

Refugees and Asylum Seekers Can Help us Rebuild after COVID-19

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When we think of refugees and asylum seekers, we often think of destitute individuals who are fleeing war or other crises.¹ We also tend to think of these individuals as only needing help, not the extent that they can help us. But those fleeing war, persecution, and other crises have long been an important part of American society and have greatly contributed to our economic growth. They can be an important part of our economy and society as we move forward from the COVID-19 crisis.

Refugees and asylum seekers are, by definition, in need of help when they come to the United States. They have often had to flee their homes quickly, with little time to gather their belongings, let alone sell their property.² What little money they did have, they usually have to spend in transit. Refugees and asylum seekers, then, have to depend on governments and non-governmental organizations for assistance.³

In the US, refugees are eligible to receive a relatively large amount of assistance in their first year. This includes reception and placement grants to help them get settled, cash, medical, and other assistance meant as a stopgap until they can find employment. Asylum seekers are not eligible for these benefits, or other federal benefits until they receive refugee status (although they may be eligible for state benefits). A recent report that was rejected by the Trump Administration calculated that these benefits cost the government about \$7,253.79 per refugee (including all family members) each year for the first ten years they are in the country or about \$326.4 billion over ten years.⁴

Yet, the fact that refugees and asylum seekers come to our country with little and need government assistance does not mean that they do not make a contribution to our economy or society. That same government report found that refugees and their families contributed \$343.3 billion in revenue over those same ten years, for a net contribution of \$16.9 billion.⁵

The fact that refugees and asylum seekers are net beneficiaries to the US is not surprising to those who have studied them. Refugees and asylum seekers come to the US not just for protection but also because they want to rebuild their lives. In a study of

Syrian and Iraqi refugees, my co-authors and I found that refugees prioritized the ability to work when choosing a destination to settle in.⁶ These refugees had suffered extreme amounts of violence at the hands of the Assad regime or the Islamic State. They had to flee quickly, usually leaving with only a few hours' or days' notice. In the process, they have lost much of what may have given them their sense of self-worth: their job, their homes and other possessions, their communities, and many have lost family members or close friends. Refugees are often unmoored from all that defined them and now must make their way in a society that they don't know and maybe don't understand well. When asylum seekers flee their homes for a new country, the major goal for these migrants is safety, yes, but it is also to rebuild their lives. They want to try to get back what they have lost: to build a new community and home.

The refugees and asylum seekers in our study saw work as one of the most important ways in which they could rebuild their lives. By working, they could take care of their family and be contributing members of society, regaining their status. And it's not just our respondents who feel this way; other studies have shown that refugees throughout the world move to where they can find jobs.⁷

This desire to rebuild their lives has meant that refugees and asylum seekers are great contributors to the US economy and American society.⁸ We see this in places like Utica and other cities of Upstate New York, which has relied on refugees to help revive the economy and their towns, by building businesses and community centers.⁹

Now, under COVID-19, refugees and asylum seekers are on the front lines as essential workers. They are doctors, nurses, and other health care workers;¹⁰ they work in food processing, including 9,300 butchers and meat processors who work in an industry that has been badly hurt by COVID-19;¹¹ and they work in grocery stores.¹² They are also working in some of the hardest-hit areas—11,400 refugee healthcare workers are in New York—and in frontline positions—14.2% of refugee healthcare workers are registered nurses.¹³

As we consider reforms to our immigration system, we should not be using this time to push away the very people who are saving lives and revitalizing communities. Instead, we should continue to welcome refugees and asylum seekers. There are many policies and actions that can be taken in both the short and long run that will help ensure our economy grows and rebuilds our sense of community as the pandemic ends.

On the federal level, the Trump Administration could immediately resettle more refugees. For fiscal year 2020 (October 1, 2019-September 30, 2020), the Trump Administration has set a ceiling of 18,000 refugees; historically we have resettled almost 80,000 refugees on average per year.¹⁴ We should immediately increase the number of refugees resettled to at least the previous levels.

Additionally, we could shift our priorities in who is resettled. Currently, we cannot resettle all of those most in need of resettlement. One option is to prioritize those with prior experience in health care or other essential services. These individuals could be resettled in areas that have been the hardest hit by COVID-19. That way, they could immediately start aiding in the recovery for these communities.

We could also work to fix our broken asylum system. The asylum system has long faced backlogs¹⁵, and the Trump administration's "Remain in Mexico" program and other changes have led to increased violence and insecurity for the asylum seekers¹⁶ but have not had a proven deterrent effect.¹⁷ Instead of placing quotas on immigration judges,¹⁸ we need to surge resources to the border to adjudicate the asylum seekers' cases properly. We can also better ensure that asylum seekers are able to contribute to society if we adjudicate their cases more quickly. Studies have shown that the longer a refugee waits to join the labor market, the less likely she is to be employed in the future.¹⁹ By providing status for asylum seekers quickly, they can begin working and rebuilding their lives.

Even without federal action, there are actions that states and localities can take. On the state level, many jobs require licensing before they can be done. These licensing requirements are often formidable burdens that can prevent immigrants from using their skills.²⁰ States could reform these licensing requirements to allow refugees and asylum seekers to use the skills they have developed elsewhere. Additionally, states, localities, and civil society groups could invest more in English language programs, skills training programs, and programs that match refugees and asylum seekers to jobs that use their skills.

It has long been a part of the American creed to welcome those who are "yearning to be free" from some of the earliest settlers who fled religious persecution to those fleeing Communism during the Cold War to those fleeing war and persecution today. Some of these refugees, like Albert Einstein, were known for their major contributions to American society, but most lived ordinary lives. Nonetheless, these refugees have long made significant contributions to our economy and our society. We can be the

generous "city upon a hill"—providing refugees with safety and the social safety net programs, including access to jobs and health care, that give them a chance to rebuild their lives—without fear that refugees and asylum seekers will harm our economic future.

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Endnotes

1. Legal refugees are people fleeing a well-founded fear of persecution" due to race, membership in a particular social group, political opinion, religion, or national origin. Asylum seekers are individuals who claim refugee status but have not yet been granted refugee status. There are other groups, like those living under Temporary Protected Status and victims of human trafficking, who are granted a legal status but not all the rights and access to benefits that legal refugees receive, as well.
2. Margaret E. Peters, Thania Sanchez, and Yang-Yang Zhou, "The Dignity of Forced Migrants: Explaining Migrants Destination Preferences," Working Paper, UCLA.
3. For a primer on resettlement, see: United Nations Human Rights Commission, "Resettlement in the United States," March 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/resettlement-in-the-united-states.html>; and International Rescue Committee, "How the U.S. refugee vetting and resettlement process really works," December 2, 2019, <https://www.rescue.org/article/how-us-refugee-vetting-and-resettlement-process-really-works>.
4. "The Fiscal Costs of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program at the Federal, State, and Local Levels, from 2005-2014," July 29, 2017, <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/4056060/Refugee-Report-Draft.pdf>.
5. "The Fiscal Costs of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program."
6. Margaret E. Peters, Thania Sanchez, and Yang-Yang Zhou, "The Dignity of Forced Migrants: Explaining Migrants Destination Preferences," Working Paper, UCLA.
7. Christopher W. Blair, Guy Grossman, and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Forced Displacement and Asylum Policy in the Developing World," 2019, Working Paper. University of Pennsylvania; Nadwa Mossad, Jeremy Ferwerda, Duncan Lawrence, Jeremy M. Weinstein, and Jens Hainmueller, "In Search of Opportunity and Community: The Secondary Migration of Refugees in the United States," September 24, 2019, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3458711>.
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11. "Refugee Workers on the Frontlines and as Essential Workers."
12. "Refugee Workers on the Frontlines and as Essential Workers."
13. "Refugee Workers on the Frontlines and as Essential Workers."
14. Migration Policy Institute, "U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Number of Refugees Admitted, 1980-Present," March 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/publications/annual-refugee-resettlement-ceilings-and-number-of-refugees-admitted-1980-present>.

[migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-annual-refugee-resettlement-ceilings-and-number-refugees-admitted-united](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-annual-refugee-resettlement-ceilings-and-number-refugees-admitted-united).

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17. In earlier research, scholars have found little effect of increased border enforcement on decisions to migrate. This is likely to be the case with the asylum seekers as they are fleeing not just poor economic conditions but also violence. See for example: Wayne A. Cornelius, and Idean Salehyan, "Does border enforcement deter unauthorized immigration? The case of Mexican migration to the United States of America," *Regulation & Governance* 1, no. 2 (2007): 139-153.

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