic, and cultural life of Buffalo” (City of Buffalo, n.d.). Additionally, the ONA is supposed to seek connections between immigrant and refugee communities and other city departments. The website for the ONA also claims that the “ONA regularly meets with refugee and immigrant community members to assess and better understand the goals and needs of the population, and how we can

best serve them” (City of Buffalo, n.d.), but, at the time of interview, the director reported that this was not currently happening, at least through any regular and formal venue, such as a refugee advisory committee.

The creation of the ONA, which the plan outlines as “...being prepared to engage with Ethnic Community-Based Organizations, non-profit agencies, educational institutions, foundations, faith and community groups, local businesses, and other stakeholders to implement these strategies...”(City of Buffalo, 2016, p. 7), was intended to implement many strategies outlined in the New American Study. Examples of strategies in the plan include increasing language access, establishing a community space, expanding employment programs, and facilitating professional careers (City of Buffalo, 2016, pp. 8–16). City documents indicate that the ONA will “regularly meet with refugee and immigrant community members to assess and better understand the goals and needs of the population, and how we can best serve them” (City of Buffalo, n.d.). The previous director of the ONA, who was in their position for about six years, indeed started their work by actively making connections with the community:

...when I started, the key was the connection...so my first and best contact was a community police officer in the Buffalo Police Department who really had a good relationship, had gone to the annual event of World Refugee Day, had been invited regularly to immigrant community events, who had a good relationship with immigrant community organizations at Buffalo State College. So, he was my first kind of, "Let me introduce you to who we know so far." And then from there, it just became a steady stream. The organizations would tell other organizations like, "Hey, there's a contact." And so, the first year was really developing relationships. It was like a meet and greet all the time...And so I would go and introduce myself and say, "The city wants to be

available to you. We want you to take advantage of the resources that everybody can."

(Interviewee 9)

Despite the many connections the ONA director was able to make across the refugee community in Buffalo, they realized quickly that the power and mandate of the ONA did not allow them to address the many needs refugee groups presented:

The problem for me personally was the issues that they had were not services that the City did...I would say to people I met, "Bring me the problem and I will work on it."

That's kind of what I did at the office. I was given a lot of freedom to work on things, I think because it wasn't a specific department... So it's good and bad, right?...But because

I'm not a specific department, I don't have a budget, I don't have staff. (Interviewee 9)

This interviewee explains that while the ONA does not have specific responsibilities or tasks, even when refugees bring an issue, there is no budget to access to aid in solving problems. Two challenges emerged with the structure of the ONA. As the previous director explains, many issues community members brought forward could not be solved at the city level. For example, if someone came to the ONA needing to sign up for Medicaid benefits or a driver's license, they could not help, as these are done at the county level. Additionally, the Buffalo Public School system is its own entity that the city does not have authority over. So, instead of addressing and solving problems, the ONA, in general, connected their clients with other departments.

Secondly, unlike New York City, which was the mayor's inspiration for opening an ONA in Buffalo, Buffalo's city charter is limited in what is included. Unfortunately, no amendments were made to the city charter to include the ONA. The charter is a unique set of laws, and outlines the way in which a city carries out its duties. The City of Buffalo has "departments that are mandated, and organized, and structured via the City of Buffalo Charter" (Interviewee 9).

The charter, formed in the 1800s, mandates departments, setting the stage for what the city provides and has control over. Without an amendment to the charter including the ONA as an office, there are not many resources behind it (no budget and no staffing outside of the director), and no city control of the school system or many services that are available at the county level. When I asked the new director if it made more sense for the ONA to be at the county level, they responded with the following:

Yes, it would. Because you've got the resources and you're able to help with just living expenses and living accommodations in a way that the city can't. I mean, you always have this kind of competition among government officials. And it's very sad, but there's always a, well, you don't want to one up the mayor. You don't want to make the county executive look bad, or... I mean, I had a very hard time because if I wanted to create partnerships where the county was involved [in collaborating on an event] and [if] it was going to happen outside [the city limits], because the county's much larger than City of Buffalo, I had a hard time getting the mayor's support, quite frankly. (Interviewee 9)

Without a mandate and recognition in the city charter, politics came before actual, tangible assistance for refugee communities. Collaborating with other government entities to support the refugee community was discouraged, resulting in a situation where what the ONA could offer to refugee communities was not what they needed.

Secondly, the venues for the refugee community to share concerns and grievances with the ONA are informal, and as stated earlier, the ONA only has one staff and no budget to address the concerns and grievances that are shared. Interactions between the ONA and refugee community members depend on the director of the ONA attending community events and through word of mouth about this office. No refugee advisory committee existed between its

opening in 2015 and 2022; but in late 2022 the new director reported that the office was now being tasked with compiling a refugee advisory board (Interviewee 11). Whether at the city or county, however, interviewees suggested that a functioning advisory board could create a formal venue that can empower refugee leaders and give them a voice and say in their community.

Another issue with the New American Study is that few interviewees commented on it, which may speak to its impact in the community. One leader in resettlement in Buffalo critiqued the plan:

It isn't really a plan. It doesn't really look at the city's role, which is what it should have done. It is kind of a dumb thing...the best of it is that it's an external signal that the mayor cares about refugees, that he created this [ONA] office, that he stands at the podium and raises the flag from Burma on the appropriate day and goes to the events and things like that...the worst of it...is that it doesn't really have a focus. And it hasn't, anyway, worked with the [resettlement] agencies at all. (Interviewee 12)

Interviews with RCOs suggest that there has been little if any implementation and no accountability. RCOs leaders I spoke to in Buffalo did not bring up the New Americans Study or actions it proposes, likely because it was published over five years before the interviews took place, and because the ONA - mandated to carry out the plan's strategies - had been vacant for over a year. Furthermore, none of the RCO leaders interviewed discussed being involved in the data collection that ensued in writing the plan.

Ultimately, as these interviews and plan reviews suggest, the Kent County Welcome Plan and the City of Buffalo New Americans Study are welcoming efforts with substantive staff time behind them, but they fall short in reaching and receiving buy in from refugee communities. The next section goes on to unpack how refugee-led organizations reach refugee populations.

Grassroots refugee-led organizations: Using insurgent planning practices to reach refugee populations

The existing literature on refugee resettlement discusses the bonding and bridging roles of religious institutions (some of which are refugee-led) in resettlement (Allen, 2010), the welfare support that RCOs provide (Gonzalez Benson, 2020a) and that RCOs are often left out of urban governance (Gonzalez Benson & Pimentel Walker, 2021). Existing literature provides insights as to how RCOs fill in gaps left by LRAs and humanitarian NGOs. I focus here on the role of RCOs in delivering services and effective engagement to and with their communities, filling gaps left by LCGs. Compared to the typically top-down or disconnected ways that LCGs and LRAs worked with refugees, I found that grassroots refugee-led organizations engaged refugee communities¹⁶ utilizing the guiding tenets of insurgent planning.

Refugee community organizations: Utilizing more appropriate and effective approaches for engagement

As discussed in the previous section, Erie and Kent County and their respective local governments engage with refugee communities in limited fashions, primarily through more traditional, top-down community engagement strategies. Scholars have found that RCOs fill in the gaps that LRAs leave, and more effectively provide service delivery as they are in closer proximity geographically and socioculturally (Gonzalez Benson, 2020b). When it comes to services that, in theory, are typically met by LCGs, such as accessing social services that the county provides, or navigating public transit, the findings show how RCOs are able to connect

¹⁶ It is important to note that refugee groups are not homogenous, and variations exist in terms of ethnic groups, religion, level of education, caste, and socioeconomic status. Oftentimes, leaders of RCOs have obtained higher levels of education or may be from an upper caste. Therefore, RCO leaders are not necessarily representative of the communities that they serve (their common identity marker may only be country of origin).

community members to these services more effectively, doing so in a way that is culturally acceptable. Ways that RCOs do this include convening spaces for community conversation and serving as liaisons between community members and larger community institutions.

Convening Spaces

Physical spaces at non-profits and RCOs can be a way to bridge refugee communities and share resources among one another. In Erie County, an incubator farm exists as a space where refugees from various communities come together, with their shared experiences and agricultural interests serving as a bridge. When asked about how members of the farm help one another, the farm representative talked about their “Farm Lunches” program, where farmers share a meal. As noted earlier, the farmer reflected that “and when we begin to know one another, we begin to share resources. If I get information, I pass it on to you. If you get information, you pass it on to me.” (Interviewee 8). These opportunities to share resources and stories across ethnic groups and countries of origin can help to strengthen community by creating a shared physical space for meeting.

Another RCO in Erie County hosts weekly walk-in hours for residents to ask questions, get mail translated, and seek assistance for a variety of issues. While these services may be offered through other state agencies or LRAs, refugees are more receptive to services at a RCO for a variety of reasons (in a conversation, the director mentioned they have to tell people to stop coming in at certain times because they do not have the capacity for people who repeatedly come). These include speaking the language, a cultural expectation that younger people will help older people, and a location close to where people live.

Serving as Liaisons

In addition to working across refugee communities, RCOs can serve as a liaison between LCG institutions and families. Not only do RCOs have the language knowledge to be able to do so, but also have the cultural familiarity and trust of families. A representative from a non-profit that hires refugee community leaders to service as a liaison between schools and families says:

Schools will call and say there was a behavioral issue today for a student we serve, because we are the emergency contact. We clear any student linked to us with the school district, with permission of parents. They reach out and ask if we will help connect directly with parents, rather than the traditional way where they would contract with an interpreter and do it themselves. So, we are the middleman that helps to make that connection. (Interviewee 20)

This respondent went on to say that families often reach out to their contact to ask questions and seek assistance with issues unrelated to school. If they need new housing, intend to purchase a car, or navigate securing emergency food services, they will contact the refugee leader they were connected to through this school program, as they know the family, there is familiarity with the challenges they may face, and a cultural understanding. This person can deliver culturally appropriate services and generally understands the experience of their client. While counties begin to enact language access programs so that translation is available at offices like the DSS, refugee community members tend to rely on those from a similar background to navigate access to these services. For instance, a focus group participant gave an example of a client she works with dealing with Child Protective Services (CPS) and how she needed to step in to help CPS understand their culture or the struggles they face:

...they are trying to keep away the mom and dad, separate and take the kids to CPS. I said no. I stepped in. I said that I work for this woman through [non-profit that supports refugee community leaders]. I talked to CPS. ...CPS didn't like me at all [laughs]. I said that we grew up in war. Hitting, kicking, biting, domestic violence, it is not accepted in this country. But we are used to seeing it. Sometimes when you are holding something, like when you do not express it, sometimes aggression happens. Sometimes abuse happens...Then the doctor diagnosed that he [the father] had severe depression, he even tried to kill himself. He has been on medication for six months and now the [CPS] case is closed. (Focus Group Respondent)

Without representation from a RCO leader, this family's story could be very different. Having a cultural broker to explain cultural norms and expectations both with the state and with their client ensured that this family could stay together.

Refugee community members that are part of the women's leader program at this organization also serve as liaisons between the community members they work with and any institution the community member may need to interact with. Through a focus group, women from this organization reflected on experiences working with courts, CPS, and health care providers (Focus Group Respondent). Working with a community leader allowed community members to have an advocate, someone who can navigate complex systems and work as a middle person.

Refugee community organizations: Utilizing tenets of insurgent planning

Miraftab identifies "insurgent planning as radical planning practices that respond to neoliberal specifics of dominance through inclusion - that is inclusive governance" (Miraftab, 2009, p. 32). Insurgent planning allows for a rethinking of what community engagement and

participation looks like in the era of austerity urbanism. Miraftab characterizes the guiding practices of insurgent planning as counter-hegemonic, transgressive, and imaginative (Miraftab, 2009). Below, I outline the ways in which RCOs enact these three guiding principles of insurgent planning through their work. This approach leads to work that is both more effective and appropriate.

Interviewees discussed how RCOs engage in insurgent planning in various ways. They play the role of mediators between their own communities and U.S. institutions and can more effectively meet refugees' needs because they often have knowledge of and experience with the dominant culture (and may be part of it). Oftentimes leaders may arrive with more privileges than many from their home countries – their positionality, caste, and level of educational attainment often provide the skills needed to be in positions of leadership.¹⁷ While their experiences may differ, they may still have some understanding, and be able to advocate for refugees from the same home country.

Refugee community organization's work as counter-hegemonic

Insurgent planning practices “are counter-hegemonic in that they destabilize the normalized order of things...” (Miraftab, 2009, p. 33). Working in a counter-hegemonic way insists on citizens' rights to rebel from the status quo (which often does not serve them) and determine their own terms of engagement and participation. Planners, or in this case, RCO leaders, meet their constituents in the ways that community members want to engage – whether it be by contacting them in appropriate ways, such as through WhatsApp, or creating representation within existing government structures, like the refugee advisory board through the

¹⁷ In fact, some ethnic groups are “formed” in order to access support for a heterogenous community. Catherine Besteman outlines how Somali Bantu refugees have done this. This is to say that RCOs are not necessarily homogenous groups (Besteman, 2016).

Office of Global Michigan. As stated earlier, one RCO leader reflects on how they chose to engage with their community in a way that was effective to the people they are serving:

And we did food distribution, culturally appropriate. A lot of people in our community are vegetarian. So, a lot of food that was served in food banks was meat. The thing that we don't eat. So, we bought food from local stores and distributed that, and that was on Facebook. (Interviewee 14)

This RCO leader saw that one social service that serves the broader community was insufficient for their community, as it was the wrong type of food. This interviewee goes on to share how their RCO bridged relationships with LCGs as well:

So [we at] the [RCO organization], we brought the Sheriff's office in our community, the City of Kentwood Police Department in our community, and also we went there... in their agency and talked about our community too. So we, like the smaller organizations like ours, have done that [reached out to other institutions to form connections]. And a lot of organizations who are in positions of power and have the capacity haven't seen that as a need [to broker relationships with RCOs]. But we saw that as a need. So we did [it on] our own. And I wish that could be done with other refugee and immigrant communities.

This RCO shows how their work is counter-hegemonic. First, they knew that food banks were not meeting the needs of their community members, as the specific group of Bhutanese in Kent County are largely vegetarian.¹⁸ They know that their community members are fearful of law enforcement, and that law enforcement may not know about some of their cultural norms, so they bridged relationships with them on behalf of their communities. By listening deeply in an

¹⁸ Bhutanese in general are not vegetarian; this shows that a certain caste of Bhutanese have resettled in Kent County.

empathetic way, while reflecting on their position, RCO leaders met their community members at their terms of engagement.

Refugee community organization's work as transgressive

Interviewees also demonstrated how RCO's work with the broader refugee community is transgressive in nature. Miraftab explains that the transgressive principle of insurgent planning is when planners span both "formal and informal arenas of politics and invited/invented spaces of citizenship practice" and that residents' histories are considered in their practice (Miraftab, 2009, p. 46). Invited spaces are those that are formal channels created by governments or non-profit organizations, legitimized by donors and government (Miraftab, 2009, p. 41). One example in this study is the refugee advisory board at the state level in Michigan. Invented spaces are "those collective actions by the poor that directly confront the authorities and challenge the status quo" (Miraftab, 2009, p. 39). These spaces are seen less within the confines of this study, but do exist within refugee communities. One example of this is a large, informal, pop-up market that happens on Unity Island in Erie County. Without securing public health permits, refugees from various communities sell prepared foods, clothing, and toys throughout the summer. While the market was shut down by police once, it has sprung back up.

Refugee community organization's work as imaginative

Lastly, RCO leaders described how their work embodies the final principle of insurgent planning: that it is imaginative in nature, they can imagine a different future, hold on to hope, and persevere to work towards this. Even after being forced to flee their homes and coming to the U.S. where the resettlement system that is intended to support them is inadequate, RCO leaders described how they maintain hope for their communities. The activities they engage in show this: from securing a voice through state level advisory councils, working within and

pushing against systems that prioritize the dominant community, and working as representatives of their communities. While this quote was shared previously, it provides an example of how one community leader reflects on how they continue to push for what they believe in:

I'm always pushing for the ideal change. I'm not going to be grateful for being allowed to breathe when we don't have housing, when we don't have all these other things...Many [resettlement agency] spaces I've been a part of do not have a lot of former refugees - which is [where] a lot of the executive level decision making [takes place]. (Interviewee 17)

This is not necessarily a common outlook for many refugees. Many want to get by, and live their lives, supporting their children. Some do not see the point of voting, or have broader concern about larger societal issues (Interviewee 21). But those in positions of leadership in the community are there because they want to see structural changes for their communities, and in imagining a different future are willing to work hard to get there.

Refugee community organization leaders have limitations too

Of course, like all institutions, RCOs have their own limitations. As stated earlier, many are run by those who come to the U.S. with more privileges than others: they may have more educational experience, be from a higher caste, they may have had more financial resources and higher standards of living in their previous life or be from the city (versus those that live in rural places and refugee camps), or might be from a religious background where people did not face persecution. While RCOs may serve people from the same home country, this does by no means equate to them having the same backgrounds. One RCO leader reflects on the discovery that none of the children in the program they run have fathers, as their mothers were victims of rape:

Every Saturday we have meetings here. There was a particular group, about 15 students here, and I said, "Okay, I want you to take this form home, ask your parents to sign these forms. I need to have them back because they have to sign these forms for you to be in the program." And somebody said, "Why don't you tell us, 'ask your moms to sign these forms?'" I said, "What does that mean? Parents, dad or mom could sign it." He said, "No. None of us has a dad." I knew a lot of them didn't have any dad, but not one out of 15 kids, how is that possible?

This RCO leader, while from the same country of origin as the participants in the program he runs, has a very different background. Their family came to the U.S. as immigrants, not refugees. They have high levels of educational attainment and are religious leaders. While these RCO leaders often speak on behalf of refugee communities, they may not have the same experience. This often happens too, with different ethnic groups being lumped together by those from outside of the refugee community. For example, Burmese and Karen people are often considered Burmese, even though they are two different ethnic groups (and people from Burma represent over 13 different ethnic groups in the U.S.). These various lived experiences and backgrounds demonstrate that RCO leaders cannot always speak on behalf of all of the diverse members of their communities but often do for a variety of reasons.

Refugee community leaders lack resources and training

While the work of RCO leaders is beneficial for those on the receiving end, they face multiple challenges. Again, because the federal resettlement system is so limited, the work of RCO leaders is necessary to support refugees in their new homes as work that government funded agencies should be doing is often offloaded onto RCOs. Moreover, many public-private partnerships exist between government agencies and non-profits for non-profits to deliver social

services (Trudeau, 2008), but many RCOs do not even have non-profit status. Explored in the findings and exhibited in Table 9, not all respondents in more formal roles in resettlement (such as workers for local and county government and local resettlement agencies) see the role of RCOs in the lives of refugees.

Working with multiple community members that have trauma, may be in very difficult life situations, have mental and physical challenges, living in a system that does not support them and relying on their community leaders at all hours can be trying. One community leader reflects on how this work impacts her:

You can be strong in front of them, but yourself, you are weak. So, I need to take time, take space, and sometimes I just go to the river and scream so loud and cry. I need to check and see if there is anyone in this park [laughing]? Any kids will be around me seeing me before I scream? I just park in my car and check if there is anyone around me.

We are not allowed to cry so loud in our cultures or in our families. (Focus Group Respondent)

This RCO leader further noted that seeing a system that does not support her community members sufficiently, and does not take time to understand cultural differences, can magnify the challenge and her sense of frustration.

On top of navigating challenging life situations, RCO leaders are new to the U.S. system themselves, and need to learn both how to get things done as well as how to navigate bureaucratic systems. One RCO leader reflects:

Those who are working in the system already are much more ahead of us... We know what the issues are in the community, but we don't know how to identify which part of the system is failing and who is in charge of that, being able to problem map and figure

out what's the strategy. Who is the person? Where should we be focusing? Which system is leading into the problem that we're seeing on the ground? It's all intertwined.

(Interviewee 17)

As this example demonstrates, RCO leaders ensure that their community members have basic needs and rights, but they do this in a system that they are simultaneously learning about themselves. Without connections in places of power, RCO leaders may be limited in the leverage they have to make more structural changes, and to assist their community members.

Conclusion

As this analysis shows, much of the city's work in Kent and Erie counties - both broader urban planning efforts as well as plans and offices specifically created to address refugee needs - are done without refugee representation in positions of leadership. The experience with the Buffalo ONA also suggests that welcoming work does not always happen in the correct entity. In this case, the ONA is at the city level, limiting its mandate and ability to officially collaborate and involve other entities - especially from the county government - such as the school system or social services. Furthermore, these findings demonstrate how plans that were developed either do not meet the needs of refugee populations - leaving out key concerns like tensions with policy - or are built without the needed trust between the broader refugee community and government officials, resulting in the community not seeing the plan as something useful to them.

Conversely, RCOs are more attuned to what is going on in refugee communities than LCGs. RCOs utilize tenets of insurgent planning in their approach, meeting the needs of their communities more closely as they push back against the status quo. Still, RCO leaders are often not representative of the broader community they serve and do not receive the necessarily training or resources to effectively do this work. In the next and final chapter, I build on the

above findings to offer a way forward a collaborative approach to planning resettlement, which includes an avenue for RCO voices to be heard.

Chapter 7 Conclusion and Discussion

My findings suggest that the U.S. refugee resettlement program is highly constrained in the type of support that is granted to refugees, especially when LCGs and other grassroots groups cannot adequately pick up the governance gaps. The U.S. refugee resettlement program is set up to be a short program, which results in a survival-of-the-fittest scenario. It is not at all surprising that LRAs cannot, in general, meet the needs of their clients within the confines of this program. LCGs see refugees as a way to revitalize their cities (especially those hit hard by austerity measures), and while urban planning officials routinely use participatory approaches and attempts to meet the needs of diverse populations, refugees have largely been left out. The findings in this study highlight the need for a more collaborative approach to be taken in welcoming work, while more fully integrating refugee services into LCGs. This will both better meet the needs of refugee populations and provide a buffer and protection if refugee numbers are cut (along with the funding for LRAs) again in the future.

My research findings show that while comprehensive and welcome plans include many topics important to refugees, the ways in which LCGs engage with refugee populations is ineffective. Additionally, RCOs fill a gap that forms when LCGs cannot reach refugee populations effectively. In this final chapter I offer suggestions for a way forward. For states that have leaders supporting immigration, institutionalize any ONA or Office of Immigrant Affairs while they can. I outline ways in which these offices can be more inclusive and supportive, followed by ways to increase RCO visibility, legitimizing their voices and incorporating them

into more formal resettlement and planning processes. I then share ideas for future research that come from these findings, followed by concluding remarks.

A collaborative approach to planning resettlement

As outlined in the previous chapter, RCO leaders are typically more effective at meeting the needs of their communities, although this work comes with mental and emotional challenges. As politics around immigration sway and refugee admissions determinants are the responsibility of the president, the federally funded refugee resettlement program is precarious. This was seen during the Trump administration, when over 100 local resettlement agencies had to close their doors, resulting in much of the U.S. refugee resettlement program needing to be rebuilt – including relaunching LRAs that had closed operations – when President Biden increased resettlement numbers (Watson, 2021). More fully integrating refugee services into LCGs can protect resettlement services, so that if there are times when numbers of refugees admitted to the country drop and LRAs cease to operate, resources are still available at a municipal level. Embedding refugee resettlement services into entities that already exist and will operate regardless of refugee thresholds established federally, such as LCGs, can help the refugee resettlement program weather future adverse events. If this is through an ONA, this office can conceivably shift their work to work with other immigrants, other multi-cultural, or community development work more widely when federal funding for refugees is adequate. I outline below how resettlement services might be embedded into LCGs, ways that LCGs can create formal avenues for RCO, and ways to amplify refugee voices.

Institutionalizing welcoming work

Erie and Kent Counties are each engaging in some of the measures outlined below, but the ways in which they are doing so need reflection and refining. Some of this comes down to how planners are trained – how do planners listen deeply, allow for, and ensure adequate participation? How do planners put their own agendas and fears aside and operate from a place of abundance?

One of the most promising approaches to strengthening the U.S. resettlement program can be through offices dedicated to serving refugees at the county or municipal level, as the City of Buffalo has done. Having an office like this will help infrastructure of the resettlement program weather future negative impacts to the resettlement system. But, as seen in the previous chapter, just having an office like this is not a solution. Two aspects are crucial. First, an ONA or Office of Diversity (where work related to refugees can be housed) needs to be permanent. Sways in political views can impact the viability of these resources, but if these offices are part of a city charter (or whatever mechanism that makes it a required office in a particular locality), they can weather changes in policy related to immigration and be assured personnel and resources.

Secondly, there needs to be adequate representation from refugee communities themselves. As discussed numerous times, refugees are by no means a homogenous community. Ensuring adequate representation through a community advisory board and outreach (with adequate translation) at community events can create avenues for people to share their perspectives. As described in chapter five, the ONA did not consult with anyone besides the mayor when determining what their agenda would be, despite LRAs having multiple programmatic efforts for refugees. Offices like this in these smaller cities often hinge on one person. This is why a community advisory board is crucial as an avenue for other voices to be

heard, with the understanding that community leaders do not necessarily represent the larger community from the same home country. Forming relationships with a range of community and religious leaders allows for buy-in from the broader community.

Increasing visibility, recognition, and reach of RCOs

As discussed in chapter six, RCOs, while not perfect, tend to meet the needs of their communities in more effective ways than LCGs. In addition to securing avenues for refugee support within government, my findings show that it is crucial to increase the visibility, recognition, and reach of RCOs. Other scholars similarly argue for increased legitimization and visibility of RCOs in order to create a human services environment that is equitable (Kirsch et al., 2023).

In addition to ensuring the recognition of RCOs so that they can have more say, RCOs also need greater stability, formality, and structure so that LRAs and LCGs take them seriously and they have the capacity to take on this work and responsibility within the refugee community (Besel et al., 2011; Miller, 1998). Unfortunately, many RCO leaders do not have the experience, expertise, mentorship, or time needed to create a 501C-3 (since many are doing this on a voluntary basis while working full-time jobs). This becomes problematic, especially if a RCO wants to receive funding for their work, and like many small organizations, places their viability at risk (Trudeau, 2008). Below, I outline how voices from the refugee community could be amplified and ways to build bridges between disenfranchised communities.

Build bridges between disenfranchised communities

Many disenfranchised communities are working towards the same goals, yet are doing this work on their own, as White supremacy and capitalism divides groups in order to limit power (Dawson, 2016). For example, in the City of Buffalo, there's the ONA and an Office of

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. Merging these offices might strengthen the work they do, or at least realize that they have a common goal. This can happen with RCOs, too. While the experience of being a refugee differs and RCOs may be competing for limited resources, RCOs can work together to advocate for a venue to share their concerns and opinions, seek out resources together, or share physical spaces.

Build capacity for civic engagement

RCO leaders both need to assist their communities and also themselves navigate often complex bureaucratic systems that are new to them. Building capacity for civic engagement both for RCO leaders and the general refugee community can both make the RCO leaders' jobs easier, as their communities may become more independent, as well as give them the tools to navigate these systems.

For the broader refugee community, civic engagement training can be something that is provided as part of the orientation upon arrival. While this is an overwhelming time - refugees need to secure employment, get up to date on vaccinations, get children enrolled in school - it may be useful to have this training available to refugees who have been in the U.S. longer, as well.

Additionally, training for RCO leaders on what different offices and entities do, what resources exist, and avenues available for voicing their concerns, can help them more effectively serve their communities. An office of Immigrant Affairs or ONA at the municipal or county level can run biannual civic engagement training for community leaders. This does not need to be limited to leaders from the refugee community, but from other minority groups as well. Understanding how municipal, county, and state governments function and how they can operate

within them will allow RCO leaders to function not only in the invented spaces, but invited spaces.

Amplifying voices

To increase visibility and recognition, voices of leaders from refugee communities need to be amplified and have a consistent venue for voicing their concerns, experiences, and suggestions. As entities in Michigan and New York have done, creating a formal and permanent avenue for engagement of refugee voices is crucial. A refugee advisory board made up of leaders from the refugee community - not just those at agencies that serve refugees - can be a venue for refugee voices to be heard. Allocating staff time to organize the board and implementing the suggestions is also important, as members of the refugee advisory board are often already juggling separate careers and community work.

As seen in the work on the Welcome Plan in Kent County, allocating staff time does not ensure that listening happens or change occurs (in that case, concerns the community vocalized were not always included in the plan). While respondents said that certain issues were not included in the plan because they were political, there are other ways that this can be acknowledged and addressed. This requires training, perhaps that Offices of Immigrant Affairs, New Americans, or Diversity and Inclusion can lead, on both how to listen deeply and incorporate a range of voices. Creating a board is one step, but ensuring that those in positions of power actually listen and enact the suggestions of the board is crucial.

Programs to get refugees in positions of leadership

As Offices of New Americans or Immigration may be cut if there is a shift in political leadership, getting refugees into positions of power is crucial so that a voice for refugee

populations remains. One example of this is the 21st Century Program in Buffalo. This is a way to get refugees and other minority populations, into the police force. Other programs and incentives that encourage and support refugees in becoming civically engaged, running for office, or working in schools is a long-term strategy to ensure that refugees are embedded in institutional decision-making structures so that the needs of refugee populations are attended to over the long term.

Future research

Both the findings and the limitations of this study point to various directions for future research. This research shows how even LCGs that are typically more engaged in welcoming work than the average LCG in the U.S. still fall short. Yet this study only included perspectives from community leaders, as it was beyond the capacity of this study to survey the refugee population that are not in positions of leadership. It is crucial to hear from a broader refugee population to gain an understanding of how others see the role of LCGs' welcoming work and what engagement strategies will be effective.

Throughout the interviews, issues around racism were brought up, especially with interviewees in Kent County after the death of Patrick Lyoya. Interviewees spoke of not being prepared to live as a Black person in the U.S. They spoke of the refugee experience, and how, for them – coming from a home torn apart by war, they viewed the U.S. as a safe haven. One interviewee described how U.S. born Black people prepare their children for life in the U.S. (for example, by teaching them how to act a certain way when pulled over by a police officer) and how, in part, Patrick's death was a result of not knowing this. One interviewee viewed his death as a failure in the resettlement system. More research needs to be done on the experience of Black refugees in the U.S. and how to better prepare them for safety in their new homes, which

is pressing, given the fact that it is unlikely that structural racism in LCGs and police forces will be rectified anytime soon.

A more comprehensive analysis of welcoming work across the country is also needed. While Kent and Erie counties offer useful and important perspectives, we can learn from LCGs with ONAs that are more deeply institutionalized and places that have become “Certified Welcoming” through Welcoming America (the highest certification from Welcoming America, where the organization conducts a policy analysis of a LCG). As political views around immigration sway, an understanding of how welcoming work can be institutionalized can help to ensure that supports for refugees and immigrants remain. How can welcoming work have a longevity and not be the result of a few champions in a LCG who spearhead the work?

More research can be done on refugees and civic engagement as well. RCO leaders mentioned that many refugees have major issues and challenges in their own lives and do not have the bandwidth or interest to be civically engaged. But, is this what the broader refugee population thinks? What avenues are there for refugees to engage in civic processes? Interviewees from Kent County mentioned past educational programming for civic engagement, now defunct. Are programs like this effective? Are there examples around the country?

Furthermore, Okour (2019) highlights the need for standardization in data on refugees and a need for data collection and measurement tools, in order to support programs and policies for refugee populations:

An improved understanding of how refugee data can be collected, processed, and analyzed is critical to the development of data-driven policies. Lacking consistency in data collection and measurements by local VOLAGS and refugee service providers undermines the ability of local communities to develop and monitor refugee-based

programs and policies. Therefore, future research must explore the benefits of standardizing refugee resettlement data at the local and regional level, identify data requirements and data needs, develop effective data collection and measurement tools, and examine how data sharing between various service providers and stakeholder can be facilitated (Okour, 2019, p. 195)

This is a needed area of research that can also explore how to best center voices of the general refugee population in research and explore best practices for community engagement with refugee populations. Finally, in future research I will attempt to include a broader array of refugee voices in the work, by ensuring translation is available so I can work with non-English speaking individuals.

Concluding remarks

While LCGs are working within challenging environments under the confines of austerity measures, they can learn from the ways in which RCOs engage. First, by learning the ways in which community members can and want to communicate, LCGs can better reach those they are trying to contact. By working and having representation from community leaders, LCGs can better have community buy-in on their welcoming work. Additionally, LCGs can create avenues for refugee voices, whether it be through an advisory board or securing spots on committees for representatives from the refugee community. Institutionalizing aspects of resettlement support, such as having an ONA be part of a city's charter, can ensure that support for these populations remain if political views on immigrants change. Lastly, LCGs can work to envision a resettlement program that supports a more holistic view of wellbeing, understanding that one way to do this is via collaboration across entities and acknowledging that building trust does not happen overnight.

Appendices

Appendix A: Key Words Used in Plan Searches

Refugee(s)

Immigrant(s)

New American(s)

Housing

Transportation

Education

Employment

Health

Religion

School

Social Services

Transportation

Language

Appendix B: Interview Tool

Phone or Zoom Interview Protocol

INTRO & VERBAL CONSENT

Hi, this is Alex Judelsohn from the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Michigan. Thanks for agreeing to speak with me.

As I mentioned in my e-mail, the purpose of this study is to understand refugee placement in the US and challenges that refugees face that pertain to urban planning, and in particular, how the type of city that refugees are resettled in may or may not affect their resettlement outcomes. The information you share will be used in journal articles and policy briefs. Your responses will be kept confidential. In any reports, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you and will only provide information in an aggregate form across all respondents. You are welcome to stop the interview at any point or decline to answer specific questions. As part of their review, the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences has determined that this study is no more than minimal risk and exempt from on-going IRB oversight.

Does this sound OK with you?

[Continue if permitted] To assist with note-taking, I would like to record the interview. The audio files will be transcribed, but the recording and transcriptions will not be shared with anyone else. May I record the interview?

Do you have any questions for me before I begin? [Turn on audio record if permitted]

QUESTIONS

Part I. Introductory questions about the interviewee and organization's primary area of work

1) *[If I don't already know, ask this...if I think you know, confirm]* First, could you explain what your title and role is in (organization's name)? How long have you been in this position? How long have you worked with this organization?

2) In what capacity do you work with refugee populations? Are there particular groups of refugees that you work with (ex - Burmese, Karen, Somali, etc.)?

Part II. Questions about refugees in the city

My next set of questions ask about integration of refugees. Here I use the following definition of integration: "a long-term two-way process of change, that relates both to the conditions for and

the actual participation of refugees in all aspects of life.” Aspects of life include things like employment, housing, health, education, social connections, language, safety, and citizenship.

- 1) How do you think the *city* a refugee is resettled in impacts integration?
 - a) *Probe with the following if time allows/they haven't covered yet:*
 - i) Employment, housing, education, health?
 - ii) Social connections, such as social bridges beyond their community, social bonds within their community, and social links such as connections to government services?
 - iii) Language and cultural knowledge and safety and stability?
 - iv) Citizenship?
 - i) Are there any additional domains of integration or challenges that refugees face that you think should be added to this list?
- 2) Refugees are placed in vastly different types of cities around the country. Do you have a sense of how the specific *city* that refugees are resettled in contribute to their experience?
 - a) I know that (name of city) is a Welcoming City. *[If they do not know what a Welcoming City is, say “A Welcoming City is one that joined ‘the Welcoming America network and works across multiple sectors, such as government, business, and non-profit, to create inclusive policies and practices such as making it easier for entrepreneurs to start a business or having government documents available in multiple languages. Welcoming Cities are guided by the principles of inclusion and creating communities that prosper because everyone feels welcome, including immigrants and refugees.”]* Do you think that this impacts the experiences of refugees?
- 3) What's the most important *type of support* that you think refugees receive in their host communities, in order to effectively integrate into their new home?
- 4) Can you speak to the different organizations that are involved in these domains?
 - a) *[probe with asking about the role of local governments if they do not mention this]*
 - b) Employment, housing, education, health?
 - c) Social connections, such as social bridges beyond their community, social bonds within their community, and social links such as connections to government services?
 - d) Language and cultural knowledge and safety and stability?
 - e) Citizenship?
- 5) How do the organizations that support refugees interact with one another?
- 6) Do you think it is common for resettled refugees to voluntarily move away from their initial resettlement location because of the city itself and support services or amenities that exist?

Part III. Questions about urban planning and refugees

- 1) What role have you seen your local government play in resettlement?
 - a) Does the local government consider specific groups when planning? If so, how?
 - i) Does the local government engage with refugees and their community leaders? If so, how?

- ii) If not, what are some challenges that get in the way of this?
- 2) Are there any innovative government programs for refugees or immigrant populations in your city?
- 3) What more do you think your local government can do to support refugee resettlement, specifically with the challenges you previously mentioned?

Part IV. Final questions

- 1) Is there anything that you would like to share that we have not already discussed?
- 2) Is there anyone else you recommend I talk to understand how the city where someone is placed affects refugee resettlement?

Appendix C: Final Codebook

Challenges

Bureaucracy
Childcare
Community leaders
Comparison to life before resettlement
Connection to Services
COVID
Cultural differences
Data limitations
Disconnection between agencies
Discrimination
Education
Employment
Engagement [or lack of]
English language [or lack of translators]
Fluidity/responding to changing community needs
Funding structure
Healthcare systems
Housing/Land access
Impact on other communities
Lack of federal support
Lack of funding
Lack of knowledge about resettlement program
Lack of refugees in leadership positions
Language
Legal system
Length of R&P program
Making tradeoffs
Mental Health
Number to resettle
Outside scope of work
Parenting
Political/religious beliefs
Poverty
Racism/Xenophobia
Reality of life in US
Reliance on benefits
Reliance on LRA
Services

Staff
Social Capital

Taxes
Time
Transportation
Trust/Distrust
Urban setting
Weather

Communication

Anecdotal incidents
Employers
Fostering
Lack of
Landlords
Law enforcement
Local government and misc.
LRA and local government
LRA and state government
LRA with other LRAs
LRA with schools
Other
RCO and LRA
RCO to RCO
State and RCO
State and state
VOLAG and county government
VOLAG and federal government
VOLAG and local government
Welcoming America and govt
Welcoming America and nonprofit
With general community
With refugee community

Community

Improvements

Adult education
Community space
Connecting with RCOs
Creating council
Creating partnerships
Cultural exchanges
Cultural knowledge
Domestic Violence
Economic opportunities
Education
ESL
Integration

Language access
Mental Health
Policies
Resettlement services
Schools
Sharing information
Translated materials
Transportation
Trust
Welcoming

Integration

Facilitators

Language and Cultural Knowledge
Safety and Stability

Foundation

Rights and Citizenship

Full Participation

Leadership [AJ added]

Markers and Means

Community space [AJ added]
Education
Employment
Health
Housing
Religion [AJ added]
School [AJ added]
Social Services [AJ added]
Transportation [AJ added]

Social Connection

General welcoming [AJ added]
Social Bonds
Social Bridges
Social Links

Interesting Facts

Interviewee (Potential)

Job/Life Description

Opportunities

Benefits
Civic engagement
Collaborations
Cost of Living
Diversity
Economic
Education
Employers
Entrepreneurs

ESL Opportunities
Existing Community
Existing Resettlement Infrastructure
Expansion of resettlement program
History
Housing/Land Access
Libraries
Micro-'Enterprise
Multiple agencies
Policy Change
Proximity to Border
Public Benefits
Refugee advisory board
Relationships
Sanctuary city
Schools
Space for women
Support for resettlement program
Trainings
Unknown
Welcoming City

Plans

Business/Economic Development
Challenges
Class
Community led / Public involvement
Diversity
Housing
Implementation
Land Use
Mobilization
Neighborhoods
Objectives/Policies
Outreach
Parks
Partnerships
Process
Purpose
Quality of life/wellbeing
Recommendations/Objectives/Pollicies
Research processes

Safety

Services
Transportation/Walkability
Visions

Priorities/To Do

Advocacy
Connecting
Cultural
Education
Funding
Implementation
Invest in business opportunities
Invest in communications
Invest in physical space
Language access
Leadership
Listening
Relationship Building
Staffing
Strategize
Transportation

Processes

R&P

Advocacy
Certified Welcoming
Geographic Formation
Deciding factors
Impact of Trump administration
Infrastructure
Limitations
Partnerships
Public Private Partnerships
Secondary Migration
Self Sufficiency
State Funding
Strengths
Tips & Tricks

Red Flags

Communication with white'-led organizations
Does not address root cause
Does not mention the orgs that are already doing this work
Issue with metric
Issue with representation
Lacking description of community'-led efforts
Outside realm of work
Patrick
Putting onus on refugee community
Refugees as benefit to city
Require English language skills
Viewing immigrant community as spenders

Support Organizations

Chamber of Commerce
Consortiums
County Government
Emergency Management
Employment
Existing refugee community
Faith Based
Foundations
Health organizations
Housing Coalitions
Informal
Local Government
Local Resettlement Agencies
Misc Non-'Profits
Natural Helpers Program
Office of New Americans
Police
R-CBOs
Schools/Educators
State Government
Welcoming America

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