

UCLA

Program on International Migration

Title

Paper integration: The structural constraints and consequences of the US refugee resettlement program

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4mj807ch>

Author

Fee, Molly

Publication Date

2018-07-03

DOI

10.1093/migration/mny016

Peer reviewed

Paper integration: The structural constraints and consequences of the U.S. refugee resettlement program

Molly Fee*

*Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095, United States.
Email: mfee@ucla.edu

Fee, Molly. 2018. "Paper integration: The structural constraints and consequences of the U.S. refugee resettlement program." *Migration Studies*. Online first.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mny016>

Abstract

The migration literature contends that, unlike other immigrants, refugees resettled in the U.S. benefit from a federal program of integration. These claims do not consider the barriers that may complicate the implementation of resettlement policy. Based on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork at a refugee resettlement agency in California, I argue that the organizational structure of the U.S. Resettlement Program shapes how caseworkers provide resettlement services on a daily basis. The financial insecurity of Resettlement Agencies coupled with high stakes government oversight creates an organizational culture of vulnerability where caseworkers rely on discretion as they put resettlement policy into practice. Caseworkers develop coping mechanisms to get by as they simultaneously attend to the demands of their funders and their refugee clients. Given these structural constraints and limited resources, caseworkers instrumentalize paperwork as a discretionary tool. When files and documents are privileged over the quality and extent of resettlement services, caseworkers creatively utilize paperwork to separate policy from practice in order to protect themselves and appease their refugee clients. This policy of integration instead becomes a practice of *paper integration*, which problematizes prior theories and assumptions about U.S. refugee resettlement. This practice of paper integration ultimately affects the services that arriving refugees receive and the degree to which they benefit from this ostensible program of integration.

Keywords: integration, paperwork, refugee, resettlement, street-level bureaucracy

Paper integration: The structural constraints and consequences of the U.S. refugee resettlement program

Molly Fee*

*Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA 90095, United States.
Email: mfee@ucla.edu

1. Introduction

While all migrants pass through varying degrees of immigrant selection, refugees are the sole group in the U.S. that also passes through a program of state-facilitated incorporation, which stands out as an anomaly of U.S. immigration policy. The U.S. refugee resettlement program has been framed as a policy of integration by migration scholars (Bloemraad 2006; Jiménez 2011; Waters and Pineau 2015; Hooper et al. 2016) and the U.S. government (The President of the United States 2015), yet there has been little research to substantiate these claims or inquire further into the conditions of how the program is implemented at the local level. The migration literature oversimplifies the structure of the resettlement program and overstates the benefits that refugees enjoy. Despite being considered one of three ‘durable solutions’¹ available to refugees, ‘there has been scarce focus on just how durable the U.S. resettlement system actually is’ (HRI 2009: 1). While refugee resettlement has been used to draw attention to the absence of support provided to most immigrants in the U.S., it is seldom the focus of scholarly analysis (Darrow 2015a, 2015b). By examining the daily implementation of resettlement services, this paper critically interrogates whether the U.S. Resettlement Program (USRP) in practice lives up to the robust policy of integration it is presumed to be. While Resettlement Agency (RA) caseworkers support their refugee clients, they must also satisfy standardized benchmark assessments of paperwork. I argue that the structure of the resettlement program fosters a practice of *paper integration* on the ground.

In recent years, the USRP has been criticized by the RAs and communities that contend with the daily challenges of a program that falls short (HRI 2009; IRC 2009; Brick et al. 2010; Lugar 2010; Nezer 2013; Brown and Scribner 2014). Given that the resettlement program is ‘underfunded, overstretched, and failing to meet the basic needs of the refugee populations’ (Lugar 2010), community institutions are forced to compensate, particularly schools, medical providers, local governments, and other social service agencies (Lugar 2010; Nezer 2013; Brown and Scribner 2014). As one study of resettled Iraqi refugees noted, ‘employment services are not properly funded, English language training is insufficient, transportation is inadequate, and professional recertification is not viable’ (HRI 2009: 19).

How do we reconcile these implementational shortcomings with the USRP’s reputation as the ‘*only* affirmative integration program at the federal level’ (Waters and Pineau 2015: 131)? This paper uses organizational theory to examine how the structure of the USRP shapes the ways that RA caseworkers carry out the work of resettlement, which in turn affects the quality and extent of the resettlement services provided to refugees. Based on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork at an RA in California, I examine how the USRP is put into practice on a daily basis, and why RA caseworkers implement resettlement policy in these ways. I find that the financial precarity

of local RAs coupled with high stakes government oversight create an environment where paperwork and documentation are privileged over the provision of resettlement services.

This paper makes two contributions to the migration literature. Firstly, I problematize the taken-for-granted assumption that the USRP lives up to its designation as a program of integration for arriving refugees. By taking federal policy at face value, migration scholars have misrepresented the depth of support provided to refugees. Secondly, I demonstrate why the USRP comes up short in practice. Drawing on decoupling theory (Meyer and Rowan 1977), which explains how organizations may uphold a ‘myth’ to outwardly comply with policies as a means of gaining legitimacy, I argue that caseworkers must decouple daily practice from resettlement policy in order to protect themselves and respond to their refugee clients’ needs. They instrumentalize paperwork to maintain a myth of compliance. When a refugee’s case file is more consequential than the actual services rendered, caseworkers are compelled to favor paperwork over service delivery. Since paperwork is used as the means through which RAs are assessed and sanctioned, core resettlement services are shaped by the documentary requirements with which they must comply. Time and resources are redirected away from refugee clients to maintain satisfactory paperwork, which may differ from the actual services provided. When practice is decoupled from policy, the USRP consists of dual realities: 1) what the government sees through its selective oversight of paperwork and 2) what takes place in the RA on a daily basis. The organizational environment of the USRP encourages and perpetuates a practice of paper integration. Given RAs’ competing priorities and the variability of service provision, it is necessary to rethink how the migration literature characterizes U.S. refugee resettlement.

I begin with the history of the USRP as well as an overview of the services provided to refugees. Next I draw upon literature in organizational sociology to shed light on the complex institutional structure of the USRP. Through my findings, I discuss how funding mechanisms create an organizational culture of vulnerability where RA caseworkers develop coping mechanisms (Lipsky 2010) and instrumentalize paperwork in order to protect the RA and appease their refugee clients.

2. The History of the U.S. Resettlement Program

Though formalized by the Refugee Act of 1980, the history of the USRP dates back to several earlier unintended resettlement efforts, laying the groundwork for the program that operates today. The U.S. President controlled these earlier waves of resettlement and relied on the benevolence of willing ethnic or religious volunteerism to deliver social service support to refugees. Federal funding to these groups was inconsistent and at times non-existent (Wright 1981; Holman 1996; Haines 2010). Refugees were admitted only when individuals and organizations could assure the government that new arrivals would not become public charges of the welfare system, underscoring a preoccupation with economic self-sufficiency that persists today (Holman 1996). Eventually, the U.S. government began providing nominal financial support to voluntary organizations to defray the costs of helping refugees travel to their destinations once in the U.S. Funding was allocated on a per capita basis, another enduring programmatic feature (Holman 1996). U.S. involvement in refugee issues became more commonplace, and the government was forced to contend with large resettlement efforts in the 1960s and 1970s (Holman 1996; Haines 2010). Congress

passed the Refugee Act of 1980, which standardized the program of support and broadened its scope to admit more refugees on humanitarian grounds (Kennedy 1981; Zolberg 1988; Holman 1996).

The Refugee Act of 1980 simply codified many of the resettlement practices that had developed on an ad hoc basis over the prior several decades, laying the groundwork for the structure of the USRP. Through a cyclical process of policy validation, ‘prior legal-bureaucratic decisions affect subsequent refugee policy decisions, that is, early policy outputs become subsequent inputs’ (Jacobsen 1996: 660-661). The state constructed a needs narrative that distinguished refugees from other types of immigrants. Government-constructed needs ‘draw on and establish common notions of what is required of certain social roles and positions’ (Haney 2010: 9). Over time, the federal government has reduced the support that refugees supposedly need for a successful resettlement, with early employment as the key to integration. What initially began as a program with 36 months of transitional financial assistance with an emphasis on early employment and English language acquisition has been stripped down to eight months of support with no English language programming and a greater reliance on state and local levels (Haines 2010). While the overall structure of the USRP remains an artifact of earlier policy decisions, today refugees receive a diminished level of support (Holman 1996).

For more than three decades, the U.S. has resettled between 40,000 and 200,000 refugees per year, with the exception of the two years following September 11, 2001. The U.S. fell just shy of its goal of resettling 85,000 refugees in 2016 (WRAPS 2017a). Despite President Obama’s plans to resettle 110,000 refugees in 2017, actual resettlement fell to 53,716 (WRAPS 2017a) as a result of President Trump’s 27 January and 6 March 2017 Executive Orders, which sought to halt resettlement and reduce the annual ceiling. The projected cap for resettlement admissions in 2018 is set at 45,000 refugees (The President of the United States 2017), marking a distinctive shift away from the Obama Administration’s attempts to expand the USRP.

3. Refugee assistance and the Resettlement Agency

Refugee resettlement contradicts the notion that ‘[i]mmigration tends to produce concentrated benefits and diffuse costs’ (Freeman 1995: 885). When compared to immigration, resettlement is relatively costly during a refugee’s first few months, though a series of longer-term benefits to society are expected to balance these early expenses (Zucker 1983; GAO 2012). At the federal level, the Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) coordinates pre-departure processing, RA assignments, and assistance during the first ninety days in the U.S. The government has subcontracted with nine national RAs, six of which are faith-based organizations. These national offices oversee the resettlement activities of their local affiliates throughout the country, with approximately 350 local RAs (GAO 2012) operating in forty-nine states plus the District of Columbia (WRAPS 2017b). These local RA offices become responsible for carrying out the work of the resettlement program on a daily basis under the oversight of their national office and the federal government. Despite the USRP’s highly standardized approach to resettlement services, local RAs operate in diverse community contexts and contend with different refugee populations (Brick et al. 2010). The involvedness of an RA’s caseload may be shaped by whether their clients are resettled through provisions for family reunification or as ‘free cases’ without pre-existing ties.

A key policy artifact from earlier iterations of the USRP is the per capita funding structure that allocates a fixed grant to RAs for each refugee that it resettles (Holman 1996). During the period of this study, RAs received a per capita grant of \$1,975 for each refugee client, from which the RA retained approximately \$850 to support the office's operating expenses. The rest was used for or given to the arriving refugee in what is commonly referred to as a 'welcome check,' which is intended to assist refugees with their initial expenses². An RA's operating budget is a direct reflection of its caseload. As arrivals fluctuate, so does revenue. Unfortunately RAs do not manage their client assignments, so they are unable to predict, let alone control, their yearly income (Darrow 2015a, 2015b). RAs subsist off of these per capita grants for their resettlement activities, yet the government in conjunction with the RAs' national headquarters determines their client capacity and by extension their revenue. This financial insecurity fosters a prevailing sense of vulnerability that is inherent in the organizational structure of the USRP, since RAs must cope with a budget over which they have little say. RAs fall on a spectrum of more or less access to supplemental sources of funding, such as public or private grants and donations. RAs may also reallocate a portion of another program's income to subsidize underfunded resettlement services. However, President Trump's abrupt cuts to the total number of refugees resettled in 2017 highlighted just how reliant RAs are on these per capita grants. Shortly after President Trump announced that only 50,000 refugees would be resettled in 2017, one national RA closed five local RA offices and laid off 140 employees (The Tennessean, 15 February 2017).

This level of funding is not sufficient for maintaining the staffing and services necessary to carry out the work expected of RAs. A 2008 study by one of the national RAs concluded that the funding RAs received at the time only covered 39% of 'the real cost of welcome,' which includes all of the resources that caseworkers draw upon to simply meet the requirements of their cooperative agreements (LIRS 2008). As a result, RAs find themselves in a catch-22. They do not receive enough funding to properly carry out their work, yet they must demonstrate that they comply with the terms of the program in order to continue to receive funding. This financial vulnerability in conjunction with high-stakes oversight and monitoring breeds a culture of anxiety within the RA. When so much effort goes into simply keeping the RA financially viable, energy is redirected away from their primary role as a service provider. Caseworkers are at the mercy of their funders, constrained by a business model that leaves them with few alternatives. If they do not demonstrate compliance, the consequences are as severe as shutting down the office.

As the USRP was formalized, RAs became crucial to the government's ability to carry out the resettlement process. RAs grew increasingly intertwined with the government through a public-private partnership. These partnerships have resulted in a blurring of where the state ends and the non-profit begins (Smith and Lipsky 1993). RAs receive their funding, mandate, and clients from the state yet they are governed 'at a distance' (Miller and Rose 1990), responsible for independently completing their daily obligations and finding their own solutions to problems as they arise. Borrowing Haney's concept of 'satellite states,' these RAs 'circle and hover around the centralized "mother ship," relying on her for material survival, legitimacy, and authority. Yet, on a day-to-day level, they claim autonomy from her and the ability to set their own agendas' (2010: 15-16). RAs are heavily reliant on the state. Without the federal government's mandate on resettlement, RAs would be unable to sustain their work financially. Beholden to the regulations of the federal government and their national office, RA caseworkers are subject to

periodic accountability measures while simultaneously being confronted with the daily needs of their refugee clients, which do not always coincide.

In order to maintain control despite a lack of proximity, the government has established mechanisms of oversight, ‘such as program evaluations, performance measures, and accountability scales that focus on “outputs”’ (Haney 2010: 17). Local RAs are monitored through a system of audits, which are conducted by their national office every three years and PRM every five years. Regulation is achieved through the allocation of highly coveted funds, where today’s success measures determine tomorrow’s funding. Since RAs are beholden to federal funding, a failure to meet regulations has direct implications on the financial viability of the agency, including the job security of the agency’s caseworkers (Smith and Lipsky 1993). More focused on RAs meeting certain benchmarks than how they are met, the government can set the resettlement policy agenda without concerning itself with the intricacies of implementation. Street-level bureaucrats play a pivotal role on the ground, as their actions ‘effectively *become* the public policies they carry out’ (Lipsky 2010: xiii). Consequently, this policy of integration is heavily mediated by the RA caseworkers who shape how resettlement services are delivered.

4. **The street-level bureaucracy of refugee resettlement**

From the moment refugees arrive, RA caseworkers become a critical resource, often beginning with airport pickup. Caseworkers serve as the hub that connects refugees to services and community institutions beyond the RA, such as housing, medical care, employment, school, and welfare benefits, including Medicaid and food stamps. The RA staff may include caseworkers from the same linguistic and cultural backgrounds as their refugee clients, some of whom may also have arrived in the U.S. as refugees (Shaw 2014). RAs are an important first point of institutional contact for arriving refugees, and caseworkers serve as intermediaries who can significantly shape refugees’ initial experiences (Caron and Tshabangu-Soko 2012; Darrow 2015a, 2015b; Shaw and Poulin 2015). Especially for refugees resettled as ‘free cases’ with limited networks in the U.S., they have no choice but to rely heavily on their local RA and its staff.

RA caseworkers reflect Lipsky’s (2010) characterization of street-level bureaucrats in form and function. Not only are caseworkers responsible for the delivery of services prescribed by the state, they do so with a degree of autonomy. Scholars have demonstrated how street-level bureaucrats utilize discretion as they implement exclusionary policies of migration control (Ellermann 2005; Vandevordt 2017) where context as well as individual interpretations can shape the ways that they reconcile policy instructions with human circumstances. As Ellermann (2005) observed in her study of immigration control agents’ compliance and noncompliance with deportation orders, policy implementation is not always faithful to policy directives. This paper expands our understanding of the role of street-level bureaucrats in migration management by examining how caseworkers navigate the implementation of an inclusionary policy of integration.

It is not unusual for street-level bureaucrats to bend the rules or reinterpret certain guidelines as a strategy of good implementation. Street-level bureaucrats are able to rationalize diverging from official policy by asserting that they are the only ones who know what it is really like ‘on the ground.’ Lipsky (2010) attributes this discretion to three characteristics of street-level bureaucrats, which include the complexity of the programs they administer, the

variability inherent in human interaction, and the desire to maintain a position of authority over clients. However, this case draws our attention to a fourth reason. RA caseworkers must rely on their discretion in order to cope with the structural constraints under which they work, most notably inadequate funding and the high-stakes monitoring of paperwork, ultimately pushing them to a practice of paper integration. Because of these organizational constraints, caseworkers are compelled at times to undermine the very purpose of their work, which is ‘to provide for the effective resettlement of refugees and to assist them to achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible’ (ORR 2012). This strategy of paper integration calls into question prevailing assumptions about the depth of support that refugees receive.

When caseworkers have the discretion to implement policy as they see fit, practice begins to diverge from written policy. Caseworkers engage in institutional decoupling (Meyer and Rowan 1977) as they reconcile policy expectations with the needs of their clients and the constraints of their environment. Despite the government’s efforts to establish a uniform program, ‘scripts get written and rewritten in actual institutional settings, through ongoing negotiations and struggle between state actors and their charges’ (Haney 2010: 5-6). As Lipsky (2010) similarly points out, the accumulation of interactions on a micro-level begins to constitute the macro-level organizational environment, which in turn becomes policy in practice.

With the RA as her site of analysis, Darrow (2015a, 2015b) reveals how the ‘complex refugee admissions and allocation structure drives inconsistency and unpredictability down the organizational chain so that the consequences are felt at the point of service delivery’ (Darrow 2015b: 113). While many studies have looked at the experiences of refugees and the outcomes of resettlement services, Darrow instead examines policy implementation within the RA in the contexts of employment (2015a) and housing (2015b). This paper builds on Darrow’s findings to explore how structure and agency oppose one another within the RA, and more precisely how key resources (Sewell 1992), such as paperwork, get mobilized as caseworkers contend with the constraints and expectations of their contracts. By zooming out the analytical lens, I examine how the structure of the USRP affects caseworker agency within the RA. In particular, paperwork serves a critical function shaping the ways that caseworkers interact with both the government and their clients. Intended to be a tool for regulation and governmental oversight, paperwork also becomes a means of subversion. In instances where caseworkers may need to diverge from policy, they can exercise their agency within the constraints of their given structure through paper integration, representing a different reality on paper to uphold the ‘myth’ (Meyer and Rowan 1977) of their compliance.

5. Methodology

This paper is based on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork at an RA in a medium-sized city in California that I call Ridgelawn³. My vantage point from within the RA allowed me to observe how both caseworkers and refugees experienced the USRP. As a result, I came to understand not only how the caseworkers carried out resettlement policy on a daily basis, but also why they implemented it in this way. A local affiliate of Refugee Services United (RSU), the Ridgelawn office consists of a small staff of caseworkers who share a cramped room piled high with case files, papers, and other resources. In my capacity as a researcher and volunteer, I took part in many of the RA’s daily activities, including Cultural Orientation (CO) classes, employment services, meetings, and general office tasks.

My fieldwork was supplemented with access to meetings of local, regional, and state-level stakeholders, which brought together all of the RAs operating in Ridgelawn with representatives from the Department of Social Services (DSS) and convened refugee serving organizations in the region with state-level officials. These meetings were crucial for gauging the generalizability of my findings, as caseworkers expressed shared grievances, RAs and the DSS aired conflicts, and state representatives listened to challenges faced by agencies throughout the area. I was better able to distinguish what was unique to the RSU office and what was a feature of refugee resettlement in Ridgelawn and in California more broadly. Moreover, the RSU office hired formerly resettled refugees as volunteers, temporary employees, and caseworkers who had been the clients of other RAs in Ridgelawn. Stories of their experiences further corroborated my findings. The other RAs in Ridgelawn are local affiliates of different national RAs, providing me with access to approximately half of the nine national RAs subcontracted for refugee resettlement. The landscape of resettlement in Ridgelawn is characterized by refugees from the Middle East, with many joining well-established ethnic enclaves and the support of kinship networks. While differing community contexts and caseload particularities shape the environment in which caseworkers implement resettlement policy, this paper seeks to identify how caseworkers contend with the challenges imposed by the structure of the USRP.

6. Findings

In the following sections, I examine how the organizational environment of the USRP shapes caseworker agency and resettlement service provision. Because of structural constraints, caseworkers must make use of the distance they enjoy as a ‘satellite’ (Haney 2010) to creatively implement policy on the ground. First by discussing broader programmatic limitations, I show how the system of funding and oversight creates pervasive insecurity and vulnerability within the RA. Next, I demonstrate how within this environment, caseworkers must capitalize on opportunities for discretion and resort to decoupling. Caseworkers strategically use paperwork to separate policy expectations from practice, maintaining an outward appearance of effectiveness and efficiency with the dual motives of protecting the RA and attending to the needs of their clients. Within the safety of the RA and through daily case management, caseworkers demonstrate their autonomy as street-level bureaucrats, relying on paper integration to uphold the myth of their compliance.

6.1. The financial instability and vulnerability of RAs

The financial viability of the RSU office was a source of significant angst for the agency’s staff and leadership, as an RA’s budget has direct implications for maintaining a full staff. Given the uncertain future of one of the RA’s supplementary programs and by extension its corresponding revenue, a manager lamented that losing the money for this program would mean he would have to ‘let these poor people go who have worked here for many years.’ Staff job insecurity is not unique to the RSU office. During a meeting of the Ridgelawn RAs, the representative from another RA was asked if one of her staff could attend an upcoming meeting. She replied flippantly, ‘if I still have people,’ meaning if her staff had not already all been laid off within the coming eight weeks. She explained with trepidation how she was attending her office’s budget meeting later that day. In hearing his colleague express her uncertainty, an RSU caseworker added quietly, ‘I’m in the same boat.’ RSU caseworkers

each manage approximately 80 clients per year. A caseworker's responsibilities include client meetings, securing housing, home visits, external meetings with local stakeholders, fielding phone calls, and attending to current and former clients who may stop by unannounced, all while completing the requisite paperwork and case notes that correspond to each interaction. Confronting a growing deficit and a low rate of refugee arrivals, RSU faced the possibility of having to downsize by 80 per cent, which would have had detrimental consequences on their ability to provide resettlement services.

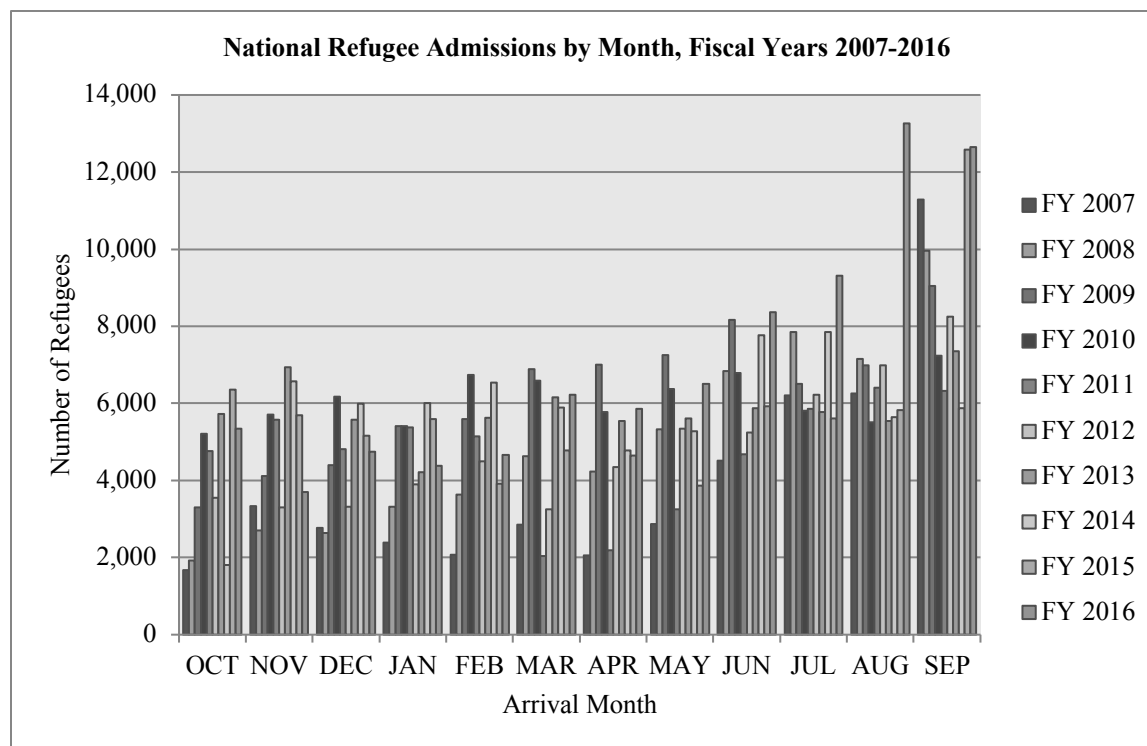
The RSU office struggled in recent years with a static caseload while the RAs around them seemed to grow. The RSU director aired her concern, 'I can barely keep this program running... We're resettling a fraction of what other area RAs are... It's just such a lean staff.' While more clients do bring more responsibility, an increase in client numbers also cushions their budget. The director explained this logic to her staff, 'the more we build up our caseload, the more money we have. It's not necessarily more work. It's an economy of scale.' With RSU's current caseload, the staff time associated with simply providing basic resettlement services had become unsustainable, ultimately contributing to a deficit. It is no secret that RAs are underfunded considering the work expected of them. During a regional meeting, a state official told local RA representatives that he knows that they do not receive enough funding. In fact, he explained how the issue was addressed in a meeting with ORR, where, according to this official, ORR 'didn't have any comments further than acknowledging that our services were underfunded.'

The stability of RAs depends not just on how many clients they receive over the course of the fiscal year but also how those arrivals are spread throughout the year. Inconsistency in arrivals causes revenue to fluctuate, which adversely affects their work when they become stretched beyond capacity during surges in arrivals. As the director of another Ridgelawn RA explained, when arrivals are not distributed evenly throughout the year, 'this has dramatic implications for the staff and the budget.' Such was the case for his agency, which received approximately 40% of the year's arrivals in the final quarter of the fiscal year. That September, he faced an arrival rate more than three times their monthly average.

RAs often experience a surge towards the end of the fiscal year. In February, one of the Ridgelawn RA meetings began with an RA representative asking her colleagues as she rolled her eyes, 'Did you hear the news? This summer is going to be very very busy. Worse than last year.' Another representative responded, 'How can we prepare? We can't hire as if we're going to get a lot. We have to wait and see.' With a laugh she added, 'We told our staff no [summer] vacation!' RAs do not know in advance if such a surge will occur and its impact on their particular agency. Without the forewarning needed to hire more staff in advance, the only strategy this RA had at its disposal was ensuring staff did not take any vacations. During these seasonal increases, caseworkers must manage an often overwhelming caseload. For example, caseworkers must conduct a home visit within twenty-four hours of a refugee's arrival and after thirty days. During a surge, this requirement can pose logistical challenges when caseworkers must balance their office responsibilities with several impending home visits. RSU had to rely on a newly hired temporary employee to conduct the twenty-four-hour home visit for family that lived seventy miles from the office. This family later complained about the uselessness of their home visit, as this 'volunteer' could not answer their questions or provide them with the information they needed about resettlement. Not only do these surges stress the capacity of RAs, they can also jeopardize the quality of resettlement support.

This pattern of surges, also observed by Darrow (2015b), is visible on a national level in Figure 1 when comparing monthly U.S. refugee arrivals from 2007 through 2016, with a particularly notable spike at the end of most fiscal years (WRAPS 2017c).

Figure 1. National refugee admissions by month, fiscal years 2007-2016



(WRAPS 2018)

These fluctuations in arrivals also have an adverse ripple effect that is felt by other local social service agencies, such as the DSS and the Department of Public Health, resulting in significant delays in providing benefits such as food stamps and Medicaid to newly arrived refugees.

Not only is the flow of refugee arrivals inconsistent from month to month, RAs cannot even rely on their yearly allotment of clients set at the beginning of the fiscal year. The RSU staff operated within an organizational cultural of uncertainty, and sudden reductions in arrivals bred distrust between the local RA and its national office. Early in my fieldwork, one of the RSU caseworkers vented about a series of decreases in their projected total, noting how their yearly arrivals were subject to a pattern of cuts. ‘I don’t trust them! They say 300 [clients for the year], and then the next month it’s 250 [clients], and then 200 [clients]!’ For the following fiscal year, the RSU national office informed the Ridgelawn RA that they would receive a notable increase from the prior year’s allocation. While this increase had been discussed with their national office verbally, one of the veteran caseworker was skeptical, saying that he would believe it if they ‘send me an email. Give it to me in writing.’ Unfortunately, his suspicion was justified. Resulting from an error made by the RSU national office, the RA was informed a few months into the new fiscal year that they had lost 44 per cent of their previously allocated clients and corresponding projected revenue. While some staff were surprised and dismayed by the cut, this long-time caseworker assured them cynically that it

happens ever year. This reduction only further fuelled distrust among the staff. It also had serious consequences for the RA's ability to carry out its work. When funding is insufficient and the future of the RA is precarious, caseworkers feel manipulated. Left waiting for several months about whether a supplemental program they had offered for years would be renewed, a caseworker bemoaned, 'they are playing games with me!' Insufficient resources create a climate of vulnerability and anxiety within the RA. The following sections demonstrate how this prevailing uncertainty drives caseworkers to rely on paper integration as a coping mechanism in response to pressures from their funders and their refugee clients.

6.2. A practice of paper integration

The vulnerability experienced by RAs as a result of their financial instability is exacerbated by the way the government and the national RA offices monitor the work of local RAs. The government regulates RAs by connecting the allocation of highly coveted funding to performance. As discussed above, since RAs are reliant on government funding to support their operating expenses, they need to demonstrate compliance so as not to lose their main source of income. This system of funding and oversight coupled with the expectations of the resettlement program constrains caseworkers. As caseworkers become preoccupied with documenting outcomes, the resettlement program gets mired in paperwork to such an extent that the documentation of services ends up superseding the actual provision of assistance. This pursuit of bureaucratic compliance breeds a practice of paper integration.

Oversight of the resettlement program is carried out on a periodic basis by both the national RAs and PRM. In their position as a satellite (Haney 2010) of both the government and their national agency, RAs enjoy some distance from supervision and regulation. Monitoring visits by PRM and the national RA office include a review of client case files, interviews with staff, and visits to a selection of the RA's clients. If concerns arise, monitors can return for follow-up visits, and if issues are not sufficiently resolved, RAs may be shut down. These monitoring visits rely predominantly on the quality and accuracy of the RA's paperwork as a means for assessing the agency's services (Darrow 2015a). For example, between 2009 and 2011, PRM found that of the 136 local RAs visited, one quarter were either noncompliant or partly/mostly noncompliant with their requirements. The most frequently cited issues involved case notes (GAO 2012), signaling the government's reliance on written accounts of service provision.

Given the authority of documentation in the monitoring process and the extent to which RAs feel vulnerable, paperwork becomes instrumentalized as a tool of decoupling for caseworkers to protect themselves. Official documents become what Dery calls a 'papereality,' which is made up of the 'durable reports that store, process, and update images of reality' (1998: 678). Since various forms and documents accompany each step of the resettlement program, paperwork becomes the resource that connects the 'satellite' RA to the state. Caseworkers are able to maintain a façade through their paperwork, constructing an outward appearance of adhering to the terms of their contracts. An RA's documentary requirements are focused around the client case file, which includes dozens of pages of documents, forms, and case notes that detail all interactions and services received.

The work expected of street-level bureaucrats is scripted through official policy (Lipsky 2010). Owing to these strict scripts, caseworkers are able to effectively maneuver decoupling. Since caseworkers know the precise

script for each task and its corresponding document, they can protect their legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977) by representing their work in the expected manner. In doing so, they retain their RA status and serve their clients without facing the sanctions that would typically accompany noncompliance. Indeed it is the extreme vulnerability under which RAs operate that drives caseworkers to resort to paper integration. An RSU caseworker explained how the consequences of unsatisfactory case notes made her anxious, venting that she felt ‘like [a] robot when I write case notes. I don’t like them, [but] we have to. I’m scared!’

Bureaucrats in diverse government contexts make use of documentary requirements to serve other interests (Kligman and Verdery 2011; Hull 2012). While the intended goal of paperwork might be to ‘limit discretion’ (Dery 1998: 678), this paper demonstrates how documents provides caseworkers with the flexibility to do one thing while recording another. Dery contends that the need for paperwork is born out of distrust. If it were not for paperwork, caseworkers could not be trusted by their national RA or PRM. Ironically, in the case of the USRP, paperwork is the very resource that allows caseworkers to exercise agency despite its intent to limit discretion. If caseworkers adhered to the letter of the policy, they and their clients might suffer. Yet, if they documented their services exactly as delivered, they risk being sanctioned or shut down entirely. Paperwork becomes a double-headed resource. Designed to be a tool of government oversight, paperwork can also be mobilized by caseworkers as a tool of subversion.

6. 2. 1. *Self-preservation through paperwork.* Warning her staff about how serious an impending monitoring visit was, the RSU director cautioned that PRM had indeed shut down an RA in North Carolina for a year because of their case notes, adding that their upcoming ‘monitoring visit will chart the course for the future of the agency.’ The director explained that the monitors ‘go to the case notes first’ so they must be up to par. When she asked her staff to reiterate why they keep case notes, a caseworker responded that they write case notes ‘to prove what we have done.’ In the months leading up to this monitoring visit, the RA began closing the office to clients for one full day per week in order to catch up on paperwork. One caseworker who was particularly behind was instructed to focus solely on her case files for two full days per week, time that she would normally spend meeting with her clients.

Of particular concern were the monitors’ visits to their former clients, an aspect over which caseworkers have no control, making them distrustful of these refugees. As one caseworker explained, the monitors visit former clients and ask questions about whether they are familiar with certain documents used in the resettlement process. A client may respond that they have never heard of these forms even though the caseworker knows that the client received and even signed them. This caseworker vented her frustration to the RSU director, ‘we explain [to the client] ten times and then the monitor goes to the client, and they say, “I don’t know.”’ For fear that former clients will misrepresent the RA, a caseworker explained to me how they have to ‘hack in the minds of the clients’ in order to ensure that their clients can accurately communicate the services they received. The director reassured her staff that while they cannot control what clients say during these visits, the monitors will use the case notes to get ‘two sides of the story.’ Therefore, case notes and other documentation become the RA’s only line of defense to prove compliance.

While it is not surprising that the RA’s files are examined from time to time, the process by which the auditing takes place is illustrative of a system that seemingly encourages RAs to engage in paper integration. When RSU was informed of an upcoming file audit, they knew that the auditors could ask to see any of the case files from

the prior twelve months. From the time that they learned of the audit, they were given a couple of weeks to prepare the case files. During this period, caseworkers and volunteers poured all of their energy into reviewing and amending files. Forms were modified, case notes were completed and revised, and documents were added. Rather than attending to their current clients, staff instead spent their time making sure that all forms were accounted for and all information was consistent.

These audits often including the files of clients for whom services have long since ended. Not only are caseworkers spending their time amending paperwork instead of serving clients, the paperwork may be for refugees who are no longer being served by the agency. For example, following a change to their employment program, all enrolled clients were required to have résumés in their case files. Many RSU case files were missing résumés either because the client never created one with the help of the agency or the résumés never made it into their files. Using basic biographical information, rudimentary résumés were created and included in several files. These résumés were solely for the purpose of the audit, created for refugees who were no longer receiving services and would never be able to make use of them.

This same employment program went through a transformation shortly before I began my fieldwork. Following an earlier unsatisfactory audit, the job developer was instructed to create a new job readiness curriculum with certain standardized elements required by the auditors, such as learning objectives, key vocabulary, and discussion questions. Once the new curriculum was complete, the job developer had to perform mock classes for the auditors before they decided the fate of the program. In the end, the revised curriculum was satisfactory, and RSU was able to continue to offer the program to clients and retain the much needed supplementary funding that came with it. However, in practice, the job developer diverged from his performance. In fact, he explained that he simply omitted some of the elements requested by the auditors, having added them to ensure approval. Based on years of experience, he found these extra components unnecessary and awkward in practice.

6. 2. 2. *Appeasing refugee clients.* While paper integration becomes a coping mechanism for caseworkers to deal with an overwhelming burden of expectations, it is also a means for helping certain clients. Instrumentalizing paperwork as a tool to protect the RA is motivated by self-preservation, yet creatively implementing resettlement policy to placate clients can at times put caseworkers further at risk of scrutiny. Though they rely on similar paperwork strategies, the following examples of decoupling have a more selfless motivation. Caseworkers may make decisions that would appear to contradict their professional roles, especially since they are subject to high stakes monitoring. For example, when it appeared that two conflicting program requirements would lead to a delay in providing newly arrived refugees with much needed financial support, the RSU director informed her staff, ‘I’d rather run up a deficit and get in trouble than make clients wait.’ On another occasion, she stated, ‘We can go into deficit if we have to. They can fire me if they want to. We have to serve our clients.’ One issue that shapes the relationship between caseworkers and their clients is the migration experiences of the caseworkers themselves. The majority of the RSU staff is formerly resettled refugees from the same ethnic and linguistic communities as their clients. These caseworkers are members of the same communities and share the salient experience of having come to the U.S. as refugees, knowing first-hand the obstacles and challenges of the first few months in a new country. However, they may struggle with their dual identities as caseworkers and co-ethnics and may not have formal

training in social service provision (Shaw 2014). Caseworkers put themselves at risk in order to address urgent concerns of their clients' wellbeing, at times making themselves more vulnerable to government scrutiny.

The RSU caseworkers are sensitive to the obstacles that refugees face due to barriers to employment and the high cost of living, recognizing that families need whatever financial help they can get early on. For example, though a supplemental employment program is intended to provide support to 'employable' refugees who meet certain qualifications, such as English language proficiency, enrolled clients receive more favorable financial support. The rate at which the monthly benefits of this program increases with each additional family member exceeds what that same family would receive through Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA). As a result, the RA's job developer explained how they prefer to enroll families rather than single cases, since single refugees receive comparable financial support through RCA. This program can become a means for the RA to provide particularly needy families with an extra source of assistance, even if they do not fully meet the eligibility criteria. Caseworkers become the mediators of resources intended to facilitate refugee integration, determining at times who is most deserving of additional support.

While clients are eager to gain the financial help that comes with this employment program, not all of them are as keen on attending all of the requisite job readiness classes. In the past, when clients resisted coming to the class, caseworkers tolerated clients collecting payments without fully completing the corresponding training. For example, during a home visit, a caseworker tried to arrange the second class for an enrolled brother and sister. She recounted later that she was chided by their relative who told her, 'let them rest! Don't waste their time. They just want to get their checks and leave.' The caseworker, fed up with this family who had proven to be difficult, exclaimed, 'fine! They can just get their check and leave next time!' On another occasion, a client who resisted attending the remainder of her classes was told by a caseworker that she needed to come in 'at least one more time for your file.' As long as she could record attendance at one more class, this caseworker would let her client off the hook, disregarding the job readiness component at the core of the employment program. In these situations, paper integration becomes a way to conceal moments where caseworkers concede to their clients.

Unfortunately, this practice of succumbing to client pressure can become a liability. As one caseworker noted, 'last time we closed our eyes. Now it's harder. We need the outcome.' Allowing clients to gain program benefits without also doing the required training made it more difficult for the RA to document services. Caseworkers may rely on paper integration to obfuscate client noncompliance, which often results from refugees managing competing priorities as they settle into their new communities. In these interactions, clients' demands have stood in the way of caseworkers' ability to fully implement resettlement policy, making casework harder. Moreover, client noncompliance raises questions about how well the resettlement program aligns with refugees' immediate needs. The practice of paper integration conceals this potential misalignment, creating an illusion that the URSP provides adequate support to refugees.

7. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how RA caseworkers face a challenging task at best and an impossible task at worst considering the structural constraints of the USRP. Given the pervasive uncertainty, financial precarity, and

vulnerability that shape their work, RA caseworkers are held to an unrealistic standard of uniform service provision. In an effort to protect themselves as well as satisfy their refugee clients, caseworkers rely on paper integration as a coping mechanism. The strategic use of paperwork allows caseworkers to decouple policy from practice in order to uphold the appearance of compliance and ease the bureaucratic burden placed on refugees. Because paperwork is so integral to the monitoring of RAs, documenting various benchmarks and outcomes may at times replace the actual work of resettlement. With few alternatives, RA caseworkers must find ways to exploit the USRP's overreliance on documents or suffer the consequences. Caseworkers ultimately become the prisoners of their own myth of compliance as their paperwork substantiates the prevailing assumption that the implementation of the USRP largely follows policy, perpetuating the status quo. When caseworkers cannot freely disclose programmatic shortcomings for fear of retribution, deficiencies in resettlement services cannot be remedied at a national level.

This paper makes two contributions to the migration literature. First, by examining U.S. refugee resettlement policy in practice, I question whether the USRP fulfills its reputation as a program of integration, which is taken for granted in the migration literature (Bloemraad 2006; Jiménez 2011; Waters and Pineau 2015; Hooper et al. 2016). The strategic use of paperwork creates a gap between policy and reality, making it impossible to know if the USRP is actually facilitating the integration of refugees in the U.S. Caseworkers are incentivized to produce documentation that may falsely corroborate policy directives. Rather than measuring refugee integration, the USRP instead measures RA compliance. Therefore, there is a lacuna in our understanding of what resettlement support actually looks like on the ground and how it may vary from one refugee to another.

Second, by leveraging ethnographic methods, I am able to examine why caseworkers implement resettlement policy in these ways. Building off of Darrow's work on refugee employment services (2015a) and housing (2015b), I examine the broader organizational system within which caseworkers operate. When the objectives of the resettlement program are filtered through an underfunded and overworked bureaucracy, aspirations of refugee integration are transformed into a practice of file management and discretionary services. These conditions and expectations create a never-ending cycle. With limited resources, caseworkers' priorities must shift from serving clients to maintaining paperwork, even if that paperwork is a falsehood.

Caseworkers do not engage in this type of representation maliciously or lightly. Rather, when they come up against structural constraints, caseworkers must find equilibrium between program requirements and the needs of their clients. In general, the priorities of refugees and caseworkers do not differ from the goals of the USRP. Within their first few months in the U.S., refugees seek financial stability, a safe home, and better opportunities for their children, and caseworkers strive to help them get there. To better achieve these goals, RAs need additional funding and a more robust staff. Furthermore, a much-expanded model of case management services may align more realistically with the adjustment period of arriving refugees. By stretching the three-month timeframe of resettlement services to two years, refugees are more satisfied with services and more successful in reaching certain benchmarks of employment, housing, and wellbeing (Shaw and Poulin 2015). Moreover, technology can be better leveraged to track resettlement services and ease the strain of paperwork, freeing caseworkers to spend more time on direct services.

Relying on a practice of paper integration may be the only way caseworkers can currently appease their

fundings and support their clients. Consequently, this modified paper trail reinforces the notion that resettlement only takes ninety days and may provide an inaccurate record of the USRP's success. Policy changes such as President Trump's 6 March 2017 Executive Order exacerbated the challenges faced by RAs. His proposed 120-day suspension of refugee arrivals meant a corresponding halt in RA revenue for one-third of the fiscal year. With reduced caseloads and a heightened state of unpredictability, RAs face leaner budgets and a smaller staff. If RAs are forced to downsize and the mechanisms of oversight remain unchanged, caseworkers will be more vulnerable and strategies of paper integration will become more prevalent. This paper demonstrates that while caseworkers may be able to make use of their agency to assist struggling clients in certain situations, their energy is depleted by bureaucratic concerns and their discretion has limitations. While caseworkers find creative ways to get by, refugees are left with little choice but to rely on an unpredictable and imperfect system.

Notes

1. The UN outlines three 'durable solutions' for refugees: 1) safe return to the home country, 2) local integration into the country of asylum, and 3) third country resettlement (Stein 1983).
2. The RA may use a portion of the per capita grant allocated to the refugee to pay for expenses such as one month of rent and necessary supplies for the home. The remainder goes to the refugee.
3. As per the conditions of research access and UCLA OHRPP IRB approval, pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the RA and all participants in this study.

REFERENCES

- Brick, Kate, Cushing-Savvi, Amy, Elshafie, Samia, Krill, Alan, et al. (2010) *Refugee Resettlement in the United States: An Examination of Challenges and Proposed Solutions*.
https://sipa.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/IRCFINALREPORT_0.pdf
- Brown, Anastasia, and Scribner, Todd. (2014) 'Unfulfilled Promises, Future Possibilities: The Refugee Resettlement System in the United States', *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 2/2, 101–20.
- Bloemraad, Irene (2006) *Becoming a Citizen*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Caron, Rosemary M., and Tshabangu-Soko, Thandi (2012) 'Environmental Inequality: Childhood Lead Poisoning as an Inadvertent Consequence of the Refugee Resettlement Process', *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 23/3, 208-222.
- Darrow, Jessica (2015a) 'Getting Refugees to Work: A Street-level Perspective of Refugee Resettlement Policy', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 34/2, 1-29.
- Darrow, Jessica (2015b) 'The (Re)Construction of the U.S. Department of State's Reception and Placement Program by Refugee Resettlement Agencies', *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 6/1, 91-119.
- Dery, David (1998) "'Papereality" and Learning in Bureaucratic Organizations', *Administration & Society*, 29/6, 667–89.
- Ellermann, Antje (2005) 'Coercive Capacity and the Politics of Implementation: Deportation in Germany and the United States', *Comparative Political Studies*, 38/10, 1219–44.
- Freeman, Gary (1995) 'Modes of Immigration Policies in Liberal Democratic Societies', *International Migration Review*, 29/4, 881–902.
- GAO (2012) *Refugee Resettlement: Greater Consultation with Community Stakeholders Could Strengthen Program*,
<http://www.gao.gov/assets/600/592975.pdf>
- Haines, David W. (2010) *Safe Haven? A History of Refugees in America*. Sterling, VA: Kumarian Press.
- Haney, Lynne A. (2010) *Offending Women: Power, Punishment, and the Regulation of Desire*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Holman, Philip A. (1996) 'Refugee Resettlement in the United States', in David W. Haines (ed.) in *Refugees in America in the 1990s: A Reference Handbook*, pp. 3-27. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Hooper, Kate, Zong, Jie, Capps, Randy, and Fix, Michael (2016) 'Young Children of Refugees in the United States: Integration Successes and Challenges', Migration Policy Institute.
<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/FCD-DemographyReport-FINAL.pdf>
- HRI (2009) 'Refugee Crisis in America: Iraqis and Their Resettlement Experience', Georgetown University Law Center, HRI Papers & Reports, 4. http://scholarship.law.georgetown.edu/hri_papers/4
- Hull, Matthew S. (2012) *Government of Paper*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- IRC (2009) *Iraqi Refugees in the United States: In Dire Straits*. <https://www1.maine.gov/dhhs/oma/irc--report-09.pdf>
- Jacobsen, Karen (1996) 'Factors Influencing the Policy Responses of Host Governments to Mass Refugee Influxes.'

- International Migration Review, 30/3, 655-678.
- Jiménez, Tomás R. (2011) 'Immigration in the United States: How Well Are They Integrating into Society?', The Migration Policy Institute. <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/integration-Jimenez.pdf>
- Kennedy, Edward M. (1981) 'Refugee Act of 1980', International Migration Review, 15/1/2,141-156.
- Kligman, Gail, and Katherine Verdery (2011) *Peasants under Siege*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lipsky, Michael (2010) *Street-Level Bureaucracy*. Updated ed. NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- LIRS (2008) 'The Real Cost of Welcome: A Financial Analysis of Local Refugee Reception', Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. <http://lirs.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/RPTREALCOSTWELCOME.pdf>
- Lugar, Richard G. (2010) 'Abandoned Upon Arrival: Implications for Refugees and Local Communities Burdened by a U.S. Resettlement System That Is Not Working', Committee on Foreign Relations. <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CPRT-111SPRT57483/pdf/CPRT-111SPRT57483.pdf>
- Meyer, John W., and Rowan, Brian (1977) 'Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structures as Myth and Ceremony', American Journal of Sociology, 83/2 340-363.
- Miller, Peter, and Rose, Nikolas (1990) 'Governing Economic Life.' Economy and Society, 19/1,1-31.
- Nezer, Melanie (2013) Resettlement at Risk: Meeting Emerging Challenges to Refugee Resettlement in Local Communities. https://www.hias.org/sites/default/files/resettlement_at_risk_1.pdf
- ORR (2012) 'The Refugee Act', <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/resource/the-refugee-act>
- Sewell, William H., Jr. (1992) 'A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation', American Journal of Sociology, 98/1, 1-29.
- Shaw, Stacey A. (2014) 'Bridge Builders: A Qualitative Study Exploring the Experiences of Former Refugees Working as Caseworkers in the United States' Journal of Social Service Research, 40/3, 284-296.
- Shaw, Stacey A., and Patrick Poulin (2015) 'Findings from an Extended Case Management U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program', Journal of International Migration and Integration, 16/4, 1099-1120.
- Smith, Steven Rathgeb, and Lipsky, Michael (1993) *Nonprofits for Hire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Stein, Barry N. (1983) 'The Commitment to Refugee Resettlement', Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences, 467, 187-201.
- The President of the United States (2015) 'Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2016: Report to Congress.' <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/247982.pdf>
- The President of the United States (2017) 'Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2018: Report to Congress.' <https://www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/docsforcongress/274613.htm>
- Vandevoordt, Robin (2017) 'Between Humanitarian Assistance and Migration Management', Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 43/11, 1907-1922.
- Waters, Mary C. and, Pineau, Marisa Gerstein, eds (2015) *The Integration of Immigrants into American Society*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- WRAPS (2017a) 'Historical Arrivals Broken Down by Region (1975-Present)', Refugee Processing Center.

<http://www.wrapsnet.org/s/Graph-Refugee-Admissions-since-19752617-d5wp.xls>

WRAPS (2017b) 'Map Arrivals by State as of February 28, 2017', Refugee Processing Center.
<http://www.wrapsnet.org/s/Arrivals-by-State-Map3617-fjgx.pdf>

WRAPS (2017c) 'PRM Admissions Comparison Graph', Refugee Processing Center.
http://www.wrapsnet.org/s/Graph-Refugee-Admissions-2017_01_31.xls

Wright, Robert G. (1981) 'Voluntary Agencies and the Resettlement of Refugees', *International Migration Review*, 15/1/2, 157-174.

Zolberg, Aristide R. (1988) 'The Roots of American Refugee Policy', *Social Research*, 55/4, 649-678.

Zucker, Norman L. (1983) 'Refugee Resettlement in the United States: Policy and Problems', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 467, 172-86.