



# Refugee resettlement in the American midwest in challenging times

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**Abstract** The practice of refugee resettlement in the United States has been altered significantly by the policies of the Trump administration, which were driven by white nationalist and neoliberal ideologies that view refugees as a burden to the state's welfare system and pose a security threat to the country's citizens. Using the case of refugee resettlement agencies that serve refugees from Somalia in the Midwestern cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota and Garden City in Kansas, the paper seeks to understand how refugee resettlement agencies have been affected by, and responded to the challenges posed by the policies of the Trump administration. The paper argues that the policies have created a hostile environment within which to resettle refugees, with devastating impacts on refugee resettlement into the local communities. With their survival under threat, refugee resettlement agencies have turned to local communities for support in order to survive the challenging times.

**Keywords** Refugees · Immigration · Integration · Resettlement · Somalia · Trump administration

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## Introduction

More than three million refugees have been resettled in the United States over the past four decades (Kerwin & Nicholson, 2021). The Refugee Act of 1980 introduced several changes on refugee policy such as the removal of nationality as a criterion for refugee status determination, resulting in refugee cases being judged on their individual merits (Nagel, 2016). In practice, the Executive branch periodically interfered with the implementation of refugee policy, for instance, in the 1980s and 1990s American refugee policy was tied to Cold War politics and the populist immigration restriction agenda (Lipman, 2018). It is notable that refugee resettlement in the country continued to assume a lower profile in political discourse in the 1990s compared to undocumented immigration from Latin America which consumed most of the public discourse during this time.

A series of geopolitical events changed the American refugee resettlement landscape in the post-2000 era. Bose (2018, p. 320) notes that the “forced migration crisis in the Middle East and North Africa, a spate of terrorist attacks worldwide, and the growing political power of xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and rightwing groups especially in resettlement countries” changed attitudes about refugees and refugee resettlement in the U.S. This shift was solidified in 2017 by the election of Donald Trump as president who sought to fulfil his campaign promise on limiting immigration to the country, both documented and

undocumented. Within the first weeks of his election, President Trump introduced policies that had wide ranging implications on refugee resettlement in the country such as the so-called “Muslim ban” (Ayoub & Beydoun, 2017), which suspended the entry of people from certain Muslim-majority countries, the “refugee ban” (Fritzsche & Nelson, 2019), which briefly suspended refugee admission into the country, as well as significantly reducing the annual ceiling of refugee arrivals (Fee & Arar, 2019). These policies generally reflect the dominant discourses associated with refugee resettlement globally on issues such as cultural and religious identity, national culture and the integration of minority communities (Bulmer & Solomos, 2018). This changing landscape, marked by growing opposition to refugee resettlement, raises questions on how racialized people are being incorporated into the American society.

The post-2000 era notably injected a new layer into the country’s refugee admission and resettlement landscape: religion. As Borja (2018) notes, the relationship between Americans and refugees has always been complicated and controversial, especially on matters of religious and racial difference. For instance, following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, refugees from Muslim-majority countries in Africa and the Middle East entering the United States have been viewed as a security threat, with Muslim men often portrayed as terrorists and inherently dangerous to the American populace (Nawyn, 2019). Consequently, the growing securitization of migration, a process in which migration discourse shifts towards an emphasis on security (Ibrahim, 2005), has produced refugee policies that are restrictive in nature (Caldwell, 2009), not only in the U.S. but in other world regions too (Alba & Foner, 2015; Anderson, 2013). Against this backdrop of securitization of migration especially towards racialized refugees with a Muslim religious identity, there is urgent need to understand how this affects the settlement of newcomers into American society (Hopkins, 2010). Understanding how refugees are included in the communal and economic networks of their new home is “vital for promoting social cohesion and economic growth of host countries and the ability of migrants to become self-reliant, productive citizens” (OECD/European Union, 2015, p. 15). Ensuring the successful inclusion of refugees into local contexts may also reduce social tensions arising from the racial and

ethnic transformative effects of immigration on the host society (Marger, 2015).

The Midwest region presents an opportunity for examining the incorporation of a racialized immigrant group with a predominantly Muslim identity in America’s challenging environment (Abdi, 2015). As the security situation in Somalia deteriorated from the mid-1990s, a large number of Somalis have sought refuge in other countries, including the U.S. Their settlement in Midwestern cities such as the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota and Garden City in Kansas has been aided by support from local immigration groups, which facilitate the inclusion of refugees in host societies (Takle, 2012). Most of these organizations are funded through federal programs as well as donations from local communities. Situating the policies and actions of Trump administration within the white nationalist framework, the paper investigates the challenges that refugee resettlement agencies have faced when delivering services to African refugees. In the section that follow, the major theoretical lens of the paper is presented, followed by an overview of African refugee movements into the U.S.

### **White nationalism and refugee resettlement in the United States**

The Refugee Act of 1980 placed heavy emphasis on fostering rapid self-sufficiency among refugees so as to reduce their reliance on state support. This requirement often forced refugees to accept any kind of job available, usually in low-skilled positions, which effectively rendered them as cheap sources of labour to the neoliberal state (Fix et al., 2017). Harvey (2005) has argued that humanitarian programs such as refugee resettlement are often used by the neoliberal state to secure cheap sources of low-skilled labour. Refugees are drawn to the U.S. whose neoliberal multicultural refugee policy suggests that they have a shot at achieving the American Dream and to belong to the country’s melting-pot of different cultures (Galella, 2018).

The inception of the Donald Trump presidency in 2017 brought to an end the country’s neoliberal-inspired refugee policy. Taking advantage of rising anti-immigration sentiments in the American society, the Trump administration introduced white nationalist-driven policies to limit the entry of non-white

immigrants into the country. White nationalism is defined as “the belief that national identity should be built around white ethnicity, and that white people should therefore maintain both a demographic majority and dominance of the nation’s culture and public life” (Srikantiah & Sinnar, 2019, p. 197). Under Trump, racist rhetoric which affirms whiteness was promoted (Pulido et al., 2019), resulting in a white nationalist-driven refugee policy whose aim to “protect its sovereignty through the maintenance of a homogenous population regulated at the borders” (Lueck et al., 2015, p. 609). As an ideology, white nationalism is based “upon not only standardized notions of ‘belonging’, but also upon expulsion and exclusion, essentially creating the undesirable ‘other’” (Lueck et al., 2015, p. 610). White nationalist ideology provided the basis upon which popular and political rhetoric against certain types of immigrants such as refugees were founded. As shall be argued in this paper, the rhetoric created a platform for the introduction of policies that negatively affected the way in which refugee resettlement was practiced in the U.S., with devastating impacts on refugee resettlement into local communities. Pulido et al. (2019) has characterized the Trump administration’s refugee policies as “spectacular racism” whose fundamental elements include racism as a spectacle (i.e., performative, for an audience) as well as being transgressive (i.e., shocking people by operating beyond the bounds of racial norms). An example of spectacular racism in the administration’s refugee policy was the “Muslim Ban” that not only delivered on one of Trump’s central campaign promises, but effectively injected Islamophobia into the country’s immigration law and practice (Ayoub & Beydoun, 2017). On a practical level, the Muslim Ban marked a continuation of racist, white supremacy-driven immigration laws that started in the 1800s with the Chinese Exclusion Laws (Srikantiah & Sinnar, 2019).

The rise of anti-immigration policy and sentiment in the American society is closely linked to changes in the racial profile of refugees and other newcomers to the country. The Pew Research Center (2015) notes that the removal of European-focused origin quota system led to a diversification of the source countries of immigrants after 1965. Consequently, with an overwhelming majority of immigrants in the last fifty years originating from regions such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the end result is a shrinking

of white America that threatens the status of some whites and makes their whiteness “increasingly salient and central” to their identity as Americans (Major et al., 2018, p. 938). The ethnic changes resulting from immigration in Western societies can also “reshape local politics, destabilizing shared conceptions of the community’s identity and future” (Hopkins, 2010, pp. 42–43). Not surprisingly, Black and Muslim refugees from Africa entering these milieu often face huge integration challenges that include subjection to open hostility, othering, and humiliation (Triandafyllidou, 2001).

This paper draws on interviews that were conducted with representatives from organizations that provide refugee resettlement services, particularly to refugees from Somalia, in Garden City (Kansas) and the Twin Cities (Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota) in September 2018. Somalis were chosen because they arrive in the United States mostly as refugees, are black and predominantly Muslim. The major goal of the interviews was to understand how the practice of refugee resettlement had been affected by policies introduced by the Trump administration, and how this had consequently affected refugee resettlement into the local communities. The criteria for participation was that the organization was involved either in refugee resettlement or offer services that are utilized largely by refugees on a not-for-profit basis. In Garden City, interviews were held with ten individuals drawn from six different organizations, while in Minneapolis interviews were held with sixteen individuals drawn from eleven different organizations that serve African refugees. Because of the sensitivity of the issues raised in this paper, identifiers for study participants and organizations they work for were excluded.

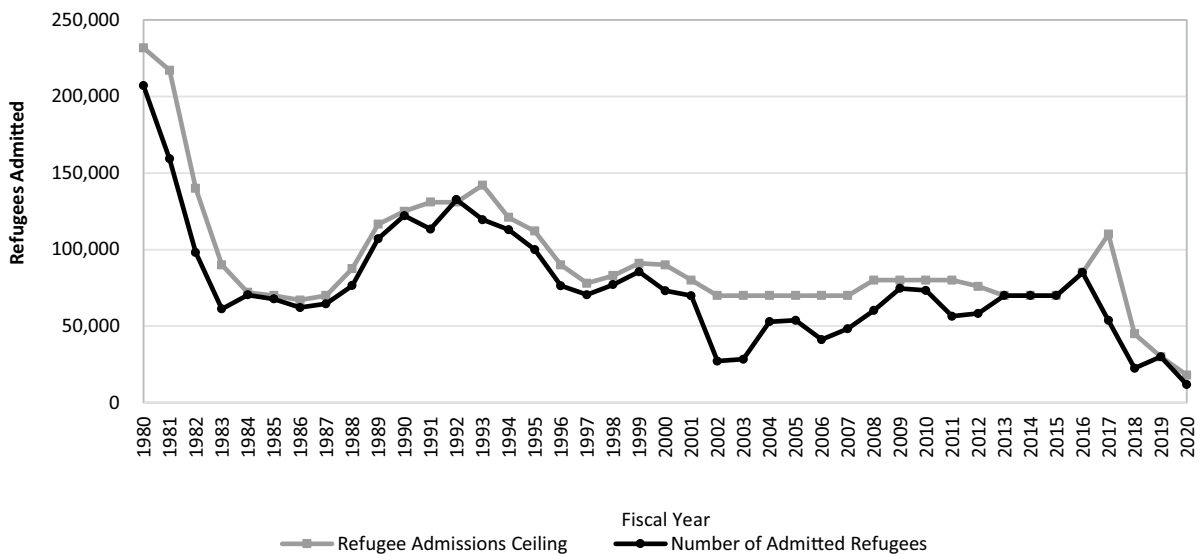
The paper examines the impacts of the policies of the Trump administration on refugee resettlement in the country from three different perspectives, namely (a) refugee admission into the country, (b) impact on operations of refugee resettlement organizations and (c) impact on the life experiences of refugees in their new communities. The study makes no claims about representativity because participation in the interviews was voluntary. Nonetheless, the consistent narrative themes that emerged from the research present a trustworthy representation of the environment in which Somali refugees are being resettled in the United States.

## Refugee entry in the Trump era

The Refugee Act of 1980 was introduced at a time of growing refugee admission into the United States. As a result of its implementation, the number of refugees that were resettled in the country went down from more than 207,000 in 1980 to only 61,000 in 1983 (Nagel, 2016). The Act established the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), a public–private partnership, in which the U.S. government screens and selects refugees overseas and work together with a group of non-governmental national resettlement agencies that place them in various locations across the country through their networks of community-based resettlement programs and agencies (Bose, 2018; Kerwin & Nicholson, 2021). Refugees seeking admission into the U.S. are processed through several government departments including the Department of Homeland Security’s U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), and the Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Once processed by these government departments, resettlement agencies help arrange for their transportation to the U.S. with the assistance of other international organizations such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The number of refugees that are resettled in the country annually is established through a Presidential Determination that establishes the admission ceiling and allocates numbers by regions (Kerwin & Nicholson, 2021). The fiscal year for refugee resettlement starts in October of the preceding year. Benefits and longer-term services for refugees are coordinated by ORR in conjunction with the states and resettlement agencies. This includes up to eight months of direct financial assistance to refugees and access to services such as language training, job search and medical care (Bose, 2018).

Resettlement agencies that assist refugees are primarily led by faith-based, secular and ethnic or identity-based organizations (Bose, 2018). They are reimbursed by ORR based on the number of refugees which they serve, and the policies of the Trump administration posed an existential crisis to their operations. The decline in refugee arrivals under the Trump administration marked a sharp departure from policies of past administrations. A substantial decline in refugee arrivals was experienced in the 1980s after the introduction of the Refugee Act. In 1980, the refugee admission ceiling was set at 231,000, with 207,116 refugees being successfully resettled in the country in that year (Fig. 1). The overwhelming majority of the refugees were from



**Fig. 1** U.S. Refugee Admissions and Refugee Resettlement Ceilings, 1980–2020. Data from U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, Office of Admissions—Refugee Processing Center (2020)

East Asia (163,799). Under the Regan administration (1981–1989), refugee admissions went down dramatically, with 62,142 refugees admitted into the country in 1986 against a ceiling of 67,000. This decline reflects the impact of the Refugee Act of 1980 which reduced refugee arrivals and placed heavy emphasis on supporting the settlement and integration of refugees into local communities (Zucker, 1983). Politics also determined the source countries of refugees admitted to the U.S. The decision by the Reagan administration not to grant refugee status to those fleeing from El Salvador can be linked to America's Cold War with the Soviet Union. On the contrary, the Haitian 'boat people' of the 1980s were not admitted as refugees but were considered as economic immigrants despite political turbulence in their country while those fleeing from Cuba were treated differently (Nagel, 2016).

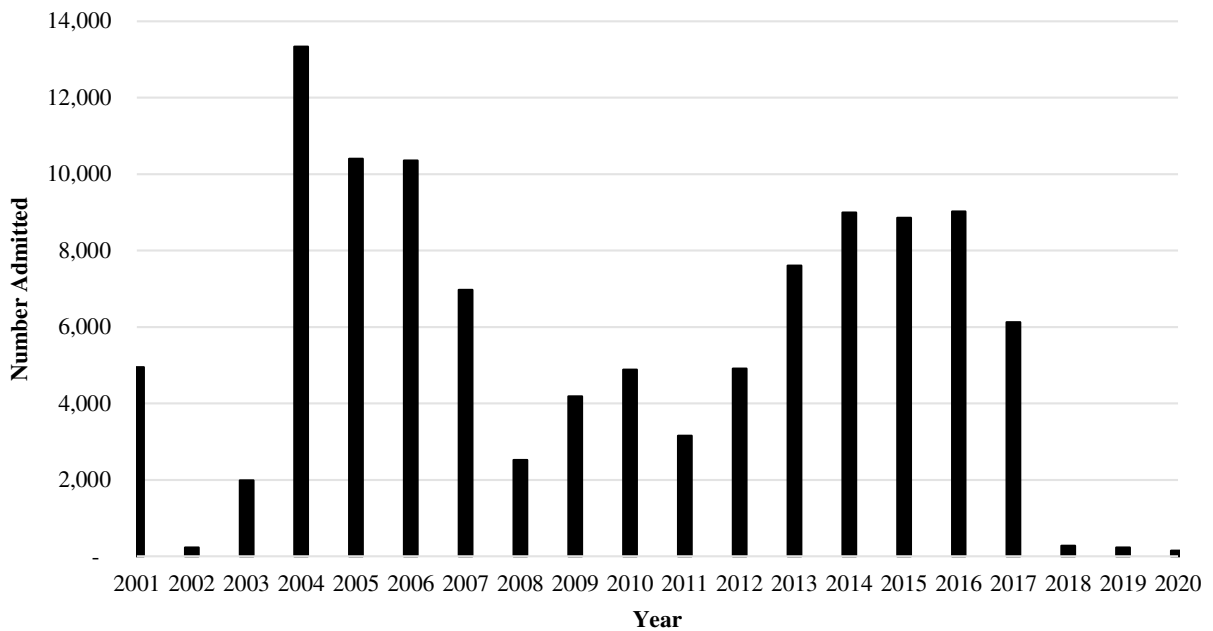
Successive governments have altered refugee admissions into the country to reflect their general policy on immigration. For instance, during the George H.W. Bush presidency, refugee arrivals rose from 107,070 in 1989 to 119,448 in 1993, which was generally in line with his policy of encouraging legal immigration under the Immigration Act of 1990. The greatest decline in actual refugee arrivals was witnessed in 2002 when only 27,131 refugees arrived into the country, against a target of 70,000 (that is, 39 per cent of the refugee admission ceiling). This followed the events of September 11, 2001 which caused the country to limit new refugee arrivals in the wake of terrorist attacks. What is notable is that under George W. Bush, refugee admissions into the country rebounded, reaching 60,191 in 2008. This stability of new refugee arrivals was maintained by the Obama administration with an average of 70,000 new arrivals each year during his presidency.

Under the Trump administration, refugee arrivals reached new historic lows. The outgoing Obama administration had set a target of resettling 110,000 refugees in 2017. In line with his white nationalist ideology President Trump, who had campaigned heavily on limiting immigration both legal and illegal, introduced several changes that resulted in the reduction of refugee admissions. This includes suspending USRAP for 120 days and barring the admission into the country of all people with non-immigrant or immigrant visas from seven Muslim-majority countries, namely Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan,

Syria and Yemen for 90 days (U.S. Department of Homeland Security & Department of Justice, 2018). These measures had far-reaching impacts on refugee resettlement in the country. For instance, they made it extremely difficult for new refugees to be admitted into the U.S. from Muslim-majority countries such as Somalia which lacked the high level of vetting mechanisms set out in the executive order. Some scholars argue that the executive order institutionalized racism and Islamophobia into America's immigration and refugee policy and practice (Ayoub & Beydoun, 2017). For others, this was a performative display of spectacular racism meant to appease the president's conservative and largely anti-immigrant/refugee support base (Pulido et al., 2019). Not surprisingly, refugee admission fell rapidly during Trump's tenure: in 2017 only 53,716 refugees were resettled against an original target of 110,000. In 2018, only 22,491 refugees were resettled against a much-reduced ceiling of only 45,000. In 2020, the refugee admission ceiling was reduced further to a new historical low record of 18,000, with only 11,818 new refugees resettled into the country.

Somali refugees present an interesting opportunity for examining the incorporation into the U.S. society of racialized refugees with a Muslim religious identity. There is very little ethnic, racial and religious difference among the Somali people: most speak Somali, identify their ethnicity as Somali and over 99 percent identify their religion as Sunni Muslim (Bigelow, 2010). There were only 2070 Somalis in the country in 1980 but their population had grown to 106,525 by 2017 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, 2017). The overwhelming majority of Somalis have entered the U.S. as refugees. Data from the Refugee Processing Center shows that a total of 109,183 Somali refugees were resettled in the U.S. for the period 2001–2020 (Fig. 2). Somali refugee admission declined substantially after the start of the Trump presidency. As a result of the refugee ban, the number of Somali refugees admitted into the U.S. declined from 9020 in 2016 (the last year of Obama's presidency) to only 149 in (the last year of Trump's presidency).

The case of Somali refugees also presents an opportunity to examine the impacts of USRAP's practice of placing more and more refugees within smaller cities. A number of researchers have begun exploring the process of refugee resettlement and their integration experiences in these smaller locations, for example,



**Fig. 2** Somali Refugee Arrivals in the United States, 2001–2020. Data from U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, Office of Admissions—Refugee Processing Center (2020)

Bose (2018) study on Syrians in Rutland, Vermont and Kraly and Vogelaar (2011) study refugee resettlement in Utica, New York. Substantial research has been conducted among Somali refugees mainly in Minneapolis–St Paul in Minnesota on issues such as Somalis’ immigration and assimilation processes (Boyle & Ali, 2010; Darboe, 2003). Scholars have started to explore Somali migrants’ experiences outside of Minnesota’s cities, including in rural Minnesota (Shandy & Fennelly, 2006), and in other states such as Ohio (Johnson et al., 2009). However, Somali immigrants’ experiences in other regions of the U.S. remain less explored. In the case of Kansas, Filippi et al.’s (2014) pilot study among Somalis in Kansas City sets the tone for further exploration in the Midwest region. The expansion of the meatpacking industry in Garden City since 1980 has turned a once slumbering rural Kansas town into a ‘modern boomtown’ (Broadway & Stull, 2006) with a plethora of cultural, economic, and social dynamics. This economic injection has lured a steady stream of immigrants to work in the region, including migrants from Latin America, Asia, and more recently, Africa. Not only has this influx of migrants changed Garden City’s demographic to a minority-majority city, but it has also contributed to shifting ethnic relations, power

hierarchies, and accompanying social challenges (Stull & Ng, 2016) as well as more recent anti-immigrant hostilities (Hauslohner, 2018). While expansive, the existing scholarship on Garden City and its migrant population has yet to focus on the experiences of refugees, in particular those from Africa. This is especially important to pursue in light of the 2016 failed bomb plot, aimed specifically at the town’s growing Somali population, which resulted in the 2018 conviction of three white supremacists (Hauslohner, 2018). In the aftermath of this alarming incident, it is crucial to investigate the role that local institutions and non-profit organizations play in incorporating Somalis into Midwestern communities.

### Refugee resettlement during the Trump presidency

The white nationalist-driven refugee policies that were pursued by the Trump administration relegated Somali refugees to the fringe of the American society. Being exclusionary in nature, the policies defined what it means to be American and set the standards on who is included or excluded from the American

society. During his presidential campaign, candidate Trump built his election campaign around the platform of immigration reform in which he essentially framed refugees from regions such as Africa as the undesirable ‘other’ who should be excluded from the American society. For instance, while on the campaign trail he called for an end to the admittance of Muslim refugees, characterizing them as a “rich pool of potential recruiting agents for Islamic terrorist groups” (Romero, 2018). He even singled out Somalis during one of his rallies in Minneapolis, noting that: “Here in Minnesota, you have seen first-hand the problems caused with faulty refugee vetting, with very large numbers of Somali refugees coming into your state without your knowledge, without your support or approval” (Jacobs, 2016). The portrayal of African Muslim refugees by the then candidate Trump as inherently dangerous was built on a white nationalist platform that defines who belongs to the U.S. state (Lueck et al., 2015), and Islamophobia discourse that views Muslims as posing serious danger to the American society (Nawyn, 2019).

It can be argued that by singling out Somalis during a public campaign, Trump exposed them to vigilante action by extremist individuals of society. In some cases, these would take the form of mere threats but they had the impact of instilling fear among refugees which made them feel as unwanted, undesirable members of the society. One social services program manager noted that:

We had somebody who had been a citizen for many years and who was, after the election, told by one of their neighbors, who was a white American-born person, “Now that Trump has been elected as President, you are going to go back to your country.”

Program Manager, Agency 1, Twin Cities, Minnesota, 09/2018

2016). In a sentencing memorandum, an attorney for one of the accused persons argued that his client had been influenced by Trump’s election campaign rhetoric (U.S. District Court for the District of Kansas, 2018). Minnesota’s Twin Cities also reported several incidences of violence targeted towards African Muslim refugees, including the bombing by anti-Muslim attackers of the Dar Al-Farooq Islamic Center in Bloomington, which serves the city’s community of civically active American Muslim families (CAIR, 2018).

Citizenship uptake among the African-born population in the U.S. has increased tremendously over the past decade. A report by the Migration Policy Institute (2018) showed that only 36.1 percent of the African-born population were naturalized U.S. citizens in 2006, compared with 40 percent of the total foreign-born population. By 2017, the proportion of the naturalized African-born population had increased to 54.4 percent, way more than the average for the foreign-born population (49.3 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Interestingly, the Somali-born population that is dominated by refugee arrivals had an even higher rate of naturalization (56 percent). This is hardly surprising since low-income families are eligible for fee waivers when applying for U.S. citizenship. It was important to establish whether the policies of the Trump administration posed a threat to the rate of naturalization of Somali refugees in the U.S.

Interviews with agencies serving refugees revealed that fear of policies by the Trump administration generated contradicting responses to the refugees’ application for U.S. citizenship. Some agencies reported a growth in the number of people they assisted to apply for citizenship. For instance, one agency reported that the number of applications which they helped to process rose from 100 in 2017 to 150 in 2018 (up to September). The agency viewed the increase in citizenship applications as a by-product of the rise in rhetoric towards immigrants by the Trump administration. Thus, some refugees viewed the acquisition of U.S. citizenship as insurance against possible changes on citizenship requirements by the Trump administration. Fear can, therefore, be cited as a driving factor in the upsurge of citizenship applications among African refugees.

On the other hand, some refugees who qualified for U.S. citizenship were deciding to forego applying because of the prevailing political climate. As noted by one refugee services director, most refugees coming from war-torn countries such as Somalia have been exposed to trauma in their home countries and the fear of re-traumatization caused them not to seek citizenship, which involve encounters with government officials. While part of the fear was founded on misinformation, some of it was based on the belief that that submitting an application could endanger their status in the country. As noted by one refugee program director:

There are a growing number of people who are fearful of applying for certain things. I think some people are doing a calculus that maybe now isn't the time to apply. And maybe we should wait until there's a different administration with different priorities. I think there is a larger fear out there, just of immigration enforcement in general. Director of Refugee Resettlement, Agency 2, Twin Cities, Minnesota, 09/2018

It's become really difficult for people to bring their families here. People are upset, frustrated and scared because their mom, their kids, their grandma or whoever it is, is stuck somewhere and the whole plan was that they would come here and file for them to follow and that's not happening right now. That's really scary and heartbreaking. There's a lot of trauma, I think there's a lot of fear, stress and frustration lately. That feels like promises have been broken.

Communications Director, Agency 2, Twin Cities, Minnesota, 09/2018

### Delivering services to refugees in challenging times

The practice of refugee resettlement was altered significantly by the policies of the Trump administration. The imposition of restrictions on refugee admission by the Trump's administration introduced new challenges for refugee resettlement agencies. Interviews with representatives from refugee service providers in Garden City and the Twin Cities revealed the nature of challenges resulting from the policy changes. Under the Trump administration, new refugee arrivals dropped sharply as a result of the refugee ban, the lowering of the refugee admission ceiling as well as the introduction of 'extreme vetting' measures in the refugee source countries. The reduction in refugee arrivals affected refugee resettlement agencies in two main ways.

First, the U.S. State Department announced in 2018 that only resettlement agencies that resettled at least 100 refugees in previous years would be allowed to accept new arrivals (Torbaty & Rosenberg, 2017). This move was aimed at consolidating refugee resettlement programs and meant the closure of about 15 percent of the nation's resettlement

centers (Rosenberg, 2018). The International Rescue Committee (IRC) was forced to close its Garden City offices as it resettled on average 90 refugees per year between 2015 and 2017 (Rosenberg, 2018). The service gap was filled in by the local Catholic Charities Branch, which was staffed with only three employees at the time of the research, none of whom was specifically dedicated to refugee resettlement. With this skeletal staff, Catholic Charities focused primarily on providing core services to refugees during their first 90 days in the country. However, it is crucial to note that the IRC had not only provided the basic reception and placement services during the first 90 days such as housing search, but also provided other services to ensure the long-term success of refugees in Garden City such as English language training and job training services. In the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota), Catholic Charities permanently closed its refugee resettlement program in September 2018 "as a direct result of the administration's policies that have made maintaining the program infeasible" (Oehrig, 2018). Thus, refugees who are beyond the 90-day limit in smaller cities such as Garden City are the worst affected as they do not have access to alternative service providers unlike those residing in bigger cities. Without the support of service providers, the newly resettled refugees would find it harder to adjust to life in their new communities.

Second, declining refugee arrivals affected the general infrastructure supporting refugee resettlement in both study sites. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) partners with voluntary agencies to carry out refugee assistance programs and provide core resettlement services (Kerwin, 2018). Nationally, Chishti and Pierce (2020) reported that as many as 51 refugee resettlement programs had closed their offices across 23 states by June 2019, while others were forced to downscale their operations. These changes "increased the workload of remaining staff who, according to participants in the community gatherings, struggle to provide sufficient services to refugees, particularly to victims of trauma and others with special needs" (Kerwin & Nicholson, 2021, p. 11). There is a risk that the infrastructure that had been built by refugee resettlement agencies would be destroyed by declining refugee arrivals (Kerwin, 2018). These connections, which one refugee resettlement director described as 'social infrastructure', have become



a vital cog in successful refugee resettlement in the Midwest as they ensure that refugee families achieve economic and social stability upon arrival in the country. The connections include relationships that the agencies have developed with employers seeking to fill low-skilled positions and landlords who provide housing for new arrivals. Respondents expressed fears that the connections which have been nurtured over a long period of time, would be lost because of the reduction in refugee arrivals. Consequently, the ability of refugee resettlement agencies to complement each other and collaborate together would be compromised. This point was emphasized by one refugee resettlement director in the Twin Cities area:

My biggest fear is the loss of all those connections and all of the years of work that people who work for me put in to make things as smooth as they are now. I'm very proud of how we do settlement in Minnesota and part of that's because with a couple other resettlement agencies we're very collaborative.

Director of Refugee Resettlement, Agency 3, Twin Cities, Minnesota, 09/2018

The Trump administration's refugee policies that discriminated against refugees from Africa left resettlement agencies operating in survival mode. While some agencies were forced to shut down their operations due to declining refugee arrivals, others responded to this new reality by adopting a wide range of strategies. Some agencies adopted inward-facing strategies, which involve making changes to their operational structure and incorporating strategies such as reorganization and reorientation of the agencies' activities so as to remain competitive in a challenging environment. While staff reductions are part of this strategy, it also includes the identification of new priority areas that are financially viable for an agency.

An outcome of the Refugee Act was the heavy emphasis on numbers as the income of resettlement agencies was directly tied to the number of refugees that were resettled. This was contrary to the stated goals of the Act of ensuring the success of the refugees resettled in the country (Zucker, 1983). The Trump administration's induced decline in refugee arrivals forced refugee resettlement agencies to shift their focus to providing services to refugees who are still within the five-year arrival window

and still eligible to receive federal aid. Hence, one could argue that the Trump-induced changes have resulted in resettlement agencies moving from a narrower approach of resettling new arrivals to a much broader approach of offering services that ensure the long-term success of refugees already in the country through programs such as English language instruction and support for job search. Future studies could seek to explore how these changes have shaped the practice of refugee resettlement in the country and trace whether the agencies will go back to the old model of heavy emphasis on serving new arrivals and neglect those who have been in the country for less than five years and are still eligible to receive assistance.

Other agencies adopted outward-looking strategies that enabled them to continue providing services to refugees in an increasingly challenging and hostile environment. Central to this strategy is the role of community support which has become a vital component of their survival in the post-Trump era. The support has come in two main forms, namely, volunteering and offering financial assistance. The increase in rhetoric and physical attacks against refugees has brought to light the challenges faced by refugees in the country. For example, in the aftermath of a failed bombing which targeted Somali refugees in the city, the Garden City community mobilized rallies in support of refugees by volunteering at local organizations that support refugees. In other cases, community members provided financial assistance to resettlement agencies so as to help them weather the difficult conditions brought about by the changing refugee resettlement landscape. MORE Empowerment, located in St. Paul was due to close at the end of 2018, but was saved at the last minute by a generous gift from a local donor. A year later, donations from community members made up 25 percent of MORE's operational budget. Community members in the St Paul area also volunteer at MORE by serving as classroom aides and food distribution drivers. A large number of the resettlement organizations are run by faith-based organizations and they tap into the compassion of their local membership to finance their operations:

“There is a lot of uncertainty in the world of refugee resettlement right now. But we have had a lot of support from the community. We're getting a lot of calls and support from local people offering

financial donations. I feel like we can only do this kind of work with the support of our community. So we're lucky here in Minnesota to have that kind of buy-in and community support.”

Director of Refugee Resettlement, Agency 3, Twin Cities, Minnesota, 09/2018

2007). The role of community support on the survival of refugee resettlement agencies was not fully explored in this study and should be subject to future research. This broader examination needs to include the role of ethnic community-based organizations (ECBOs) which are “(c)ompetent at delivering linguistically and culturally appropriate services” (Newland et al., 2007). They rely on the support of community members who volunteer their time and resources to ensure the successful integration of newcomers to the country. The U.S. has recently adopted community sponsorship of refugees and it is crucial to understand the important role that local communities play in the integration process. Evidently, and contrary to nationalist concerns that refugees can strain local resources (Brown & Scribner, 2014), local communities are welcoming refugees through their financial and in-kind support to refugee resettlement agencies (Kerwin, 2018).

## Conclusion

The UNHCR (2018) reports that one person is displaced every two seconds worldwide as a result of conflict and persecution. Refugee resettlement programmes are now more important than ever as they give refugees the chance to restart their lives in new locations. Unfortunately, the policies which were adopted by the Trump administration undermined the country's refugee resettlement programmes, with devastating impacts on refugees and the agencies that serve them. The white nationalist and neoliberalist-driven refugee policies prioritize self-interest and the need to protect the sovereign state from refugees and immigrants who are perceived to be a drain to the country's welfare system. Such an immigration policy is not founded on compassion but rather on the net benefits the state derives from immigrants and refugees. Recent research suggests that even though refugees may initially rely on the state for support, they are eventually able to make positive contributions to

the national economy. For instance, a study by Evans and Fitzgerald (2017) shows that by the time refugees who entered the U.S. as adults have been here for 20 years, they will have paid on average \$21,000 more in taxes to all levels of government than they received in benefits over that time span. Kerwin's (2018) study showed that refugees who arrived in the U.S. between 1987 and 1996 exceed the average U.S. population in terms of measures such as median personal income, home ownership and access to health insurance. In other words, given the right support, refugees have the capacity to make a positive impact to the country's economy.

The Trump-induced changes to consolidate refugee resettlement operations has reduced access to services for refugees living in the smaller cities. While refugees living in bigger cities have been forced to shift to other agencies for assistance, those living in smaller cities do not have such an option. Further research could explore the impacts caused by such closures on how refugees adjust to life in the smaller cities. Furthermore, another unknown is the impact such closures have on ethnic community-based organization (ECBOs) which are “competent at delivering linguistically and culturally appropriate services” to refugees which go beyond assistance in finding employment or filing legal documents with the government (Newland et al., 2007). ECBOs are funded largely through federal grants which declined dramatically under the Trump presidency. It's likely that such providers which offer services that are linguistically, culturally and religiously appropriate might have seen their capacity to provide services decline significantly as a result of the policies of the Trump administration.

In an era of declining federal government support for refugee resettlement and growing national anti-immigrant sentiments, the population most affected are the refugees themselves. There is urgent need to understand how the shrinking of services are impacting on their inclusion into the American society. In addition, future studies could seek to uncover the informal systems of support that newcomer refugees are utilizing as they seek to rebuild their lives in America's challenging environment.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Ethical approval** The study was approved by the Human Protection Research Program at the University of Kansas on 19 September 2018 (IRB ID: STUDY00142971).

**Informed consent** All research participants provided verbal informed consent on their participation in this study

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