

KIN AND COMMUNITY: TRADITION MAINTENANCE AND THE ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY OF REFUGEES
IN A MIDWESTERN TOWN

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ABSTRACT

The plight of international refugees has been a global concern since the establishment of the UNHCR after World War II. Since the United States accepts more refugees than any other nation, the resettlement process currently in effect has global ramifications. Further, since refugees are often incapable of securing their own passage out of their nation of origin, and getting resettled in the United States requires complicated logistics as well as significant funds, having a support system in place could be a major advantage in terms of getting refugees resettled and economically self-sufficient quickly. In order to assess the available support systems, namely kin and ethnic communities, I interviewed refugees about their traditions and recorded their personal journeys as refugees. I focused on whether they had a kin network already in place in the US and how that affected their ability to maintain traditions that could help them cope with their new life. Subjects such as marriage, religion, and interactions with Americans (especially government, co-workers, and the local aid organization) were especially significant since they are the mechanisms through which social bonds are established and support systems are built. I found that under the current US refugee policy, refugees are resettled in small groups that are scattered across the country. This leads to isolation and makes building a support system very difficult. Since the goal of US refugee policy is to get refugees economically self-sufficient as quickly as possible, and small groups don't aid in that process, I propose that refugees be resettled in communities sufficiently large to enable tradition maintenance and support system building, but not so large as to burden the local economy (since refugees often require public assistance when they arrive) nor to create insulated communities that hinder integration. The exact parameters for how large these communities should be will depend on the capacity of the local community and available resources.