

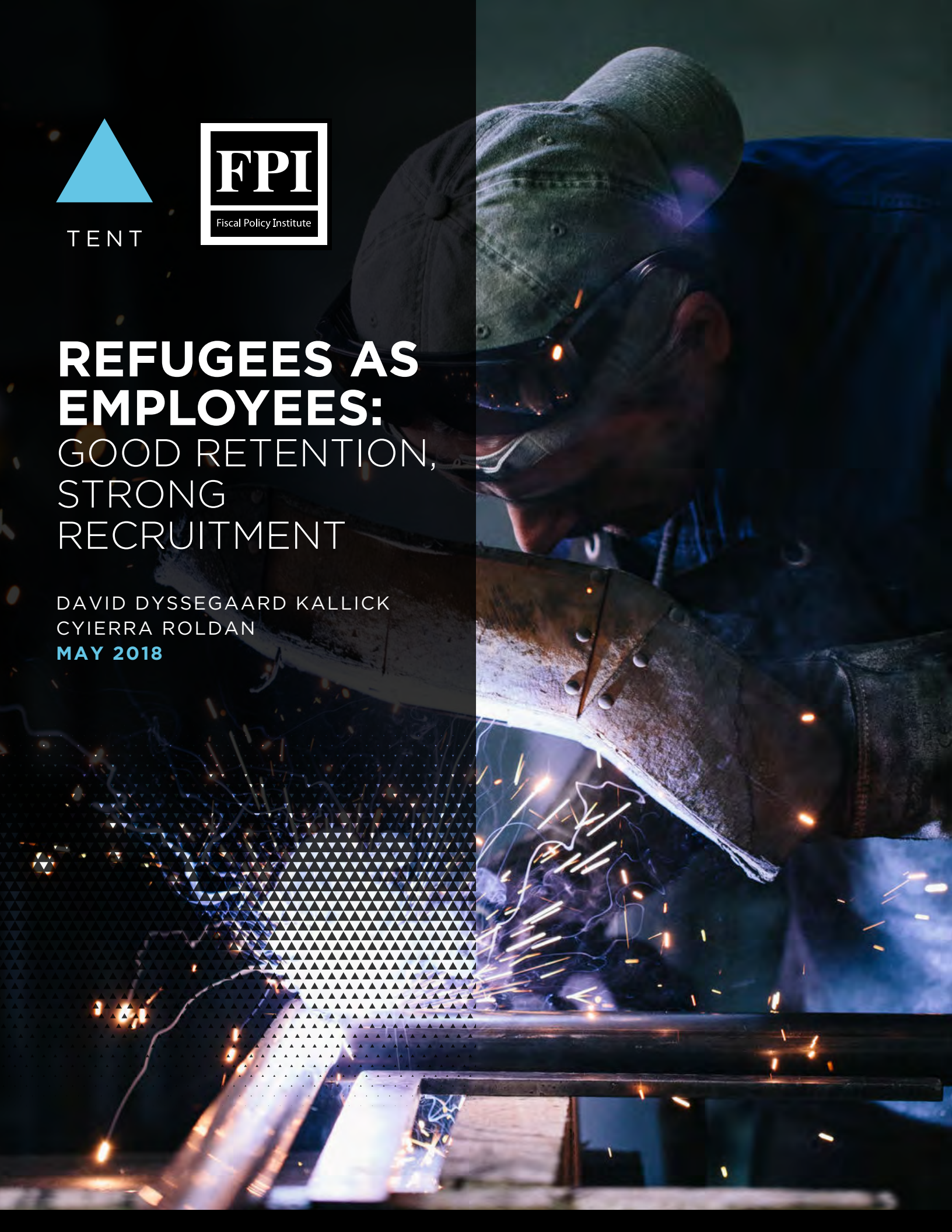


TENT



# REFUGEES AS EMPLOYEES: GOOD RETENTION, STRONG RECRUITMENT

DAVID DYSSEGAARD KALLICK  
CYIERRA ROLDAN  
MAY 2018



## ABOUT THE TENT PARTNERSHIP FOR REFUGEES

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TENT IS MOBILIZING THE PRIVATE SECTOR TO IMPROVE THE LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS OF THE MORE THAN 20 MILLION MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN WHO HAVE BEEN FORCIBLY DISPLACED FROM THEIR HOME COUNTRIES. AS TRADITIONAL ACTORS STRUGGLE TO COPE WITH THE GLOBAL REFUGEE CRISIS – WITH EVER-INCREASING NUMBERS OF REFUGEES, DISPLACED FOR LONGER PERIODS OF TIME – IT IS CLEAR THAT BUSINESSES HAVE A MORE IMPORTANT ROLE THAN EVER BEFORE.

TENT WORKS WITH BUSINESSES TO HELP THEM DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT TANGIBLE COMMITMENTS TO SUPPORT REFUGEES.

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## ABOUT FPI

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# OVERVIEW



# OVERVIEW



## AROUND THE WORLD, REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT HAS BEEN A BIGGER AND MORE POLITICALLY PROMINENT QUESTION IN RECENT YEARS THAN AT ANY TIME SINCE WORLD WAR II.

In the United States, there is established recent research on how over time refugees become well integrated into society and how they fare in the economy, learning English, increasing their wages, owning homes, and starting businesses.<sup>1</sup> Less attention, however, has been focused on the employer side of the resettlement story: *What is the experience of businesses that hire refugees?*

To investigate this question, the Fiscal Policy Institute conducted in-depth interviews with employers of refugees in four geographic areas of the United States. All are major sites of refugee resettlement, yet they represent a wide range of economic situations, immigration experiences, and political contexts: Atlanta, Georgia and the surrounding counties; Phoenix, Arizona; upstate New York; and Eastern and Central Nebraska. To frame this research, we also conducted interviews with refugees, refugee resettlement agency staff, other service providers, researchers, and other members of the community to give context to our findings, conducting over 100 interviews in total. The research was further contextualized and guided by FPI's analysis of data from the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Worldwide Refugee Processing System (WRAPS).

For the most part, employers we interviewed stressed the similarities, not the differences, between refugee

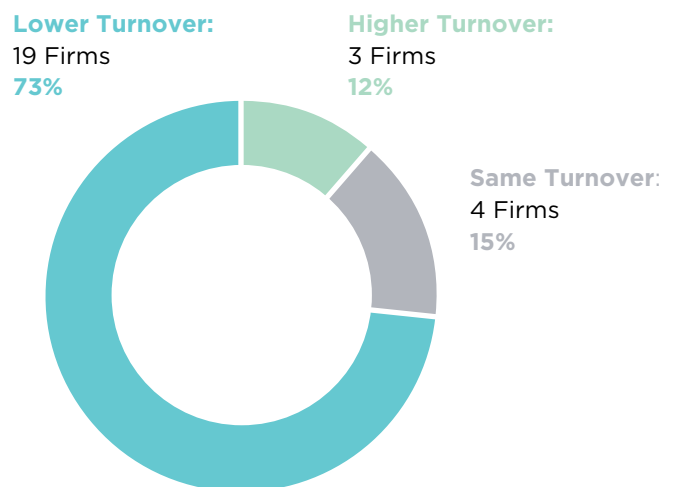
employees and their other employees: Most importantly, they come to work and get the job done. Refugee employees, for their part, emphasized the importance of wages and working conditions, just as might be expected for other employees.

However, there were also important differences between refugee employees and employees overall. In particular, this study identified two clear differences that reflect ways employers benefit when they broaden their hiring pool to include refugees.

### 1) REFUGEES TEND TO STAY WITH THE SAME EMPLOYER FOR LONGER THAN OTHER HIRES.

19 of the 26 employers surveyed—73 percent—reported a higher retention rate for refugees than for other employees. This was consistent across industry sector and across geography (*see Figure 1*).

▲ **FIGURE 1 | SURVEY: LOWER TURNOVER RATES IN 19 OF 26 FIRMS**

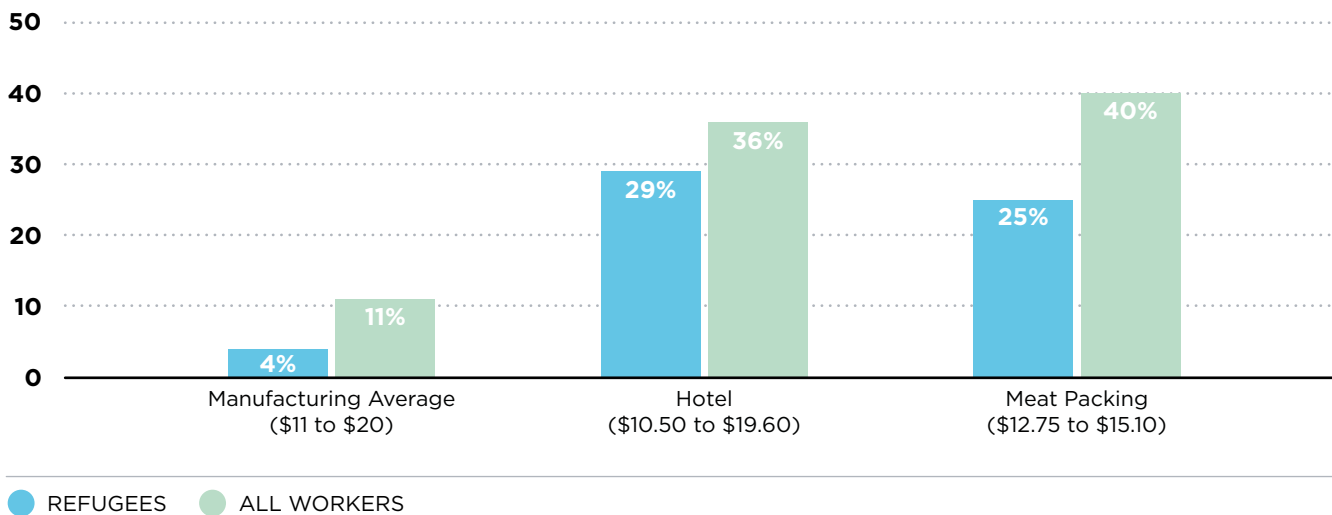


1. For a useful summary of the most recent findings, see Hamutal Bernstein, "Bringing Evidence to the Refugee Integration Debate," Urban Institute, April 9, 2018.

Among employers who gave the Fiscal Policy Institute confidential access to internal data, refugees had a turnover rate that was seven to 15 percentage points lower than for the overall workforce (see *Figure 2*). Among the four manufacturing firms for which we have data, the average turnover rate was four percent for refugees, compared to 11 percent for employees overall—a difference of seven percentage points. In the hotel industry, which has much higher overall

turnover, the rate in the job categories typically filled by refugees was 29 percent for refugees and 36 percent overall—also a difference of seven percentage points. In meatpacking, a tough occupation where retention is at least as challenging as in hotels, the differential in the firm for which we have internal data was 15 percentage points—annual turnover was 25 percent for refugees and 40 percent overall.

▲ **FIGURE 2** | LOWER TURNOVER REFUGEE AND OVERALL RETENTION RATES



*Source:* Data were provided confidentially to FPI by a hotel, a meat packing firm, and four manufacturing firms. Individual manufacturing firm responses are shown in *Figure 6*.

The firms for which we have statistical data all pay a starting salary to all workers that is at least a little above the minimum wage (at the time of interviews \$7.25 in Georgia, \$9.00 in Nebraska, \$10.00 in Arizona,

and \$10.40 in upstate New York.) Among the firms interviewed that paid lower wages, the trend was more mixed, though in general the turnover rate was still reported to be lower for refugees.

What seemed important to achieving lower refugee turnover was that the employer made at least some effort to integrate refugees into the workplace. These were not generally big investments, but they did include an attempt to address the challenges of making a place for workers from a different kind of background than their previously typical employees. Figuring out how to get new hires started when they speak very little English was the most common challenge. Making the workplace culture and practices flexible enough to accommodate people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds was another, as was resolving transportation issues. In a significant number of cases, bereavement policies also came up.

The firms where refugee turnover was about the same as or even higher than for all workers were generally the ones with turnover rates that were higher for all workers than the industry average, where service providers talked about firms using refugees as “cannon fodder” in a cycle of high burnout and replacement of workers.

Lower turnover is valuable for any business. A 2012 study by Heather Boushey and Sarah Jane Glynn found that replacing a worker typically costs businesses about one fifth of the worker’s annual salary. For a full-time worker earning \$13 an hour, which is typical in our surveys, that translates into \$5,200 per year saved for every worker who does not have to be replaced. That’s a cost savings to the employer that leaves room for investment in translation services, help with transportation, or other ways of easing refugee employees’ integration into the workplace.<sup>2</sup>

Lower refugee turnover seemed to reflect a positive experience for the refugees as well. There is a larger question about options for good jobs in today’s labor

market, but within that context, low refugee turnover almost always seemed to be a sign of a comparatively positive work experience for refugees, not simply a measure of an inability to change jobs.

Several factors appear to be driving the comparatively high retention rate among refugee employees: All workers value employers who make them feel welcome and respected, but refugees are especially responsive to a welcoming environment. Once they find it, they tend to stay with that employer, possibly because they may be unsure of finding a similarly welcoming climate elsewhere. Refugees also tend to gravitate towards jobs that allow them to get by with limited English proficiency initially and learn the language on the job, and they also tend to stay longer with employers that provide this flexibility. Finally, refugees often prefer to work alongside other refugees – especially those who share their background – so employing multiple refugees also positively influences retention rates. Refugees who want to stay together as a group are less likely to move to a new environment where a community of their background has not yet been established, and in a few instances we saw this potentially holding refugees back from advancing, but in the large majority of cases it was a way for refugees to maintain ties to the culture they grew up in while also helping navigate and integrate into the new culture they encounter in the United States.

What is true for retention is also true for recruitment: when refugees find a workplace they feel welcome in, they tend to tell others in their community. And Therefore, employers who have created a climate in which refugees feel welcome should not be surprised to see more job applications from other refugees—and maybe also from other non-refugees who feel welcomed as well.

2. See Heather Boushey and Sarah Jane Glynn, “There Are Significant Business Costs to Replacing Employees,” Center for American Progress, November 16, 2012.

Although the employers interviewed for this report do not necessarily comprise a fully representative sample of all employers, their interviews do reflect a wide range of employer experiences.

**2) ONCE EMPLOYERS CREATE A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FIRST FEW REFUGEES, IT OPENS THE DOOR FOR THE RECRUITMENT OF MANY OTHERS.**

The first time an employer hires one or several refugees, there is almost always a period of mutual accommodation. Some issues are likely to come up that have never arisen before and may take employers by surprise, although they are often easily manageable. Taking shoes off in the break room, or assuming that a cousin can substitute for an employee who is out sick, for example, are issues that have come up for the first time when refugees joined the labor force. Language barriers are a consistent challenge for new employers of refugees, and are in some ways a bigger challenge with refugees than with other immigrant groups. Where training videos may be available in Spanish, for example, the same is not likely for speakers of Karenni, one of several Burmese languages.

Companies that make the effort to work these issues through, however, are often doubly repaid in both retention of the employees themselves and also in recruitment of other refugees. This recruitment advantage works at least three ways.

One recruitment advantage comes from the tendency of members of the same ethnic group to seek employment at the same company. If an employer works through the issues for new Bhutanese refugee hires, for instance, is very likely to find others from the Bhutanese community applying for any job openings. These applicants will have recommendations from Bhutanese employees, and the

company will already have made arrangements that address some common issues that arise in employing Bhutanese refugees. And, at least in the first years following their arrival in the United States, Bhutanese are likely to give a high preference for working in a place where there are others from their country who they can talk with during breaks and learn from on the job.

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**ONCE EMPLOYERS MAKE A COMMITMENT TO HIRING ONE REFUGEE GROUP, THEY GENERALLY BECOME MORE ADEPT AT INTEGRATING NEW GROUPS OF REFUGEES AS WELL AS NEW GROUPS OF OTHER EMPLOYEES FROM DIFFERENT KINDS OF BACKGROUNDS.**

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A second advantage comes from easier recruitment as firms develop relationships with refugee communities and build a practice of integration into their workforce. If an employer works through the initial logistics of hiring refugees from one country of origin, hiring from a second group is often far easier. To begin with, refugee resettlement agencies and other service providers are quick to recognize when employment is working out well for their clients. The agencies then become something like recruiters themselves, not only providing screening and even pre-trained referrals, but also providing some level of ongoing services such as assistance with translation, aid working through cultural misunderstandings, or help identifying agencies that can help workers with health or family issues.

A final advantage is in the number of refugees who have no trouble getting through the multiple kinds of screening that are often required by employers. They rarely fail a drug test. And, having already been

extensively vetted by the U.S. government in order to receive their refugee status, they can easily pass a background test.<sup>3</sup> Necessary or not, these are screens that frequently keep other applicants from getting a job. Refugees are given Social Security numbers, and there is no question about their work authorization.

Once employers make a commitment to hiring one refugee group, they generally become more adept at integrating new groups of refugees as well as new groups of other employees from different kinds of backgrounds. Several employers we interviewed downplayed the challenges of integrating refugees into their workforce, and when we noted things that they had seemingly done to ease integration, they responded by saying, as one employer put it, “that may just seem easy to us because we have been working with refugees for so long.” In at least one case, learning how to integrate refugees into the workforce helped a company move toward recruiting and integrating a very different population that have proven challenging: formerly incarcerated workers.

Employers frequently felt they had learned and grown from the experience of integrating refugees in ways that made them not just better employers of refugees, but better employers in general. Hiring with the expectation of teaching workers on the job opened the doors to non-refugee and refugee employees alike, and often also worked better for employers. Making production goals and evaluation clear to people who don’t speak English well also benefitted native English speakers who found the new communications clearer. An openness to hiring employees who may need training on the job, instead of exclusively looking for people who walk in the door with all the skills needed for a job, has widened

the applicant pool for some companies. In some cases, hiring refugees helped companies connect with local markets, when they were located in neighborhoods with high concentrations of refugees.

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**“IF YOU CAN BE A PART OF CHANGING ONE PERSON’S LIFE, THAT’S REWARDING. REFUGEES ARE KIND OF CAST OUT THERE BY THEMSELVES. BUT EVERYBODY NEEDS A SHERPA— EVERYBODY NEEDS A GUIDE AND SOME HELP ALONG THE WAY.”**

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Refugee resettlement should hardly be seen as a concern for local workers seeking jobs, in fact in many instances they play an important role in helping local economies grow. Studies have consistently shown that immigrants in general help expand a local economy, and do not displace workers from job opportunities.<sup>4</sup>

There are some neighborhoods, and a few cities, with significant concentrations of refugees, helping cities like Minneapolis or Utica, for example, turn around population decline and tip toward growth. Yet there is nowhere in the country where refugees make up more than a tiny fraction of the population of a metropolitan area. A metropolitan area, which includes a city and its suburbs, is the local labor market, and refugees typically make up less than one percent of the metro area population; in no instance do refugees make up over three percent of the metro area population.

In any discussion of refugees, it is important to note the distinctions between different refugee groups. What is true for Congolese refugees may be different for Iraqi, Somali, or Burmese refugees. Some refugees have spent years in refugee camps, while others were displaced

3. For details on the vetting process, see [www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/admissions/](http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/admissions/).

4. For a good overview of this literature, see Heidi Shierholz, “Immigration and Wages,” Economic Policy Institute, February 4, 2010.

relatively recently. Some refugees have a more formal educational background than others, and some have more readily transferable skills. Throughout this report we will refer to those characteristics that apply to refugee groups in general, aware that there is no such thing as a typical refugee.

Employers who hire refugees do it because it works for their businesses. The main reason they hire refugees is straightforward: they are looking for workers, and refugees are workers—usually one among many sources of job applicants. For the employers who make it work, however, hiring refugees also turns out to lower turnover rates and at least one added source of future recruitment. The gains from lower turnover and improved recruitment easily offset their costs in integrating refugees into the labor force.

That said, many employers also brought up the emotional benefits, and even patriotic feelings, that they experienced when they hired refugees. Being able to hire refugees and see them succeed on the job, buy their first car, send their kids to college, purchase a home, or gain American citizenship is hugely rewarding. “I have a photo of [a longtime employee, getting his citizenship papers] and his wife and little kid holding an American flag. If that doesn’t make you proud to be American...,” one employer said, trailing off with the thought. Another observed: “If you can be a part of changing one person’s life, that’s rewarding. Refugees are kind of cast out there by themselves. But everybody needs a Sherpa—everybody needs a guide and some help along the way.” And, yet another, summing it all up, said short and simple: “It’s the American Dream. It’s very cool to see.”





**FOUR REGIONS,  
A BROAD RANGE  
OF EXPERIENCES**



# FOUR REGIONS, A BROAD RANGE OF EXPERIENCES

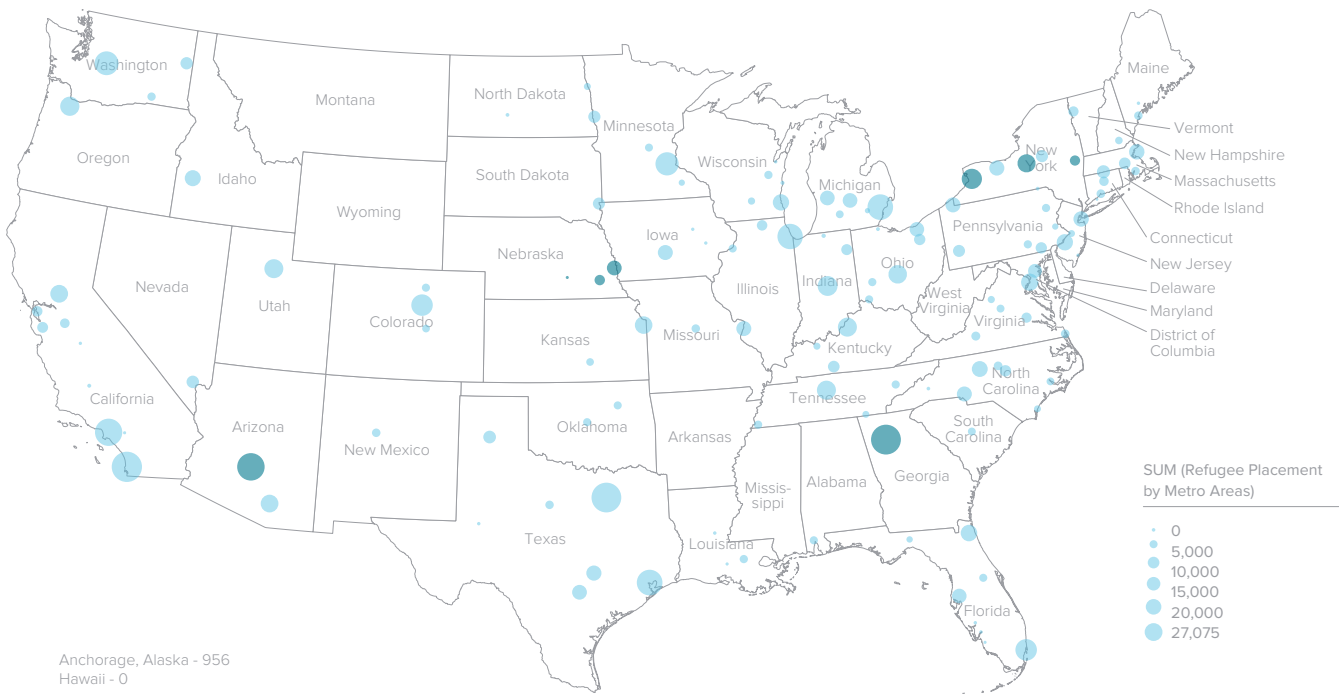


**IN LOOKING AT THE EXPERIENCES THAT BUSINESSES HAVE WITH REFUGEE EMPLOYEES, FPI SET OUT TO DO COMPREHENSIVE IN-PERSON INTERVIEWS WITH EMPLOYERS IN A BROAD RANGE OF SETTINGS.**

Through consultation with national researchers and program administrators, as well as an original data analysis of resettlement by metro area, we selected four geographic areas in the South, Southwest, Mid-West and Northeast. We intentionally chose sites with very different economic, immigration, and political profiles.

▲ **FIGURE 3** | NUMBER OF REFUGEE PLACEMENTS OVER THE PAST 10 YEARS

Over the Past 10 Years, by Metro Area



Source: FPI analysis of WRAPS data, 2007 to 2016.  
 Dark blue indicates metro areas included in field research.

No four sites can represent the entire United States, but what we found in these very different regions showed strong similarities as far as refugee employment and retention are concerned. The sites included:

### **ATLANTA, GEORGIA**

The Atlanta metro area is the third largest site for refugee resettlement in the country, with 26,000 refugees resettled in the area over the past decade. Most of these refugees have been resettled in DeKalb County, including in the town of Clarkston, which has been called “The Most Diverse Square Mile in America.”<sup>5</sup> Atlanta is a large and growing area, with an immigrant share of the population that is slightly above the national average.

### **PHOENIX, ARIZONA**

Phoenix is the fourth-largest site for refugee settlement over the course of the past decade. It is, like Atlanta, a fast-growing metropolitan area, with an immigrant share that is slightly above the national average. Of the four areas considered in this report, Phoenix has the highest share of undocumented immigrants,<sup>6</sup> which can affect both the labor market and politics around employing refugees.

### **UPSTATE NEW YORK**

Upstate New York metro areas—Buffalo, Syracuse and Albany as studied here, but also Rochester, Utica, Binghamton, and smaller upstate cities—have a long history of resettling refugees, and a combination of low housing costs and accessible jobs. Buffalo and Syracuse rank 13th and 20th in the country for the total number of refugees resettled over the last decade (Albany, not shown in Figure 4, ranks 58th). Among the top 30 metro areas they have the highest share of refugee placements as a share of the total population, and by a wide margin the largest share of the immigrant population. These are areas that have seen very slow growth in their metro area

population for decades, in addition to steep declines in the central city populations that are just beginning to turn around—or at least stabilize—in part because of the role of immigrants and refugees in rebuilding the population.<sup>7</sup>

### **EASTERN AND CENTRAL NEBRASKA**

Of the 136 metro areas that have seen refugee placements over the past 10 years, metro Omaha ranks 30th and Lincoln ranks 67th. Grand Island is included in this study because of the large meat packing plants that employ a significant number of refugees, although only 103 refugees were directly placed for resettlement in Grand Island over the past decade. Omaha and Lincoln have experienced a kind of “Goldilocks” economy for some time, with relatively good jobs, low unemployment, and reasonable housing prices. Immigrants make up just seven percent of the Omaha metro area population and eight percent of the Lincoln population—refugee placements over the past decade make up a comparatively significant 10 percent share of the immigrant population in both metro areas.

In all four areas, refugees seemed to be easily integrated into the local economies. At a time when the overall economy continues to grow, and the number of refugees being resettled has suddenly declined (see sidebar), resettlement agencies felt confident they could readily find job placements for more refugees than they currently handle. In our interviews, we found that refugees sometimes made up 20 or 30 percent or even higher shares of a particular company’s employees, and in some parts of a metro area there may be towns or cities with a similarly high share of refugees in the local population. But even in the areas where they are most highly concentrated, refugees make up a very small share of the overall population of a metropolitan area—the urban core plus the surrounding suburbs.

5. <http://www.atlantamagazine.com/great-reads/ellis-island-south-welcome-diverse-square-mile-america/>

6. Unauthorized, or undocumented, immigrants make up 5.5 percent of the total population of the Phoenix metro area, modestly higher than 4.5 percent in metro Atlanta. The level in metro Omaha is 2.3 percent, and Buffalo and Syracuse are among the lowest in the nation at well under one percent. See: <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2017/02/13/estimates-of-unauthorized-immigrant-population-by-metro-area-2014/>

7. <http://buffalonews.com/2018/02/03/editorial-buffalo-relies-on-immigration/>

▲ FIGURE 4 | TOP 30 METRO AREAS FOR REFUGEE PLACEMENT OVER THE PAST DECADE (2007 TO 2016)

METRO AREA	REFUGEE PLACEMENTS (10-YEAR TOTAL)	PER CAPITA REFUGEE PLACEMENTS	REFUGEES PLACEMENTS PER IMMIGRANT POPULATION	METRO AREA POPULATION	METRO AREA IMMIGRANT POPULATION	IMMIGRANT SHARE OF POPULATION
San Diego, CA	27,075	0.8%	3%	3,317,749	797,991	24%
Dallas-Fort Worth, TX	26,950	0.4%	2%	7,232,599	1,319,883	18%
<b>Atlanta, GA</b>	<b>26,322</b>	<b>0.5%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>5,790,210</b>	<b>793,489</b>	<b>14%</b>
<b>Phoenix, AZ</b>	<b>22,811</b>	<b>0.5%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>4,661,537</b>	<b>675,911</b>	<b>14%</b>
Los Angeles, CA	22,217	0.2%	0%	13,310,447	4,475,769	34%
Houston, TX	19,958	0.3%	1%	6,772,470	1,588,661	23%
Chicago, IL	18,538	0.2%	1%	9,512,968	1,675,434	18%
Detroit, MI	18,163	0.4%	4%	4,297,617	417,502	10%
Seattle, WA	16,882	0.4%	2%	3,798,902	690,230	18%
Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN	16,255	0.5%	4%	3,551,036	376,062	11%
Denver, CO	13,583	0.5%	4%	2,853,077	346,679	12%
Miami, FL	13,420	0.2%	1%	6,066,387	2,458,591	41%
<b>Buffalo, NY</b>	<b>12,509</b>	<b>1.1%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>1,132,804</b>	<b>69,846</b>	<b>6%</b>
Indianapolis, IN	11,549	0.6%	8%	2,001,737	142,774	7%
Portland, OR	10,281	0.4%	3%	2,425,325	303,865	13%
Salt Lake City, UT	10,250	0.9%	7%	1,186,187	142,752	12%
Louisville, KY	10,129	0.8%	16%	1,283,297	64,952	5%
Columbus, OH	9,957	0.5%	6%	2,041,520	155,793	8%
Nashville, TN	9,871	0.5%	7%	1,865,535	143,341	8%
<b>Syracuse, NY</b>	<b>9,532</b>	<b>1.5%</b>	<b>23%</b>	<b>656,510</b>	<b>41,259</b>	<b>6%</b>
Kansas City, KS	9,387	0.4%	7%	2,104,115	144,010	7%
Tucson, AZ	8,397	0.8%	6%	1,016,206	135,944	13%
Washington, DC	8,384	0.1%	1%	6,133,552	1,407,787	23%
Sacramento, CA	8,061	0.4%	2%	2,296,418	418,764	18%
Jacksonville, FL	7,452	0.5%	6%	1,478,212	125,349	8%
Milwaukee, WI	7,338	0.5%	7%	1,572,482	109,340	7%
Greensboro, NC	7,125	0.9%	11%	756,139	66,238	9%
Philadelphia, PA	6,966	0.1%	1%	6,070,500	676,140	11%
Boise City, ID	6,918	1.0%	16%	690,214	42,114	6%
<b>Omaha, NE</b>	<b>6,596</b>	<b>0.7%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>924,495</b>	<b>67,937</b>	<b>7%</b>

Source: FPI analysis of WRAPS data 2007 to 2016 and 2016 American Community Survey 1-year data. The number of refugees resettled over the past 10 years is less than two percent of the local population in all metro areas of the United States. Top 30 metro areas are presented here; see [fiscalspolicy.org/refugee](http://fiscalspolicy.org/refugee) for the full list of 136 metro areas with refugee placements in that period. Place names in bold indicate metro areas included in field research.



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# LOWER TURNOVER, IMPROVED RECRUITMENT

# LOWER TURNOVER, IMPROVED RECRUITMENT



**IN EACH OF THE FOUR GEOGRAPHIC AREAS STUDIED, FPI IDENTIFIED EMPLOYERS TO INTERVIEW THROUGH NEWS REPORTS AND WITH THE CRUCIAL ASSISTANCE OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT AGENCIES AND LOCAL SERVICE PROVIDERS.**

FPI conducted detailed, in-person interviews of a half-hour to an hour with 26 firms employing refugees in a range of industries including manufacturing, hospitality (especially hotels), medical research, meat packing, laundry services, health care institutions, transportation, and recruiting firms that specialized in the construction and hospitality industries.

Of these 26 respondents, 19 firms, or 73 percent, said refugee employees had lower turnover rates than other employees (see *Figure 1*). Three firms said the rates were about the same, and four said refugees had higher turnover than other employees.

In some cases, the reason refugees stayed on the job longer had to do with being surrounded by others who spoke their language and shared their background. In others, it was because employers found ways of

integrating refugees into their workforce, making overall adjustments in policies that some saw as overall improvements to the environment for everyone. In many cases, there was a period of mutual adjustment as the refugees adapted to workplace expectations and the workplace adapted to this new employee population.

And, in the 19 firms that reported lower turnover, all also reported that once they established a good relationship with their refugee employees, recruiting additional employees became easier. Refugee employees are highly likely to know others in their community who are seeking work. Having someone from the community who can vouch for a company by telling others in the community that the company has a welcoming environment is a valuable resource for recruitment.

Refugee resettlement agencies and other service providers also recognize where refugees are thriving, and they then channel their clients to those employers. Since the agencies want to maintain good relationships with the firms they consider to be good employers, they are also likely to pre-screen or even pre-train refugees for available jobs. Once the firm has made whatever adjustment may be necessary and has proven to provide good opportunities for refugees, a channel opens up between the refugee community and the company that makes recruitment significantly easier.



**MANUFACTURING**

# MANUFACTURING



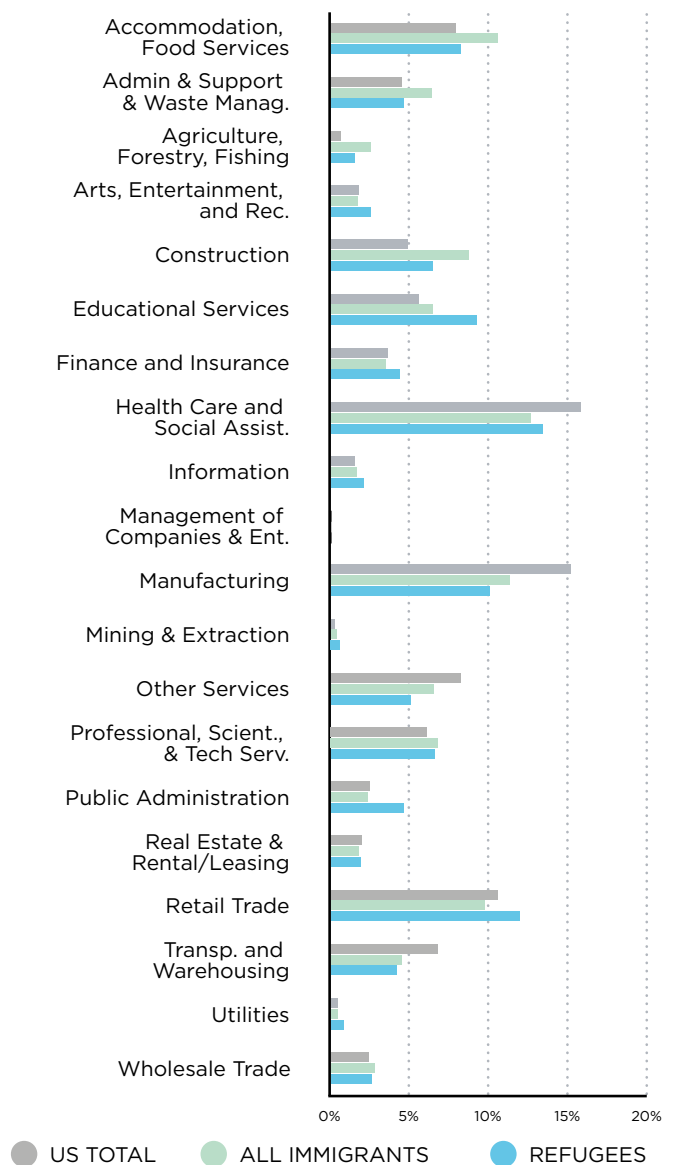
## MANUFACTURING FIRMS ARE PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT EMPLOYERS FOR REFUGEES.

15 percent of all refugees work in manufacturing, the second-largest concentration by industry after health care/social assistance, which employs 16 percent of all refugees (see Figure 5). Manufacturing has traditionally been a sector that has employed immigrants: it often requires less advanced English language ability than other sectors, and the skills involved are more often those that are learned on the job, rather than those learned in school. The manufacturing jobs refugees work in are not necessarily in industries like car factories or steel mills, where wages may be considerably higher than average. The manufacturing jobs we found refugees working at included assembling furniture, molding plastic, and producing microelectronic components. We saw a range of low-tech and higher-tech production, with wages and working conditions ranging from near the minimum wage to family-sustaining.

FPI was able to get internal company data for four firms in the manufacturing sector, on a confidential basis. At these four firms, the total annual turnover rate ranged from five to 16 percent, and the refugee rate ranged from two to eight percent. On average, overall turnover among these firms was 11 percent and refugee turnover was four percent, a difference of seven percentage points, as noted above. Or, to put it another way, the turnover rate for refugees was two thirds lower on average for refugees than for employees overall (see Figure 2).

▲ **FIGURE 5** | SHARE OF REFUGEES WORKING IN INDUSTRY

Compared to Share of Immigrants and Share of U.S.-Born



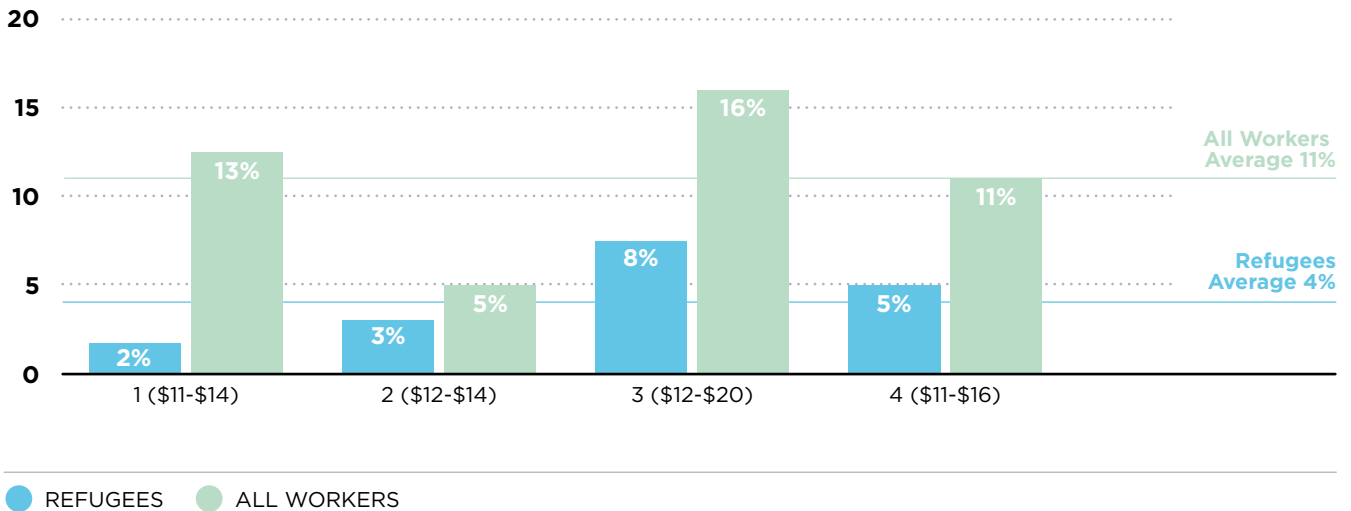
Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of 2016 ACS 4-year data. Refugee status is imputed; see methodology section.

Among these four firms the wage range is not dramatically different: the hourly wage is \$11/\$12 to \$14/\$16. Firm 3 is an exception, with top wages reaching

up to \$20 per hour. These wages above the minimum are no doubt part of the positive experience for both employees and employers.

▲ FIGURE 6 | LOWER TURNOVER REFUGEE AND OVERALL RETENTION RATES

**Manufacturing Sector**



Source: Employer data made confidentially available to FPI.  
Typical wage range indicated in parentheses next to firm number, on X axis.

**Firm 1**, as shown in Figure 6, provides a good example of refugee employment. It is a high-end specialty manufacturer that has about 150 employees, about a fifth of them refugees. The company began hiring refugees five years ago, at a time when turnover was considerably higher. The company turned to a refugee resettlement agency for help filling open positions, and then found others from the local refugee communities were drawn in by word of mouth. Today, refugees have a turnover rate of just 2 percent, compared to 13 percent for all employees.

“I think it’s been a resounding success,” one manager reported. “On-time delivery is up, quality is up, residual knowledge is staying here, and I think we have a more connected workforce. And I think the reason is that we’ve tried to find appropriate people who could start and eventually move up in the organization, rather than looking for people with skills acquired elsewhere.” This was a lesson the company learned from refugees, but then also applied in hiring other employees: “We’ve had more success looking for character attributes—drive, ambition, integrity—and then training people with those attributes to learn the skills we need.” When that’s the way you approach hiring potential employees, “then you can look at anyone.”



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**“I THINK IT’S BEEN A RESOUNDING SUCCESS,” ONE MANAGER REPORTED. “ON-TIME DELIVERY IS UP, QUALITY IS UP, RESIDUAL KNOWLEDGE IS STAYING HERE, AND I THINK WE HAVE A MORE CONNECTED WORKFORCE.”**

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**Firm 2** is a metal manufacturing company that has a very low turnover rate for all employees of five percent, an even lower rate of three percent for refugees. The company, which currently has about 180 employees, roughly 40 of them refugees, first hired a refugee in 1986: a then-young man from Vietnam who just retired this year. According to the president of the firm, “we’ve found refugees are willing to learn, not afraid to work hard, and they’re very loyal because this company helps them.” The company is flexible about family needs: employees can leave to pick up their kids if they need to, and families can come and have lunch with the workers. These policies apply to all workers, but they are particularly valuable to refugees and make them feel welcome. “Some companies say: show up on time, you can’t be late one minute, you can’t take vacation,” the president said. “Not us: Come and work hard, and you’ll work out here.”

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**“EIGHTY PERCENT OF THE PEOPLE COME HERE WITH NO EXPERIENCE. FINE. ARE YOU WILLING TO LEARN? LET’S GIVE THEM A CHANCE TO PROVE THEMSELVES.”**

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As above, the president of Firm 2 also stressed that a key to refugee employment is training people to the job rather than expecting them to already have the skills they need when they walk in the door. “Eighty percent of the people come here with no experience,” he said. “Fine. Are you willing to learn? Let’s give them a chance to prove themselves,” with a 60-day probation period, for example. Refugees benefit from this approach, but it allows the company to widen the pool of potential for other employees as well.

**Firm 3** is a high-tech electronics manufacturer with about 650 total employees, including 40 refugees. Overall turnover for the company is 16 percent, and for refugees it is half that, or eight percent. A good number of those hired by Firm 3 are what the human resources director calls “degreed individuals.” “Their degree may be in a different field,” he notes, but they have a degree—and that makes a difference.”

“Clearly the biggest obstacle is language. But we’re very open to working with people who speak the language hardly at all—a lot of people are surprised by that. Our supervisors are used to it, and tolerant about doing what it takes to make it work because they’ve seen it work. And there are enough [other refugees] who have been here longer who can help translate when they need to.”

“At lunch, there are tables from Cuba, from Iraq, they like that camaraderie. The volume of people from their own community makes them feel comfortable, and more likely to stay.”

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**“...WE’RE VERY OPEN TO WORKING WITH PEOPLE WHO SPEAK THE LANGUAGE HARDLY AT ALL—A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE SURPRISED BY THAT. OUR SUPERVISORS ARE USED TO IT, AND TOLERANT ABOUT DOING WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE IT WORK BECAUSE THEY’VE SEEN IT WORK.”**

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The history of working with a wide range of refugees clearly benefits the company in making it seem easy and normal to bring new people on, even when challenges arise. The HR director says “now we know we have people who need to pray every day at a certain time, so we find a place they can do that.” They described another situation that could quickly have become a conflict in a different setting: the company has strict rules about headwear. The challenge is known in the industry as “FOD,” Foreign Object Debris. FOD can ruin production for an electronics manufacturer. For women who

wear a hijab, this strict work rule created a religious conflict. Rather than insist that the women uncover their heads, however, one of the supervisors found a simple pragmatic solution. He looked online and found a plastic head cover that can go over a hijab, solving the FOD concern without making the women change their dress code. “The covers are like \$100 for a box of 100. It didn’t even come to me as a conflict,” the HR manager said. He didn’t see this as a question of resolving a challenge related to integration of refugees, he saw it as a simple everyday issue for good management. “I don’t think you have to do a lot of extra to make it work,” he said, dismissing the notion that this was anything special.

**Firm 4** is a manufacturer of individualized medical products with 140 employees. Over a 13-year period, the company has employed 21 refugees, with an average annual turnover rate of 11 percent for all workers (calculated over the past five years) and 5 percent for refugees (over the full 13-year period, to get a bigger sample size).

Employees “need to have pretty decent English” to work at Firm 4, and the location is out of the way. Although the pay is not higher than other firms, the benefits package is very favorable, which helps in retention of all employees.

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**“THE FIRM DOESN’T MAKE PARTICULAR EXCEPTIONS FOR REFUGEES OR FOR ANYONE ELSE, SHE SAID, BUT “WE TRY NOT TO BE RULE-DRIVEN TO THE POINT THAT WE MANAGE OURSELVES INTO A CORNER.”**

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Transportation is a challenge—a common theme among the employers interviewed—but refugees and the employer each give a little. Good public transportation is rare in the United States, and recently arrived refugees need some time before they can purchase cars and get a U.S. driver’s license. The HR director of Firm 4 said: “There is a bus route, but it’s hard, and many [of the refugees] don’t have a vehicle. It takes two or three transfers to get here, and if they’re starting the 7AM shift it’s sometimes almost impossible. And bless them, most of them seem to make every effort, and don’t seem to flinch at it,” She said, “I’m flinching for them.” The company doesn’t do anything to help them with the transportation itself, but, she said, if they can’t get there early enough “we try to be flexible, to let them start a little later and end a little later.”

Flexibility about family leave is another area where the company’s policy for everyone is particularly important for refugees. The firm doesn’t make particular exceptions for refugees or for anyone else, she said, but “we try not to be rule-driven to the point that we manage ourselves into a corner.”

The HR manager also pointed out that there is turnover they like to see, as well as turnover they don’t. “I had one guy who had worked in Syria as a dentist,” she explained. “He’s in Chicago now, getting certified as a dentist. So that’s a good reason he left us.” This idea of “good turnover” and “bad turnover” was repeated throughout our interviews: managers might regret losing employees, but they also felt good about being a launching pad for people who leave to make a real step up.

In addition to the four firms for which we were able to obtain internal data, FPI interviewed several other manufacturing firms. One reported turnover rates to be about the same for refugees and other employees. This was a company that paid below-average wages, had no sign on the door, and struggled to find enough employees in general. Although a good number of people stayed at the job for years, the manager reported, he was not surprised many others left: “Why would you want to work here when you could go work somewhere else easier?” This was the one employer we spoke with who brought up the interaction of wages with public benefits, saying that they sometimes find employees—refugees and others alike—do not want to work extra hours because they are concerned about losing access to Food Stamps (SNAP) or Medicaid.

Interestingly, one of the three firms reporting higher turnover among refugees was a manufacturing firm that at the same time reported having very positive experiences with its

refugee employees. The manager of this firm was not sure there was really a difference at all between retention rates for refugees and other employees, but she thought “if anything, it’s a bit less” for refugees. The manager took pride in the diversity of her workforce, including not only about 40 refugees but also immigrants from Eastern Europe, Central America, Mexico. “We are recognized by the [parent] company as the most diverse site, they showcased us for that in their magazine.” Some of the reasons for what she saw as slightly higher turnover were negative ones—transportation is difficult, long weekend hours were tough for everyone. But, she also pointed out that “for some, this is a job they’re working until they can get a job in their field. You know when you hire them they’re not going to be long-term employees” because they are overqualified. Still, she added, she hires them intentionally, even knowing they are likely to move on quickly, because for as long as they stay, they “can be great employees.”



# MEAT PACKING

# MEAT PACKING



**MEAT PACKING IS AN INDUSTRY WHERE UNIONS WERE ONCE STRONG AND WAGES AND WORKING CONDITIONS WERE BETTER.**

Today, work in meat packing is known for being grueling, cold, and potentially dangerous, as even employers and employees who take great pride in their work readily acknowledge. Wages are often above the minimum,

however, and the jobs are accessible to refugees and other immigrants because the level of English language ability and literacy required is not high. Out of every 1,000 refugees in the United States, 13 work in animal slaughtering and processing (1.3 percent), the fifth-highest refugee concentration in any detailed industry. By contrast, just three out of every 1,000 workers in general is in that industry, and seven out every 1,000 immigrants. See Figure 7 for refugee and overall employment shares in this and other industries where refugees are concentrated.

▲ **FIGURE 7** | TOP 20 TYPES OF BUSINESSES WHERE REFUGEES ARE CONCENTRATED

	BUSINESS TYPES	REFUGEES PER 1,000	ALL WORKERS PER 1,000	DIFFERENCE PER 1,000
1	NAIL SALONS AND OTHER PERSONAL CARE SERVICES	27	3	24
2	ELECTRONIC COMPONENT AND PRODUCT MANUFACTURING, N.E.C.	14	4	10
3	TAXI AND LIMOUSINE SERVICE	12	2	10
4	TRUCK TRANSPORTATION	22	12	10
5	ANIMAL SLAUGHTERING AND PROCESSING	13	3	10
6	TRAVELER ACCOMMODATION	20	10	9
7	HOME HEALTH CARE SERVICES	17	9	8
8	INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY SERVICES	18	11	7
9	BEAUTY SALONS	14	7	7
10	MEDICAL EQUIPMENT AND SUPPLIES MANUFACTURING	10	4	6
11	SERVICES INCIDENTAL TO TRANSPORTATION	10	5	5
12	COMPUTER SYSTEMS DESIGN AND RELATED SERVICES	18	14	4
13	OTHER HEALTH CARE SERVICES	10	7	4
14	OFFICES OF DENTISTS	9	6	3
15	SERVICES TO BUILDINGS AND DWELLINGS	13	10	3
16	PHARMACIES AND DRUG STORES	9	6	3
17	CUT AND SEW APPAREL MANUFACTURING	5	2	3
18	AIRCRAFT AND PARTS MANUFACTURING	6	3	3
19	NURSING CARE FACILITIES (SKILLED NURSING FACILITIES)	15	13	3
20	DRYCLEANING AND LAUNDRY SERVICES	5	2	3

Source: FPI analysis of 2016 ACS 4-year data, with refugee status imputed. Marked in grey are industries included in FPI interviews. Dark blue indicates the meat packing sector.

In the meat packing industry, there are differences between employers that make an effort to establish a good match and context for refugees and those that simply draw refugees in without additional support.

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**HE SAID: “A GRANDMOTHER IS *VERY* IMPORTANT. FOR THE BHUTANESE, THEY RISK BEING A FAMILY OUTCAST IF THEY DON’T TAKE TIME OFF.” THE COMPANY THEN ADJUSTED ITS POLICY FOR ALL EMPLOYEES.**

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The one meat packing firm that reported higher turnover for refugees was a unit with very high turnover in general, even in an industry where turnover is always high. The company was known for paying competitive wages but had brutal working conditions in an isolated location. One observer noted that the company treated the refugees—and other employees as well—as “cannon fodder,” not much concerned about building relationships with employees. A local member of the Somali community offered a different, though not contradictory, observation: “A lot of people, they come here for six months, or for 2 or 3 years, then go back to Minneapolis,” he said of other Somalis he knew. “Pay at the meat packing plants is better than in Minneapolis, maybe \$15/hour, and it doesn’t cost much to live here. People save to buy a car, or to buy something else—but especially a car.” They do this, he said, not just once, but often for several stints.

On the other hand, the HR director of a smaller family-owned company that was closer to where refugees were resettled had highly positive things to say about her refugee employees. This is the sole firm in the meatpacking industry for which FPI was able to obtain internal data. Turnover in general was very high—40 percent for all employees. But it was considerably lower, 25 percent, for refugees. Pay was \$10 to \$16 per hour.

The company, like the industry in general, had been rocked in 2011 by a series of audits and raids that forced out a large part of their immigrant labor force, many of whom had been undocumented or had friends and family members who were. Turnover was already high in meat packing, and it suddenly spiked, which pushed this and other firms to look to new sources of employees, and they were hard to find. Today, 65 percent of the 450 production employees are refugees, and almost all of the other 35 percent are Mexican and Central American immigrants: “I can count on my right hand the number of American-born workers, except for management.”

In employing refugees, the manager here described a continual back-and-forth between whether the employer adapts, the employees adapt, or if there can be a different solution. When they first started employing refugees, for example, some of them would chew betel, which requires spitting the juice somewhere. At first the company tried putting barrels into place for spitting, then found that wasn’t sufficient, and eventually the company just banned betel chewing. Making the employer/employee relationship work is a two-way street, and while the employer made some effort at accommodation this was a case where employees were the ones to change.

On the other hand, the company was able to adapt around bereavement policy. In general, the manager said, refugees have been very reliable about showing up every day for work, often breaking company attendance records. “But, we were not offering enough funeral leave,” the manager said, an issue that came up among a number of the successful employers of refugees. The company reconsidered when a longtime employee took off too many days because his grandmother died. “He said: a grandmother is *very* important. For the Bhutanese, they risk being a family outcast if they don’t take time off.” The company then adjusted its policy for all employees—

not just refugees—to include time off for in-laws and grandparents, and also to allow for a longer period off. The extended time off is unpaid, but the job is still there for the returning employee.

Another measure taken by this firm that has been adopted in one form or another by many refugee employers is around interpretation and translation. To help employees who speak a different language integrate, the company has designated an employee who already works on the line and speaks the same language as an interpreter, putting a sticker on their hard hat saying “translator” and paying them a little extra.

Being able to call on the refugee resettlement agency was also important to working through problems. When several employees seemed to be having difficulty with alcohol—always a tough issue for employers—the manager contacted the agency and was able to identify a 12-step meeting that took place in the Karen language. “If I start seeing a trend, I’ll email [the resettlement agency contact],” she said. “You really don’t want to lose a good employee.”

Meat packing is a hard job, and the opportunities for advancement are not great, the manager acknowledged. “They probably don’t want their kids to work here. I don’t know that I would want mine to. But we’re providing for folks who don’t have a lot of other career options.” From the business’s point of view, refugees have been excellent, stable employees. And the company takes pride in its diverse workforce that includes Nepali, Congolese, Mexican, and Central American immigrants and refugees, as well as Burmese refugees speaking Karen, Karenni, and Kachin. And the company encourages all to become U.S. citizens, reimbursing them \$400 toward the fees and giving them the day off for their citizenship ceremony.

It was not only in the family-owned firm that meat packing employers made an attempt to adjust and incorporate

refugees as workers. One of the big national companies also had a plant where refugees seemed to be doing comparatively well. As one small example of their accommodations, the manager there said: “You have to know what language they speak, and we can provide an interpreter. But you have to want to understand them, too.” The managers and new refugee employees developed a sign language for “lunch,” “coffee,” “bathroom break,” and so on.

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**...THE COMPANY DEVELOPED A SERIES OF BOARDS TO SHOW HOW PRODUCTION ON A GIVEN DAY IS GOING. “RED MEANS NOT GOING AS GOOD, GREEN MEANS GOOD. WE STARTED IT BECAUSE OF NON-ENGLISH SPEAKERS, BUT IT WORKS WELL FOR EVERYONE.”**

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“You’re not going to be able to say, ‘we are twenty percent below our production schedule, so yield is below standard.’ But, even our native speakers will have trouble with that.” So, the company developed a series of boards to show how production on a given day is going. “Red means not going as good, green means good. We started it because of non-English speakers, but it works well for everyone.”

This firm didn’t have specific data about retention rates for refugees, but the manager said “Oh, it’s different.” Refugees were more likely to stay, he said, because “they’re comfortable in the job, they’re comfortable with the people, they’re comfortable with the paycheck.” Part of the issue was familiarity with the company they are in, and not being as sure they will fit in somewhere else. They might say to themselves, he speculated, “I could go someplace else and start all over, make 75 cents an hour more, but would I like the people there?”



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# HOTELS



# HOTELS



**TWENTY OUT OF EVERY 1,000 REFUGEES WORK IN TRAVELER ACCOMMODATION, DOUBLE THE LEVEL FOR THE AMERICAN WORKFORCE OVERALL (SEE FIGURE 7), WITH MANY OF THE JOBS IN LOW-WAGE POSITIONS CLEANING ROOMS, DOING GROUNDSKEEPING, AND WORKING IN THE KITCHENS.**

These are difficult jobs to fill, with low wages, minimal benefits, and high turnover for all workers. Refugees more rarely work their way up to the better-paying jobs at the front desk, though more than one manager noted that the refugee employees they have would be great at the front desk if only they had the language skills for the position.

**HAVING WORKED THROUGH THESE INITIAL ISSUES, “NOW PRODUCTIVITY HAS INCREASED,” AND “TURNOVER IS MUCH, MUCH LOWER.”**

Two of the hotel managers who reported very good success with refugees and higher retention rates today said the story was different when they first started hiring refugees some years ago. In the beginning, “we were not doing much to help them succeed,” one manager said.

“Someone would hire a cousin and he would translate. There was a lot of miscommunication. And expectations were different.” But the refugees they hired had a good work ethic, he said, and they stuck with it because “in our industry it’s hard to find people who want to work for minimum wage, show up every day, and take pride in their work.”

Having worked through these initial issues, “now productivity has increased,” and “turnover is much, much lower.”

Language is always a challenge, while having employees who speak the same language and have been there for longer definitely helps, in some cases having employees translate for other employees is not the best solution—if, for example, there is a privacy issue involved. Most of the training videos in the hotel industry are available in Spanish and perhaps French, one manager pointed out, “but if you’re looking for Swahili, Somali, they just don’t have those.” Being able to bring in an outside interpreter is sometimes a big help.

Taking the time to explain things that seem obvious is another part of the equation. “Wearing shoes, the uniform, things we take for granted,” the manager observed, “we need to find ways to explain to them what’s expected. I don’t want to say accommodation, but, making sure we understand what is important to them and they understand what is important to us.”

At one point, he reported, refugee employees were leaving their work shoes in a break room and wearing flip-flops home. An American-born employee got so upset and threw all the shoes out. The general manager stepped in to buy new shoes for everyone, and to defuse a conflict that easily could have escalated. “Not everyone wears the [new] shoes,” a manager noted, but it was an important gesture and signal to both the refugees and the U.S.-born workers that helped them come to terms with each other.

Time off is a big issue in hotels as well, especially, again, for bereavement. “Employees would say to me ‘I need to have three weeks off. Tomorrow. I left a note on your desk,’” one manager reported. “That’s when you lose people.” Over time, managers were able to explain to employees what is expected of them and needed in terms of advance notice, while the managers were able to work out ways employees could generally find a way to take the time off they needed, with a combination of paid and unpaid leave.

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**THE REAL BENEFIT WAS GETTING “A LOT OF REFERRALS FROM OUR CURRENT REFUGEES, ESPECIALLY LONG-TERM. THEY’VE BECOME ANOTHER RECRUITING TOOL FOR US.”**

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In the large majority of firms interviewed, managers reported that refugees were good workers, and fitting in well and expanding the labor force. In only a few cases did FPI interviewers hear managers say refugees were “better” than other workers, with the implication that non-refugee workers were less desirable employees. In those instances where this did come up, however, the sentiment often seemed to have a racial tinge. Although wages and work conditions likely have more to do with why workers reject jobs than a sense of “entitlement,” it may also sometimes be the case that employers have an unjustified preference for refugees over other local hires, particularly when refugees are white and other local hires are people of color.

For most employers, however, refugees are a useful expansion of the labor pool, not a group preferred over others hires. At another hotel, for example, where 20 to 30 of the 170 jobs were filled by refugees, the managers agreed that turnover rates for their refugee employees were lower. To them, the real benefit was getting “a lot of referrals from our current refugees, especially long-term. They’ve become another recruiting tool for us. Not that we hire only refugees, but the connection with the [resettlement agency] has been a big success.” As a different manager put it: “I want people knocking on my door saying, ‘I want to work here, with them,’” one

manager said of the refugees he's hired. "It works for everyone if that's the case."

In addition to the tangible benefits to the company, employers report a sense of pride in America, and pride in the refugees, as they begin to succeed. "I personally love watching some of our refugee employees buy houses, get their citizenship, start looking at colleges with their kids," a manager said. "You definitely get the impression that they're working hard so their kids can go to school," said another.

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**"I PERSONALLY LOVE WATCHING SOME OF OUR REFUGEE EMPLOYEES BUY HOUSES, GET THEIR CITIZENSHIP, START LOOKING AT COLLEGES WITH THEIR KIDS."**

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Expecting refugees to have lower turnover rates was not universal among hotel employers, however. A different hotel manager with years of experience in a series of hotel chains said: in locations where there is resettlement, refugees are a good labor pool, but their turnover rates are not different than for others. She thought refugees were just employees much like others, with similar retention rates in jobs that have high turnover for all workers.



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# HEALTH CARE

# HEALTH CARE



## THE HOSPITAL AND RESIDENTIAL CARE FACILITIES WE INTERVIEWED BOTH REPORTED HIGHER JOB RETENTION RATES FOR REFUGEES, AND BOTH MADE SOME EFFORT TO INTEGRATE THEIR REFUGEE EMPLOYEES.

In the case of the hospital, the manager saw hiring refugees not only as a way to fill employment needs, but also as a way to build their “customer” base by connecting more deeply to the community where they are located. “If folks are settling in the neighborhood, then this is their neighborhood and it is where they will come to seek medical treatment. It’s only good for us if they weave themselves into our workplace. Good close neighbors make good employees. And a good customer/patient base is part of it.”

In this case, the employer did not work directly with the refugee resettlement agency. “I don’t know where they’re being referred from, actually.” Rather than being the refugees’ first jobs in the country, the hospital job may be their second or third positions. Many refugees, in fact, were reported to have had prior experience working in hotels, where the tasks are sometimes overlapping for hospital workers in housekeeping or nutritional services, for example.

In addition to somewhat better pay, the hospital offers more of a chance for advancement than many other industries. Entry-level roles include being a dishwasher or cook’s helper, host or hostess, or patient transporter. Those who do well and gain further skills can advance to unit secretary, phlebotomist, nurse’s aide, or physician’s

assistant. And some, especially those who arrived very young or had a related degree in the country they fled, move up to be a nurse or a physician.

As came up in other industries, bereavement policy was an issue raised by refugee workers at a hospital in this study. “We created a new rule,” the manager explained. “Every two years, you could take up to four weeks.” But it’s a combination of paid time off and unpaid leave, and it is of course available to all workers, though it is refugees who primarily take advantage of the policy since few U.S.-born workers have wanted to take the unpaid portion of the time off. “We’re not offering something so glorious and glamorous to one group and not to the others.”

The question of how close the relative has to be was another common theme that made the employers rethink their bereavement policy more broadly. “If our policy was that when your mother dies you can take off, how do we handle it when it’s your tribal mother?” But, that made the managers realize that for non-refugees a similar question comes up with, for example, a stepmother.

Adjustments around shoes, too, was an issue here. “‘Even if you’re on break, we don’t take off our shoes.’ You wouldn’t necessarily have to say that to someone who was born and raised here.” This was a cultural adjustment that took a little patience but was important to explain to refugees: it’s not allowed, but it’s also something most Americans will see as simply inappropriate.

The hospital managers also made the distinction several others did between “good” turnover and “bad” turnover. Sometimes employees go on to get a degree, to get a better job, or just to move to be with a community in a different part of the country. “What we try to manage is

bad turnover,” people who leave because of what they perceive to be a problem that could have been dealt with better by management. “A manager might say, ‘Hey, I need you to go down there and clean out that closet.’ But they don’t say: ‘And let us know if it’s an impossible task and you need help.’” So they wind up being frustrated when many hours later they find out that the employee is still buried in the closet, “and they’re saying, ‘why didn’t you tell me earlier you needed help?’” When that kind of miscommunication leads to people leaving or being fired, that’s “bad turnover,” turnover that good management could have prevented.

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**THE HOSPITAL MANAGERS [DISTINGUISHED] BETWEEN ‘GOOD’ TURNOVER AND ‘BAD’ TURNOVER. SOMETIMES EMPLOYEES GO ON TO GET A DEGREE, TO GET A BETTER JOB, OR JUST TO MOVE TO BE WITH A COMMUNITY IN A DIFFERENT PART OF THE COUNTRY. “WHAT WE TRY TO MANAGE IS BAD TURNOVER,” PEOPLE WHO LEAVE BECAUSE OF WHAT THEY PERCEIVE TO BE A PROBLEM THAT COULD HAVE BEEN DEALT WITH BETTER BY MANAGEMENT.**

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The residential care facility also made adjustments to make refugee employees comfortable and to incorporate them into their workforce. The adjustments for refugees were not viewed as a burden, but rather as a duty and requirement.

The managers make an effort to make the refugee employees feel welcomed and comfortable, starting for example by making a policy of learning how to pronounce the refugees’ birth names and using them instead of the Americanized names they often are given.

Even in the face of challenges, the managers try to be understanding and view the situation from the refugee workers point of view. “A woman would take the food out of the trash that they threw away because it was spoiled. We found out that she was doing this because her son was studying to be a doctor and every penny they earned went to paying for his schooling. This was a sacrifice she had to make. We told her that we would help her but that she couldn’t do that anymore,” the director of operations said.

The president acknowledged the support system among the refugees that helped the facility retain other refugees for employment: “There was a refugee from the Philippines who brought over 12 family members. Her daughters were CNAs [Certified Nursing Assistants] and are now RNs [Registered Nurses]. She always talks about how [the employer] has supported them.” The facility also works with a local Chamber of Commerce that provides two weeks of training to refugees and transportation to the testing site in order to prepare them to become home health aides.

The facility also offers opportunities for advancement, for example classes to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA). Refugees often build a community and support each other to take advantage of this. “They will encourage each other to move up together if they came in together,” the director of this program said. This support system has encouraged refugees to continue trying even if they are faced with deep challenges. “A woman was taking the CNA class, ESL classes and working hard. She failed the test three times. She didn’t want to go back to the kitchen [where she had been working] because in her culture that is seen as a failure. We all rallied around her and gave her the opportunity to be a home health aide. We expect to see her in the CNA class again because the refugees all support and help each other,” the director said.

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**“THEY HAD A LIFE, THEY LOST A LIFE AND NOW THEY WANT A LIFE AGAIN...I DON’T KNOW IF I COULD DO WHAT THEY DO TO GET TO WORK EVERY DAY.”**

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The staff explained that the jobs at the facility are physically and emotionally draining and require long hours, but refugees overlook this to achieve their goals. “They had a life, they lost a life and now they want a life again. They are eager and grateful.” The president went on to underscore the dedication refugees have to their jobs, “I don’t know if I could do what they do to get to work every day.”

And, there seem always to be a few refugees who came with advanced degrees and are working to regain their former careers here in the United States, and others who strive to achieve an advanced degree once they are here. Sometimes these employees move on to other workplaces, but sometimes they have a great deal of loyalty to the places that got them started. “We have a Cuban refugee who was a doctor in his country and is now an RN,” the president here reported. “He said that he will keep moving up but will always serve [our facility] because we were the first ones to give him an opportunity.”



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**OTHER INDUSTRIES:**  
CONSTRUCTION,  
COMMERCIAL LAUNDRY,  
STAFFING COMPANIES, AND  
HIGH-TECH MANUFACTURING



# OTHER INDUSTRIES:



**FPI INTERVIEWED COMPANIES IN A NUMBER OF INDUSTRIES BEYOND MANUFACTURING, HEALTH CARE, MEAT PACKING, AND HOSPITALITY, AMONG THEM EMPLOYERS IN CONSTRUCTION, A COMMERCIAL LAUNDRY, AND TWO STAFFING COMPANIES.**

Refugees are not particularly concentrated in construction. In fact, refugees are more under-represented in construction than in all but one of over 250 industry categories. Forty-six per 1,000 refugee workers are in the construction industry, compared to 64 per thousand workers in general and 87 per thousand immigrants overall.

Still, construction is a large sector, and refugees do work in the construction industry in a variety of ways. At a firm that has 600 employees doing electrical and other types of construction work in a very hot climate, for example, about 150 employees are refugees. “If I would place an ad today to hire 10 individuals,” the manager said, “six weeks later I would be impressed if I had two. Honestly, I

would be impressed if two of them showed up on the first day.” It’s hard, hot work, that requires some training and is not paid accordingly.

When the employer interviewed a series of refugees, he was impressed by one of them who did not talk about any experience in construction. “He said, ‘I am so blessed to be here and I will work really hard for you.’ I’ve never heard that before. I hired him on the spot.”

At the firm, the employer said, “we were introduced to languages I didn’t even know existed.” Pairing current and new employees who speak the same language can help, he said, and even more important is having managers who are patient and want to make it work.

Here as elsewhere, one of the big challenges was transportation. In this case the company decided that it was a worthwhile investment to buy an SUV for one of the employees and let him or her (the workforce is mostly men, but also some women) drive the others. “Once you’ve fully trained people, they may go work for someone else, but with refugees there was a sense of loyalty there,” he felt. “They recognize that we had taken a chance on them.” He said, “we’ve seen very, very low turnover once they’ve gone through the apprenticeship.”

The experience of being flexible and making things work with refugees led the construction company to look to ex-offenders as a potential labor force. “I don’t care what you did six months ago, what you did six years ago,” the employer said. “Let’s start over: where are you going to be six months from now?” He continued, “I had an interview with one man from prison who had tattoos all over his neck. ‘Is this going to be a problem,’ he asked. ‘And I said: Buddy, you’re going to fit in here.’”

“We learned a lot from working with refugees,” the manager said, attributing their success with current prisoners and ex-offenders to the experience they gained in working with refugees. “Let’s succeed together,” is what he frequently says to employees. “It’s all about making an investment,” he said. “And, every employer has made an investment at some point in their career.”

The commercial laundry we interviewed acknowledged that working at his company was a tough job at low wages. Turnover for refugees is lower, he said, though it’s high for everyone. The big advantage of refugees as employees, in his view, is that “refugees are 100 percent legal.” In areas that have experienced immigration raids, employers find it reassuring that refugees are guaranteed to have work authorization.

But, he added, some refugees stay for two or three years, buy a car, and support their family. And, “you can just see what’s happening with the second generation. They’re doing really well in school and helping their parents.”

And, in the transportation sector there are refugees working in a number of different jobs. One involves

moving and cleaning cars, which requires a driver’s license and some basic English. This is a job that pays just above the minimum wage, and doesn’t provide much opportunity for advancement. But it’s a starting job for a good number of refugees, and the relationship between a local resettlement agency and the employer has thrived. As with so many refugee employers, the manager here has learned a lot about cultures he didn’t know before, and that has helped him to be a better manager of his increasingly diverse workforce.

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**AS WITH SO MANY REFUGEE EMPLOYERS, THE MANAGER HERE HAS LEARNED A LOT ABOUT CULTURES HE DIDN’T KNOW BEFORE, AND THAT HAS HELPED HIM TO BE A BETTER MANAGER OF HIS INCREASINGLY DIVERSE WORKFORCE.**

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“When Ramadan comes around,” he said, “we work around it the best we can. This is not a demanding job, but you do a lot of walking. We have a safety concern with that, people getting dehydrated. We plan for it in advance, talk with people. ‘Hey, Ramadan season is approaching, if you need to make plans let’s make them now.’”

While in one or two instances employers expressed what may have been a bias in favor of refugees over U.S.-born employers, as noted above, one manager expressed a bias against refugees as compared to other immigrant workers. Neither sentiment was common, but we did hear the bias against refugees from the manager of a staffing firm—a company that serves as

an intermediary that helps place workers in jobs at other companies. The manager we spoke to there felt refugees had expectations that were too high, compared to the other immigrants, some of them undocumented, who took the low-wage jobs on offer by his staffing firm that worked with the hospitality industry. At the same time, some of the issues the same manager reported that he encountered were resistance, and bias, from the employers where his firm placed the workers. The employers want people from Mexico or Central America, he indicated, and were reluctant to give people from Burma or Congo a chance.

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**“IF YOU TREAT ME AS A HUMAN BEING I WILL ENJOY COMING TO WORK EVERY DAY...YOU HAVE TO MAKE PEOPLE FEEL YOU VALUE AND RESPECT THEM.”**

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In the world of high-tech manufacturing, wages, working conditions, and opportunities for advancement are all better, though the requirements for getting these jobs in the first place are also considerably higher. The founder of one high-tech manufacturing company, himself an immigrant, reported having very positive experience hiring refugees. For high retention rates and for success in the business altogether, he felt, an employer has to have competitive wages, and some flexibility about working hours helps as well. But often undervalued, he said, is respect. “If you treat me as a human being I will enjoy coming to work every day...You have to make people feel you value and respect them.”

This employer had an interesting perspective on why refugee turnover would be lower, despite the diverse backgrounds of refugees. “When you migrate to a new place, you’re going to want to prove yourself.” It’s not just immigrants, he said, this would be true for anyone making a big life change. “If you move from New York to North Dakota, your work ethic will improve. You’re trying something new. You want to establish yourself.” That’s what he sees among the refugees he hires: they want to establish their families, get their children settled, and they will do hard work to do it.”

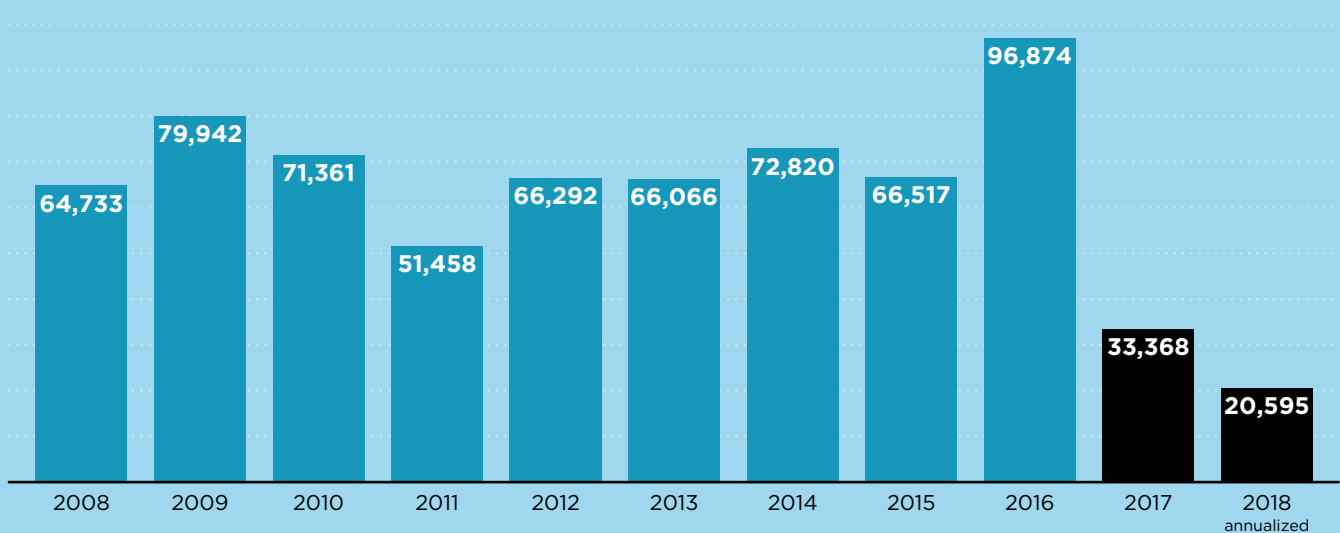
# REFUGEES IN THE UNITED STATES



THE UNITED STATES HAS A LONG AND PROUD HISTORY OF RESETTLING REFUGEES FLEEING SOME OF THE MOST HORRIFIC WARS AND NATURAL DISASTERS AROUND THE WORLD.

Refugees do not choose to leave their homeland or come to the United States — they come here only after being interviewed and categorized as refugees by the United Nations and then go through an extensive process of vetting by different agencies of the American government.

▲ **FIGURE 8** | REFUGEE PLACEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES (2008 TO PRESENT)



Source: Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of WRAPS data; 2018 is based on first four months of 2018, through April 30, multiplied by three to approximate an annual rate.

When refugees arrive in the United States, they generally come in small groups of a few to a dozen. They are typically picked up at the airport by someone from a local refugee resettlement agency and brought to a house or apartment where they will start their new life. There are nine refugee resettlement networks—Church World Service, Ethiopian Community Development Council,

Episcopal Migration Ministries, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, International Rescue Committee, US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and World Relief Corporation. These resettlement agencies act as partners in the process, and with a combination of federal funding and charitable

contributions, they help refugees get on their feet, especially during the first 90 days in the country, and to a limited extent for a longer period after that. Refugees have legal permission to work in the United States and are expected to have a job within 90 days of their arrival here.

Between 2008 and 2017, the United States has admitted a total of 670,000 refugees. The majority do not have family or sponsors in the United States, and do not choose where they go but are placed by the federal government in consultation with local authorities and the local resettlement agencies.

Of the 43 million immigrants in the United States, about eight percent are either refugees, which is to say people who come through the refugee resettlement program, or asylees—people who apply for asylum after entering the United States. This report focuses on refugees, though many of the findings likely also apply to asylees.

Until recently, refugee resettlement was something the United States took on quietly and with a justified sense of pride. Even as immigration policy became a controversial issue, refugee resettlement was generally kept out of the fray.

More recently, refugee resettlement has become a focus of uneasy attention.

The number of refugees accepted annually by the United States has varied over the past decade from about 50,000 to 100,000. The various travel bans implemented by the Trump administration combined with decisions to cut resettlement numbers has meant that in 2017 the number of refugees accepted by the United States was at a lowpoint of 33,000, and in 2018 the country is on track to admit just 20,000 refugees if it continues at the rate established in the first three-and-a-half months of the year.

# METHODOLOGY



## THE STATISTICAL DATA IN THIS REPORT COMES FROM TWO SOURCES.

Data about refugee placement is from the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS). This shows how many refugees are placed in which locations in the United States. The refugee placements are shown by state and by location within the state. The WRAPS data provide a very accurate administrative count of refugee placement, but they do not reflect any possible secondary migration. In other words, it counts where refugees are first settled, but does not track whether they later move to a different location in the United States. The compilation of WRAPS data by metropolitan area in this report was done by the Fiscal Policy Institute; it is the first time the data has been compiled by metropolitan area.

The data about overall population, and overall immigrant population, presented in Figure 4 come from a Fiscal Policy Institute analysis of the American Community Survey (ACS).

Data about refugee employment is based on data from the ACS, with refugee status imputed. Imputation of refugee status is derived from the previous work of Jeffrey S. Passel and Rebecca L. Clark. This method was extended by Passel, and also by Randy Capps and his colleagues at the Migration Policy Institute, who also helped orient us at FPI to the approach so we could perform our own analysis.

The imputation starts with the number of refugees placed in the United States, by country and by year of arrival,

from the WRAPS data. We identify a country/year-of-arrival data set for all years going back to 1980.

FPI then compiled a parallel table based on the most recent year of ACS data. In this table, we identified the number of people who come from each country of birth for refugees (with the countries identified in the WRAPS analysis). The ACS also allows us to identify the year of arrival in the United States for people from those countries. We now have parallel tables of year of arrival for refugees (WRAPS) and people from refugee-sending countries (ACS). Where refugees in the WRAPS data are more than 40 percent of the number of immigrants from that country in the ACS data, we count all of that country/year-of-arrival cohort as refugees. The estimate is imperfect, and is better suited to gauging the share of refugees in different job categories than it is to gauging the number of refugees in each job category.

Data about turnover was reported directly and confidentially from the employers to FPI. In most cases, employers did not keep specific track of which employees were refugees, but experienced managers took the time going through their data files to identify as closely as possible which employees were refugees. In two instances employers reported data separately for the first 90 days of employment and after the first 90 days. In those cases we reported the data after the first 90 days. The relationship between refugee and overall retention rates was about the same though the turnover rate for both groups was higher in the first 90 days was higher.





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