Refugees in Maine—Workforce Integration and Related Supports
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Because of the often abrupt nature of their move and the situations in their countries of origin, refugees and asylum seekers frequently arrive in the United States with limited financial and other resources, have made few significant plans for their life and work in a new country, possess few skills/credentials that are recognized or useful in the United States economy, and are often inhibited by limited or non-existent English skills. With this project, I attempted to develop an understanding of how refugees are faring economically in Maine when faced with these challenges. I approached my research by investigating existing secondary sources and reports, conducting six preliminary ethnographies with refugee students of Portland Adult Education (PAE), examining PAE’s New Mainers-Refugee Workforce Development Program outcomes, and posing questions to refugee service providers. From interviews with refugee students, I found a range of barriers to economic integration but one common theme reported by refugees was a lack of skills necessary to navigate the US workforce culture. Students reported a lack of English skills and/or interview and job-searching unfamiliarity but also a broader issue of simply not knowing where to start—whether to retrain, return to school, or devote their time to entering the workforce.

The direction of my research was influenced by some significant challenges facing Portland Adult Education this summer as they navigated the shutting down of their facility at the West School. Understandably, this shutdown and impending move introduced a lot of uncertainty and confusion and meant that it was harder for me to reach students for the ethnography portion of my research. Being around administrators and teachers during the ongoing search for a new and suitable facility, however, also became a learning experience in and of itself. Finding a singular, central location that can be easily accessed by bus routes, is close to public housing neighborhoods, and can be utilized during the daytime so as to provide classes for late shift workers or people who are caring for children will certainly influence the degree to which Portland Adult Education can provide services to the city’s growing immigrant and refugee populations.

In addition to the ethnographies, however, much of the research that I was doing involved trying to uncover the typical paths taken by Maine refugees in terms of economic mobility. When service providers report their successes, they often measure these against a “counter-factual,” or typical outcome that would have occurred had the service not been provided. This counter-factual for Maine refugees was not particularly well defined by service providers with whom I interacted. I therefore spent a considerable amount of time exploring information and resources that shed light on the average economic outcomes for various subsets of refugees in Portland in order to develop a counter-factual and better evaluate the outcomes and initiatives of service providers working with these populations.

With my research project, I wanted to find a way to contribute something that would be of use to the programs and initiatives that support refugee economic integration in Maine. I have therefore compiled summaries and overviews of the findings from reports released by the Department of Labor and various other authors on refugees in the Maine workforce and tailored these to supplement the intake and reporting process of PAE’s New Mainers-Refugee Workforce Development Program (NMRWDP). Some of these overviews will likely be useful to the program in applying for funding and grants. Additionally, my research has put me on the path of working to design a better intake and evaluating process for NMRWDP. This new process will include questions and formats informed by the various pieces of my research project and is something that I will continue to work on this fall.

Additional information on my research project, including secondary source bibliographies and recommendations for future work on a project related to this topic, can be found by accessing the McKeen Center server.

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