

Impact of Refugees in Rock Island County

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Introduction

The United States has accepted **3 million refugees** since 1975, the most of any country in the world in absolute terms. Most refugees admitted by the United States apply for refugee status from outside of the country (for example, in a refugee camp) and go through a screening process that usually takes between 18 and 24 months. The Department of Homeland Security determines whether to admit applicants based on interviews and background checks. Refugee cases are then referred to resettlement agencies, non-governmental organizations that receive funding from the State Department and the Office of Refugee Resettlement.

According to the United Nations, a refugee is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to their country due to past persecution or a well-founded fear of being persecuted in the future for reasons of "race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion" (1951 UN Refugee Convention). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are currently **26 million refugees globally**. In 2020, the top sending countries for refugees are Syria (6.7 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million), South Sudan (2.3 million), Burma (Myanmar) (1.1 million), Somalia (950,000), Sudan (725,000), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (720,000).

This report focuses on refugees residing in Rock Island County, Illinois. While refugees live throughout the Quad Cities metropolitan area, which also includes Scott County in Iowa, the vast majority of the refugee community is located on the Illinois side of the river because of the location of World Relief Quad Cities, a refugee resettlement organization located in Moline, IL. Since 1999, World Relief Quad Cities has resettled at least **2,553 refugees** in Rock Island County.

World Relief provides services to refugees who are resettled by U.S. State Department, including housing and all essential needs for 90 days. The agency provides additional services to refugee families for 5 years or longer depending on their needs. World Relief also assists secondary migrants, or refugees who were initially resettled in a different city and subsequently moved to the Quad Cities.



Country of origin for refugees resettled by World Relief in Rock Island County since 2002

Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burkina Faso, Burma (Myanmar), Burundi, Colombia, Cuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eswantini (Swaziland), Ethiopia, Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, Iran, Iraq, Nepal, Niger, Russia, Rwanda, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Suriname, Syria, Uzbekistan, Venezuela (source: Refugee Processing Center/WRAPs and World Relief Quad Cities)

Research on Immigrant and Refugee Contributions in the United States

Many recent studies have shown that immigrants and refugees make significant economic contributions to local communities and economies. In Illinois's Congressional District 17, which covers all of Rock Island County in addition to parts of Peoria, Rockford and several rural counties in northwest Illinois, New American Economy found that immigrant residents contributed **\$230.4 million** in taxes. Immigrants in Illinois also have a combined spending power (income minus federal, state and local taxes) of **\$611.4 million** (New American Economy 2019a). Across the entire state of Illinois, refugees contributed more than **\$319 million** in state and local taxes and more than **\$2.6 billion** in spending power (New American Economy 2019b). Refugees in the state of Iowa had **\$423 million** in spending power (New American Economy 2019c).

Refugees tend to have lower levels of education than the general population in the United States and their initial outcomes are characterized by low earnings and high rates of participation in public assistance programs. However, these outcomes improve significantly over time, and in the long run refugees have a significantly positive fiscal impact on federal, state and local governments.

The National Bureau of Economic Research found that refugees receive more in benefits than they pay in taxes for the first 8 years in the U.S., but over 20 years refugees contribute on average **\$21,000** more than they receive in benefits. A 2017 Department of Health and Human Services study found that refugees in the United States contributed **\$63 billion more** than the cost of government expenditures between 2005 and 2014.

“Over 20 years, refugees pay on average \$21,000 more than they receive in benefits.”

“Refugees in the state of Iowa had \$423 million in spending power.”

Illinois

\$ 319 Mi

\$ 2.6 Bi

Tax
Contribution

Spending
Power

Illinois's Congressional District 17

\$ 230.4 Mi

\$ 611.4 Mi

Tax
Contribution

Spending
Power

A recent New American Economy report (2015) found that an estimated 2.3 million refugees in the United States earned a collective **\$77.2 billion** in household income and paid **\$20.9 billion** in taxes in 2015. While recent arrivals initially have significantly lower incomes than the national average, the median income for refugees after 25 years or more in the United States is \$67,000, **\$14,000 more** than the average US income.

The report also found that 84 percent of refugees who had been in the U.S. between 16-25 years became citizens, which generally results in new employment opportunities and higher wages. Research also shows that refugees tend to learn English quickly. New American Economy's data analysis found that only **26.5 percent** of refugees who have been in the country for less than 5 years speak English well, while **53.6 percent** of refugees who have been in the country between 6-15 years speak English very well or fluently.

In 2015, 2.3 million refugees in the United States earned a collective \$77.2 billion and paid \$20.9 billion in taxes

Percentage of the population between the ages of 25 and 64 (working age)



The **New American Economy** report also shows that refugees make significant economic contributions. **77.1%** of refugees are working-age, much higher than the general U.S. population (**47.1%**). Immigrants and refugees are also more likely to start businesses than native-born Americans, and newcomers have often led to the revitalization of shopping districts and neighborhoods in cities and small towns (Mathema et al. 2018). New American Economy estimates that **13%** of refugees are entrepreneurs, and refugee entrepreneurs made **\$4.6 billion** in business income in 2015.

“Refugees are more likely to start businesses than native-born Americans, and refugee entrepreneurs made \$4.6 billion in business income in 2015.”

Inclusive policies across the country

Cities across the country have developed inclusive policies that encourage immigrants and refugees to settle and put down roots. Immigrant and refugee integration plans generally provide loans to support immigrant and refugee entrepreneurs and funding for English-as-a-second-language classes, and encourage civic engagement and programs that build connections between newcomers and long-term residents.



New Americans in Champaign County

Snapshot of the Demographic and Economic Contributions of Immigrants in the County



INDIANAPOLIS IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION PLAN
Becoming a Welcoming City to All Residents

Immigrant Welcome Center

Submitted to Mayor Joe Hogsett
by The Immigrant Welcome Center
FALL 2017

Social and Economic Impact of Refugees in Rock Island County

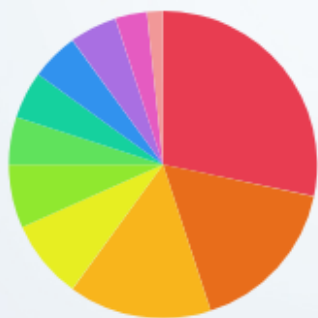
Methodology

To estimate the economic and social impact of refugees in Rock Island County, we identified 69 likely refugee households (165 people total) from the 2014-2018 American Community Survey using the method developed by Capps et al. (2015). We selected foreign-born residents (non-citizens and naturalized citizens) who were born in the following countries: Albania, Bhutan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Nepal, Myanmar, and Vietnam. We also selected individuals who were born in Congo, Malaysia, and Tanzania based on their ancestry and year of arrival.

| Countries of Birth | Year |
|--------------------|-----------|
| Yugoslavia | 1975-2000 |
| Croatia | 1999-2001 |
| Serbia | 2001-2004 |
| Bosnia-Herzegovina | 1993-2004 |
| Vietnam | 1975-1996 |
| Cambodia | 1975-1994 |
| Laos | 1975-1997 |
| Afghanistan | 1978-2015 |
| Bhutan | 2007-2015 |
| Burma/Myanmar | 2007-2015 |
| Iran | 1978-1982 |

| Countries of Birth | Year |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Iraq | 1990-2015 |
| Syria | 2014-2015 |
| Sudan | 1990-2015 |
| Liberia | 1992-2010 |
| Sierra Leone | 1999-2008 |
| Ethiopia | 1978-2008 |
| Eritrea | 2001-2015 |
| Somalia | 1992-2015 |
| Zaire/ Dem. Rep. Congo | 1996-2015 |
| Albania | 1991-1994 |

Country of origin for refugees in the ACS sample



- Myanmar (28.33%) ■ Sudan (16.67%)
- Tanzania (15%) ■ Congo (8.33%) ■ Iraq (6.67%)
- Bhutan (5%) ■ Democratic Republic of Congo (5%)
- Ethiopia (5%) ■ Malaysia (5%) ■ Bosnia (3.33%)
- Others (1.67%)

Others include Albania, Egypt, Eritrea, Nepal, Rwanda, Vietnam

Summary

Weighted, the 69 refugee households in the ACS survey represent 1,594 people, which is approximately 1.1% of the total population in Rock Island County. We found that refugees make significant economic contributions to the local and state economy. We estimate that refugees pay almost \$700,000 in taxes annually, including \$293,000 in state and local taxes, and have an estimated spending power of \$1,663,588. Like other refugees in the United States, the refugee population in Rock Island County tends to have lower levels of education and outcomes are initially characterized by high use of public assistance and low earnings. However, our findings demonstrate that refugee outcomes improve significantly over time.

Refugees Stories

Man Dim
Burma (Myanmar)



Although she struggled at first to navigate life in a new country, four years later Dim is now an incoming first year student at Augustana College who plans to study pre-dentistry. Originally from Burma (Myanmar), Dim's family first moved to Malaysia in search of a better life and opportunities for education. After several years, they were resettled in the Quad Cities by World Relief. Dim described how World Relief and her church, the Grace Myanmar Christian Church in Moline, helped her family with "everything" when they first arrived. Her parents found jobs at Tyson Food and Dim quickly learned English. During her time in high school, she became involved in the National Honors Society and tennis team at United Township and later Moline High School.

Dim teaches Burmese at her church and helps to interpret for her parents and other community members as much as she can. Because her parents rely on her for so much, Dim made the decision to apply for college locally and received a scholarship at Augustana College. Dim hopes to become a dentist after college, in part because she never received dental care while living in Myanmar. After visiting a dentist for the first time after she arrived in the Quad Cities, she became interested in the field and is looking forward to continuing to give back to her community.

Dim remembers how different the Quad Cities seemed when she first arrived in 2016. She and her parents didn't speak any English, and everything seemed strange, including the food, culture, and the way that people lived.

Economic Impact

\$692,764

**Tax
Contribution**

\$293,529

**State/Local
Tax**

\$399,235

**Federal
Tax**

\$1,663,588

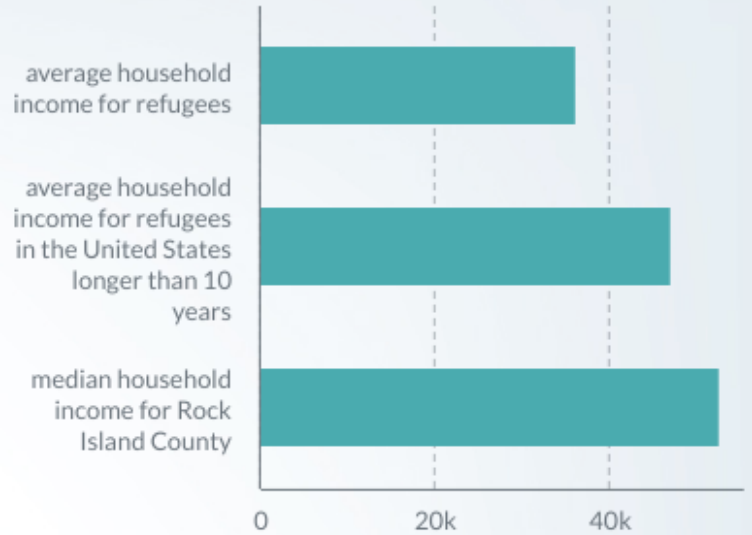
**Spending
Power**

We calculated the spending power of refugees using New American Economy's formula, which involves subtracting income from taxes paid.

Income

The average household income for refugees (**\$36,252**) is **69%** of median household income for Rock Island County (**\$52,630**).

The average household income for refugees living in the U.S. more than 10 years is **\$47,011**, almost **90 percent** of the median household income of Rock Island County



Niyongabire Prosper Burundi



Growing up in a refugee camp in Tanzania, Niyongabire Prosper remembers how small and crowded life felt. Hundreds of thousands of Burundians have fled the small country in eastern Africa in recent decades because ongoing conflicts and political unrest have caused people to lose their homes, farms, and belongings.

In the camps, refugees have very limited job prospects and must leave the camp to find work, but they always have to ask permission from the camp authorities. “There wasn’t much freedom to go anywhere I wanted to go,” Prosper recalled. After 12 years in the refugee camp, Niyongabire was finally resettled in Boise. However, like many refugees who now make the Quad Cities their home, Niyongabire later moved to Rock Island in 2012 to be closer to his parents and siblings. His experience in the Quad Cities so far has been positive. After getting his associates degree at Blackhawk College, Niyongabire continued to work as a direct support professional at Imagined Possibilities where he has been working while attending school. Although working with individuals with developmental disabilities can be challenging sometimes, Niyongabire finds it to be rewarding and feels like he is making a difference in the lives of his clients by bringing a smile to their face every day. Outside of work, Niyongabire is also an advocate and caretaker. On most days and weekends, he helps fellow refugees from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda to navigate the social service system by giving people rides to doctor’s appointments and interpreting in Kirundi, Kiryarwanda, and Swahili. He also helps new refugee overcome obstacles of the new life.

Education

Refugees in the sample are less likely than the total Rock Island County population to have a high school diploma. **65 percent** of refugees over 25 have at least high school diploma or GED, compared to **89 percent** of Rock Island County. About the same percentage of refugees (**22.7**) have at least a bachelor's degree compared to the total population in Rock Island County (**23.2 percent**).

Entrepreneurship

We found that a relatively small percentage of refugees (**6.8 percent**) in Rock Island County are entrepreneurs, at least compared with a **9 percent** entrepreneurship rate for the US-born population.

Work Force

Refugees are more likely than US-born residents to be working age (between the ages of 25 and 64). We found that **61 percent** of refugees in Rock Island County are of working age while **49.7 percent** of the US-born population is. This translates to **much higher rates of labor participation among refugees in Rock Island County**. Refugees over the age of 16 are more likely to be in the workforce than the general population in Rock Island County (**76.9 percent** of refugees, **62.7 percent** in Rock Island County). Refugees in the survey were most likely to work in manufacturing (**36 percent**) and the service industry (**14 percent**). Refugees in Rock Island County also work in the construction, transportation, tourism, childcare, agriculture, and health care fields.

Eh La So Burma (Myanmar)



Eh La So describes her journey to the Quad Cities as “a long story.” A member of the Karen people in Burma (Myanmar), the long-running ethnic conflict between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Burmese government forced Eh La So to leave her home in the mid-1990s.

After spending a decade and getting married in a refugee camp in Thailand, she was initially resettled in New Zealand with her grandparents. Her husband was resettled in the United States, however, so Eh La So eventually moved to upstate New York and to Rock Island in 2014, where she opened the MM Asian Mart on 14th Avenue. Eh La So was inspired to open a grocery by her brother, who was a refugee store owner in Colorado and suggested that she open a similar store in the Quad Cities. He helped Eh La So set up everything in the store, but she now takes care of ordering food from a variety of wholesale companies around the Midwest, while her husband drives to Chicago every week to pick up Asian vegetables. She says that owning a business is a lot of work and can be challenging, but she loves it. She gets to meet a lot of different people who buy groceries in her store, including people from the Karen, African, Mexican, Thai, and Lao communities, and enjoys helping Karen community members fill out forms, make phone calls, and with other small issues they face in the Quad Cities.

Refugee Incorporation



Citizenship

Most refugees in Rock Island County have been in the United States for at least 5 years. Of the refugees who have been in the country for more than 10 years, 23.5 percent have become naturalized citizens.



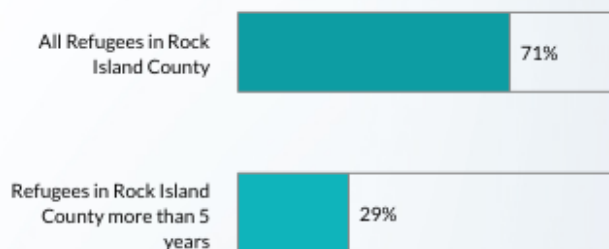
English Language

English language ability also increases over time. While two thirds of refugees in the sample speak English very well or well, after 5 years this number grows to 74 percent of refugees.

Social Services

A relatively high number of refugees use public assistance, although this decreases over time. **64 percent** of refugees in the sample have Medicaid, Medicare or some other form of health insurance for low-income individuals, while **11.5%** have insurance through their employer.

Enrollment in SNAP



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