



Fact-Checking a Fact Sheet On Refugee Resettlement

By Nayla Rush

The migrant crisis in Europe and the Obama administration's decision to admit more Syrian refugees has brought the issue of refugee resettlement to the forefront of the news. The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) released a [fact sheet](#) in which it covers key questions relating to the refugee resettlement program in the United States. This fact sheet is drawn, for the most part, from a recent MPI report, "[The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees: Successes and Challenges](#)," and commentary, "[The U.S. Record Shows Refugees Are Not a Threat](#)". The conclusion is straightforward: "The evidence suggests that the U.S. resettlement program, despite its funding limitations and reduced intake from earlier periods, successfully resettles substantial numbers of refugees every year."

Before we rejoice with the authors, let's review a number of those "facts".

Question: Are Refugees mostly working or unemployed?

Fact: The U.S. refugee resettlement system emphasizes self-sufficiency through employment, and most refugees are employed.

According to this fact sheet, employment rates of refugee men in the 2009-2010 period exceeded those of their U.S.-born counterparts: 67 percent for refugee men vs. 60 percent for U.S.-born men. For women, the rate is similar for both categories: more than half work (54 percent).

This sounds great. However, if we are to look more closely at the referenced MPI report, we would be less optimistic.

The employment rates of Burmese, Iraqi, and Somali refugee men (three of the top-four origin groups of recent arrivals) are at or below U.S.-born men's employment rate.

For refugee women, only four of the top-10 most common origin groups' employment rates exceeded those of U.S.-born women: Vietnamese, Liberians, Ukrainians, and Russians. All six remaining groups fell below U.S.-born women's rate: Cubans (49 percent), Iranians (46 percent), Burmese (42 percent), Somalis (41 percent), Bhutanese (36 percent), and Iraqis (27 percent). The report adds: "the relatively low employment rates of women from some refugee groups often translates into fewer workers per household and, in turn, lower household incomes."

Moreover, in its "[FY 2013 Annual Report to Congress](#)", the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) concluded that: "Disparity of employment rates between Iraqi men and women is still greater than in the general U.S. population. Full-time employment and long-term employment for Iraqi refugees improved slightly, however poor health and education are the major reasons why some Iraqi refugees are not searching for employment."

This is worthy of note, especially since Iraq has been the leading country of nationality for refugee admissions in recent years.

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Question: Do refugees depend on public benefits?

Fact: Although many refugees initially depend on public benefits, most quickly become self-sufficient.

Two terms here are somewhat misleading: “self-sufficient” and “quickly”.

In the context of refugees, the Office of Refugee Resettlement defines [economic self-sufficiency](#) as “earning a total family income that enables a family unit to support itself without receipt of a cash assistance grant.” But even with no cash welfare, a “self-sufficient” refugee can and often does rely on other, non-cash public benefit programs such as food stamps, public housing, or Medicaid. As the authors of the MPI report explain, refugees tend to receive more public benefits than the U.S.-born population during their first five years in the United States. This gap is reportedly eliminated for the most part after 10 years. In this particular setting then, “quickly” should be understood as “not before 10 years”.

Question: Do refugees improve their economic position after they are resettled?

Fact: Refugees’ incomes rise over time, almost reaching parity with the U.S.-born.

According to the fact sheet, the median household income for those who arrived during the past five years totaled 42 percent of the U.S.-born population median. This median goes up to 87 percent for those who arrived 10 to 20 years ago.

Further details from the original MPI report: Refugees from Vietnam and Russia had the highest median incomes (\$52,000 and \$50,000). These groups arrived for the most part before 2000. As for Somalis, Iraqis, and Bhutanese (all recent arrivals), they had the lowest household incomes (\$20,000 or less).

For three groups of refugees — Iraqis, Somalis, and Cubans — longer U.S. residence does *not* equate with higher income.

Moreover, the fact sheet notes that “income gains observed among earlier arrivals may not be replicated for those who arrived more recently.” In the 2009-2011 period, refugee incomes “remained substantially below those of the U.S.-born” even after more than 10 years in the United States. And refugees were more likely than the U.S.-born to be low-income.

Knowing that “[l]ow-income individuals have annual family incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL),” MPI’s “factual” account of refugees’ “rising income and falling public benefit dependency leading to positive fiscal contributions over time” is to be taken with caution.

Question: Is the U.S. Refugee Resettlement program a conduit for terrorists?

Fact: Refugees are intensively vetted for security threats before being resettled in the United States.

Are they really? The United States “chooses” its refugees based on referrals from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the process (from referrals to entry into the United States) takes 18-24 months. This is very different from what Europe is witnessing these days, as thousands of migrants enter without prior screening or permission for the most part. But that is not to say that the United States is totally safe. The lack of solid on-the-ground intelligence systems in Syria renders vetting measures somewhat permeable.

Many national security officials are concerned about the absence of dependable screening measures for Syrian refugees and the United States’ impossible task of crosschecking Syrian nationals’ backgrounds. To cite just a few from a recent [Senate Homeland Security Committee hearing](#):

- FBI Director James Comey testified that “There is risk associated with bringing anybody in from the outside, but specifically from a conflict zone like that. ... My concern is that there are certain gaps in the data available to us.”
- Nicholas Rasmussen, the head of the National Counterterrorism Center, admitted: “The intelligence that we have of this particular conflict zone is not as rich as we would like it to be.”
- Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson himself warned: “We should do the right thing by accepting more [Syrian refugees], but we should be careful in doing it.”

Even if Syrian refugees themselves were to pose no threat for the time being, the risk — [as voiced by the head of Germany's domestic intelligence services](#) — could come later on as radical Islamists prey on vulnerable communities and recruit young refugees who might feel somewhat estranged in their hosting country.

Question: Do refugees come to the United States with low levels of education?

Fact: Refugees are more likely to have a high school degree than other immigrants, and are just as likely as the U.S.-born to have graduated from college.

Again, this assertion is too linear. According to the 2013 ORR report, “statistics on the level of education completed before arrival in the United States should be interpreted with caution because of differences between the educational systems of other countries and the United States.”

Also, as MPI's own integration report notes, education attainments vary by nationality. Iranians, Russians, and Vietnamese (longer-term groups) have educational attainment equal to if not exceeding the U.S. average. Other long-term refugee groups, like the Cubans, are way behind.

Fewer than 60 percent of Afghani, Bhutanese, Burmese, Hmong, Liberian, and Somali refugees arriving during 2004-13 were even literate in their native language at arrival.

As we prepare to welcome thousands of Syrian refugees, we might want look over a recent MPI report, “[The Educational and Mental Health Needs of Syrian Refugee Children](#)”. It shows that “Approximately half of Syrian refugee school-age children were not enrolled in school in mid-2015, with enrollment rates as low as 20 percent in Lebanon and 30 percent in Turkey. ... Girls are far less likely to attend school than boys. Even when they do enroll, Syrian refugee children are more likely than their non-refugee peers to receive poor or failing grades, or to drop out.”

These indicators could affect the children's future success. As the authors warn: “Children may struggle to bridge gaps in their learning after substantial educational disruptions, particularly when contending with language barriers or new curricula.” Serious consequences for countries of resettlement, including the United States, are also to be expected.

Question: Do refugees embrace their new country?

Fact: Refugees are on a fast track for permanent residency and citizenship, and a large majority become citizens.

This is not as impressive as it sounds. [According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services](#): “If you were admitted as a refugee, you are required by law to apply for a green card (permanent residence) in the United States one year after being admitted as a refugee.”

The odds are, if refugees are *required* to apply for a green card, they will do so. It is also likely that most will follow the regular process of gaining citizenship.

Is a mandatory green card application a sign of “embracing a new country” or could it be one of mere practicality? Another question worthy of answer is: What happens if a refugee does not apply for a green card one year after admission?

Question: What is the likely integration picture for Syrian refugees?

Fact: Syrian immigrants already in the United States are relatively well educated and prosperous.

The MPI fact sheet's authors go on to highlight the following: In 2014, 39 percent of Syrian immigrants were college graduates (vs. 30 percent of the U.S.-born population). The median household income for Syrian immigrants is \$52,000 (vs. \$55,000 for U.S.-born and \$49,000 for all foreign-born households).

These achievements, even if 100 percent factual, are beside the point. The same authors admit that, “the socio-economic status of Syrian refugees may differ from the larger immigrant population, but data specific to Syrian refugees are not yet available.”

A comprehensive (and preferably longitudinal) study on Syrian refugees in the United States is needed to assess the general integration patterns of this community. For when it comes to social issues, especially those related to human migration, partial “facts” can never depict an actual picture of the complexities involved.

This MPI fact sheet brings an image to mind of someone looking through the peephole of a door. What the person sees is indeed real, but its limited scope can only provide subjective (and at times calculated) interpretations.