



Women's Refugee Commission
Research. Rethink. Resolve.



Making Our Way

Resettled Refugee and Asylee Youth in New York City

December 2011



**WOMEN'S
REFUGEE
COMMISSION**

Research. Rethink. Resolve.

Since 1989, the Women's Refugee Commission has advocated for policies and programs to improve the lives of refugee and displaced women, children and young people, including those seeking asylum—bringing about lasting, measurable change.

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Acronyms & Abbreviations

BENL	Basic Education in the Native Language
BRIA	Bureau for Refugee and Immigrant Assistance
CBO	Community-based Organization
CDC	Century Dance Complex
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
ESL	English as a Second Language
FGC	Female Genital Cutting
GED	General Education Development test
IRC	International Rescue Committee
LTW	Learning to Work initiative
NY	New York
NYC	New York City
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
ORR	Office of Refugee Resettlement
OTDA	Office of Temporary Disability Assistance
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
US(A)	United States of America
VOLAG	Voluntary Agency
WRC	Women's Refugee Commission

Executive Summary

The United States has resettled more refugees than any other country annually since it began receiving refugees in 1948. In 2010, the United States admitted 73,293 refugees.¹ Leading nationalities were Iraqi, Bhutanese and Burmese. The majority admitted were young people; over 50 percent were under the age of 24, with nearly 35 percent ages 18 and younger.² On average, refugees are younger than the native-born U.S. population. Also in 2010, the United States granted 21,113 individuals asylum; the leading nationalities were Chinese, Ethiopian and Haitian.³ Asylees (asylum-seekers granted asylum status) are also younger than the native-born U.S. population (the median age was 29 years in 2010).⁴ The leading states receiving admitted refugees were California (12 percent), Texas (11 percent), New York, (6.2 percent) and Florida (5.8 percent). Approximately two-thirds of asylees reside in California (37 percent), New York (15 percent) and Florida (13 percent). Significant numbers of refugees arriving in the United States through the resettlement system come from protracted displacement settings; the average length of displacement worldwide is now 17 years.⁵

The current U.S. Refugee Assistance Program requires that resettled refugees and asylees ages 18 and older become economically self-sufficient soon after their arrival. And yet, the majority of those arriving in the United States are young people who are often unprepared for the challenges ahead of them. Many had few to no opportunities while they were displaced to continue and complete their formal schooling, or to build skills that would help them find work after displacement. Young refugees and asylees in the United States face limited opportunities to catch up on missed years of education or gain relevant work experience, and hence struggle to find living-wage jobs. Young refugees from camp-based protracted displacement contexts often have been the least able to develop transferable job skills to support their return home, local integration or resettlement.

New York City (NYC) receives resettled refugee and asylum-seeking young women and men each year from over 35 countries. Both refugees and asylees are eligi-

ble for support from the federal Refugee Assistance Program. The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) met with refugee and asylee displaced young women and men in NYC from 11 well-represented nationalities from December 2010 through May 2011 to learn about their experiences in displacement and resettlement to the United States. Specifically, we asked them what education, skills training and employment opportunities they were able to participate in while they were displaced to build their capacity to support their study and work transitions. We asked what programs and services would have been helpful to them, and what could be done to better prepare displaced youth for resettlement to the United States, now and in the future. Examining the transitions of resettled youth as they try to integrate into U.S. education systems and labor markets highlights their need to build skills and gain experience while displaced that can support them wherever they may go.

Key Findings

During Displacement

- During displacement, young women and men lack relevant education and training opportunities to build transferable skills.
- Youth with no or low English language literacy are at a disadvantage in their education and work transitions in the United States.
- Orientation programs need to provide youth in transition with usable information on resettlement, immigration, education systems and employment in the United States.

After Resettlement

- Youth ages 18-24 arrive the least equipped to continue their education or become economically self-sufficient after resettlement.
- Displaced young women face barriers to completing their education and finding decent, living-wage work. Barriers include low primary school completion rates prior to arrival, disproportionate burdens for household

work and caregiving, early pregnancy and marriage.

- The most resilient young women and men participate in targeted youth programs for resettled refugees and asylees that addressed their English as a Second Language (ESL) training, academic support and acculturation needs. They attend high schools that had partnerships with refugee youth programs and other non-profit refugee-serving education and employment services providers.
- The least resilient young women and men need specific strategies to address the barriers they face. These youth struggle to continue their interrupted education. They also lack social support through family, peer and adult networks, and need mentors.
- Community-based programs and cultural centers provide needed information and referrals, skills training, mentorship, safe spaces and social support. Young women and men need familiar, safe spaces in the local context to support their acculturation process.
- Social networks of resettled refugee and asylee young women and men with peers and adults are fragmented soon after arrival, but they improve with time and provide needed information, contacts and opportunities.

Key Recommendations

Recommendations in this report are relevant for donors, policy makers and program practitioners serving resettled refugee youth and youth granted asylum in the United States.

Recommended areas for action are based upon interviews with resettled refugee and asylee young women and men, education and employment services providers, resettlement agency and community-based organization (CBO) case workers and staff, educators and social workers.

1. Increase donor support for secondary education and training in transferable job skills in displacement settings. Displaced youth need access to education and training programs so that the time they

spend prior to resettlement, return or integration is not wasted. Building skills while displaced can help youth avoid years of struggle trying to make up for interruptions to their education and work experience.

2. Expand access to more comprehensive and consistent resettlement orientation training.⁶ Orientation training needs to provide relevant, practical information that resettled youth can use to enhance their acculturation and integration into the United States.

3. Extend access to ESL training and make it work-place oriented in displacement and resettlement. Lack of English language skills are the most common and important barrier to finding work in the United States.

4. Prioritize secondary school completion. Resettled youth ages 18 and younger need targeted support to stay in and finish school. Youth ages 18 and older need multiple pathways to graduation. Youth need their high school diploma in the United States to get hired and build a livelihood.

5. Build transferable employment-readiness skills for the United States in displacement settings. Resettled youth ages 18 and older need skills for entry-level work, particularly in the services and health care sectors where there is demand for labor. These include basic skills for getting and keeping a job (and doing well on the job), such as interviewing and self-presentation, punctuality, time management, communications, using a computer and being flexible and adaptable.

6. Match existing skills to job training and employment opportunities in the United States. Youth arrive in the United States with useful existing skills that should be matched individually with education, training and work opportunities related to sectors currently offering employment.

7. Strengthen U.S. education systems to serve refugee and asylee students' specific needs. This requires partnerships between refugee serving organizations and high schools, as well as building school capacities to serve the unique needs of refugee and asylee youth.

8. Cultivate strong partnerships with high schools, nonprofits organizations, CBOs and employers so that resettled youth can further their educational and employment skills. Partnerships between refugee youth-serving organizations and mainstream organizations can bridge the needs of this diverse population with existing education, employment and related support services.

9. Improve employment services and mainstream workforce development programs to serve resettled refugee and asylee youth. Resettled refugee and asylee youth often have additional needs beyond those of immigrant English language learners to build market-ready job skills for the United States. Supplementing job placement and job-specific trainings with job-readiness skills training and work-oriented ESL can improve outcomes of employment services and workforce development programs for these populations.

10. Develop peer and adult mentorship programs to build refugee and asylee youth social networks. Youth become more resilient in resettlement with improved social networks. Most of the leadership, community participation and job opportunities that these young women and men find are through word-of-mouth via their family or peer or adult social networks. They learn about the best-paying jobs through adult mentors who are professionals.

See page 22 for a full list of recommendations.



Social networks and activities can help resettled refugee youth gain self-reliance.

Purpose of the Study

With support from Unbound Philanthropy and the Frankel Family Foundation, the Women's Refugee Commission carried out the Displaced Youth Initiative (2008-2011), a multi-country global advocacy initiative that sought to increase international attention and support for appropriate education, training and employment programs that prepare displaced youth for greater economic self-sufficiency. Understanding displaced youths' access and barriers to education, training and jobs both during displacement and after resettling to the United States, the Women's Refugee Commission is advocating for more effective and appropriate programs through which youth can learn transferable, marketable skills and improve their education and employment outcomes. This report focuses on findings from a case study conducted in New York City between December 2010 and May 2011.

Methodology

This report is based on qualitative and quantitative data from interviews; available U.S. resettlement, education and employment statistics; U.S. Refugee Assistance Program monitoring data; independent evaluations of U.S. resettlement programs; and a literature review on the resettlement transitions of youth in the United States.

The WRC met with a total of 58 female and male resettled refugees and asylees, ages 14-29, who at the time lived in the New York City boroughs of the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens and Staten Island. We conducted 23 in-depth individual qualitative interviews in English and French and four semi-structured focus group discussions in English. Staff of the IRC's U.S. Programs resettlement unit helped us identify the majority of youth for interviews, as the agency provides assistance and services to an estimated 90 percent of recently arrived refugees and asylees in NYC. We included asylee youth who have received services through the Refugee Assistance Program, funded by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Asylees are eligible beneficiaries of the Refugee Assistance Program as long as they sign

up within 30 days of their asylum status being granted.

Although the United Nations defines “youth” as people ages 15-24, this study looked at an age range of 14-29 to take into account significant life-cycle stage issues that displaced youth contend with in their development around the lower and upper bounds of this age range. Once displaced, some young women and men take on additional responsibilities, leading to earlier school drop-out, first pregnancy or marriage. Once resettled, older youth often spend extended amounts of time trying to catch up on years of education and work experience missed during the years spent in displacement. Respondents ages 25-29 included in this study had experienced extensive interruptions to their education and work experience that delayed their transitions to adulthood and economic self-sufficiency after their arrival in the United States.

The high degree of variation in youth respondents’ nationalities, displacement experiences, levels of educational attainment before resettlement to the United States, and education and employment transitions postarrival, demonstrates the diversity of this population and enables qualitative insights into the range of their needs, priorities, perceptions and experiences. We interpreted findings to the greatest extent possible by sex, age, national origin, educational attainment and length of U.S. residency. Findings are not generalizable statistically to the total population of resettled youth in the United States.

We also spoke with staff of New York State institutions, voluntary agencies (VOLAGs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international high schools and community-based organizations (CBOs) that serve refugees. We visited resettlement programs and relevant community centers engaging resettled youth.

We researched statistics on refugees and asylees from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s Refugee, Asylum and Parole System, New York State, and client statistics of relevant service-providing organizations in NYC. We also consulted available NYC census data on immigrants and the foreign born, to better understand the context to which youth respondents have resettled.

We reviewed relevant academic articles, NGO and

CBO program reports, independently commissioned resettlement program evaluations and reports to Congress on the U.S. resettlement system.

Finally, we synthesized findings from the interviews, statistics, literature and document review to identify gaps in knowledge about the access and barriers for displaced youth to education, training and jobs during displacement and after resettlement, and to recommend priority actions to improve relevant programs in both displacement contexts and resettlement in the United States.

Limitations

We met only with resettled refugee youth and accompanied youth granted asylum as they are eligible for services through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) state refugee resettlement assistance programs implemented in NYC. We did not meet with asylum-seeking youth, or unaccompanied minors⁷ who have been granted asylum and are served through the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors⁸ program implemented in Rochester and Syracuse, New York.

Further, married young women are unrepresented in the study, and only two male respondents had ever been married. It is unknown how many married refugees and asylees under the age of 24 there are in NYC.⁹ Existing data sources do not allow us to determine to what extent they are participating in continuing education programs or are working. Early marriage, defined as before age 18, was reported as a common issue in several of the respondents’ communities and countries of origin. From the desk research, we know that marriage often happens earlier in displaced settings, that married girls often disappear from school, and that they are often not actively reached and retained in training and employment programs in displacement, return, local integration or other development contexts. Further research is needed to learn about the education and employment participation and outcomes in the United States of young married refugee and asylees.

Background on Contexts and Populations

International trends in demographic transitions, gender equity, displacement due to armed conflict, refugee resettlement and global economics factored in to the findings of this case study. Demographic trends included youth as the largest group in many low-income, conflict-affected countries, and yet they are the most underserved group in humanitarian and development agendas. As a result of demographic shifts, displacement trends show populations in camp and urban contexts are getting younger. Resettlement trends in the United States have shown younger and more diverse populations in recent years, including more arrivals with low educational attainment and interruptions to their formal education.

Among youth, displaced young women and girls are particularly underserved in their needs for education and training, employment, leadership and community participation. Displaced young women contend with additional barriers to accessing education and employment, and controlling important life decisions, when dealing with early interruptions to their education. Reasons include unpaid domestic work, early pregnancy and marriage, care giving responsibilities, sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, unaddressed trauma as survivors of gender-based violence and marginalization based upon social and economic gender inequities.

At the same time, the global economic recession has worsened unemployment and under-employment, leading to even fewer income-earning opportunities for displaced young women and men and to difficult job searches for those who resettle to the United States.

NYC Context¹⁰

The profile of refugees and asylees in NYC has become more diverse over time. In the 1990s, more than eight in 10 refugees were from Ukraine, Russia, Uzbekistan, Belarus and other former Soviet republics. Today, refugees in NYC come from over 35 countries across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean.

There were 4,099 refugees resettled in New York State in Federal Fiscal Year 2010,¹¹ representing a three percent increase over Fiscal Year 2009. Refugees resettled to New York City numbered 461 in 2010.¹² This number was on trend with about 400 refugees resettled to the city annually since 2001. The number of asylum seekers granted asylum has consistently surpassed the resettled refugee population in NYC annually.¹³ In contrast, in New York State overall, the number of asylees is about one-third the number of resettled refugees. Refugees, asylees and immigrants tend to migrate out of NYC at moderately high rates after their arrival. Refugees and asylees often leave for parts of New York State, such as Rochester, Syracuse and Utica, or other states in the United States where they have larger social networks. They also leave the city because of structural problems associated with urban poverty. Refugee and asylee youth may be disproportionately affected by a lack of needed resources in many NYC public schools. NYC schools strain to serve an already large number of students with interrupted formal education. With the largest and most diverse immigrant population—NYC educators require adequate “time and tools to address the extraordinary needs of refugee students.”¹⁴

The federal Refugee School Impact Grant that provides support to NYC schools receiving refugee and asylee students was cut in fiscal year 2011 by the New York State agency managing federal funds. Cutting the Refugee School Impact Grant could negatively impact the high school graduation rates of refugee and asylee students if services cannot continue to be funded through other sources to meet these students’ specific educational and transitional needs.

Profiles of Displaced Young People in NYC

Learning about the diverse profiles of resettled refugees and asylee young women and men in NYC helps us advocate for services to meet their specific needs—which are distinct from those of immigrants—and to challenge assumptions about them. They are not a homogenous group, even when from the same origin country. Tom Kuhlman, Faculty of Economics and Econometrics, Free University of Amsterdam, identifies at least six key factors related to the integration of re-

settled refugees¹⁵:

- **Demographic characteristics:** sex, age, ethnicity, educational attainment pre-arrival, English proficiency level, marital status, number of children/dependents.
- **Flight-related characteristics:** cause of flight, type of movement, attitude toward displacement, displacement context (e.g., camp, urban).
- **Host-related characteristics (in displacement and resettlement):** economic conditions, ethnic composition, attitudes towards refugees within host society, access to social services, use of education and employment services provided by resettlement and mainstream agencies.
- **Residency characteristics:** length of residency and secondary migration within the United States, household composition.
- **Noneconomic aspects of integration:** adaptation stresses and acculturation characteristics; presence or lack of social support, and membership in social networks (ethnic, religious, other).
- **Awareness of legal status and rights:** awareness of status and the rights, protection, assistance and services that refugee status and asylum do and do not provide. Understanding of how to apply for U.S. citizenship.

In the interviews, the Women’s Refugee Commission spoke with equal numbers of female and male refugees and asylees, ages 14-29. Respondents’ countries of origin included Afghanistan, Bhutan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Haiti, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Myanmar, Sierra Leone and Tibet. Most refugees had been processed for resettlement while living in refugee camps outside their country of origin. Most asylees had arrived on their own from urban contexts in their countries of national origin; most had spent varying lengths of time internally displaced from their homes. Refugees had transited through one to three countries prior to their resettlement to the United States, and had been displaced from their countries of origin for between six months and 14 years prior to their arrival. Displacement had separated numerous refugee and

Key Definitions

Refugee: under the 1951 Convention, a refugee is legally defined as: “A person who is outside his/her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of his/her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.” *

Asylee: “Asylees are individuals who, on their own, travel to the United States and apply for/receive a grant of asylum. These individuals do not enter the United States as refugees. They may enter as students, tourists, businessmen or even in undocumented status. Once in the U.S., or at a land border or port of entry, they apply to DHS [Department of Homeland Security] for asylum, a status that will acknowledge that they meet the definition of a refugee and that will allow them to remain in the United States. Individuals granted asylum are eligible for ORR [Office of Refugee Resettlement] assistance and services. (Note that asylum applicants are not eligible for ORR assistance and services. The only exception is for certain Cuban and Haitian entrants. See section on Cuban/Haitian Entrants).**

Immigrant: a person who takes up permanent residence in a country other than his or her homeland. ***

* Source: UNHCR.

** Source: Office of Refugee Resettlement, Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services.

*** Source: UNHCR.

asylee youth from their parents for up to 16 years.

The length of time since arrival in the United States ranged from two weeks to 10 years, with an average of two years. Longer periods of residence correlated with improved economic status for some, but not all, particularly given effects of the economic recession on labor markets. The number of working adults in respondents’ households ranged from one to four. The number of people living together ranged from three to 10 people residing in a one- to four-bedroom apartment. A high proportion of respondents reported having at least one

adult in their household who was receiving Social Security disability or unemployment benefits. More male adults were working in these households than female adults, and more female than male adults were reported to have physical or mental functional impairments that prevented them from working.

With the exception of two refugee males, no one in the study had ever been married. Only three males and two females reported having children. Still, all young women and some young men shared that they had regular responsibilities to care and help provide for younger siblings, parents, grandparents and ill or disabled family members. Several males and older female youth also contributed financially to the care of relatives still in their home country or a host country.

At the time of the study, about half of the young women and men interviewed were in high school, and the other half had graduated, passed the General Education Development (GED) test or planned to take the GED in the next year. In-school youth were attending international schools, such as Brooklyn International High School, Manhattan International High School, Manhattan Day and Night School or Ellis Preparatory School in the Bronx. Few reported having a computer at home or regular access to a laptop. About half in the study, mostly males, owned a cell phone. All out-of-school youth ages 19 and older were struggling to find part-time or full-time paid work or to apply to college.

Profiles of respondents who appeared more resilient in the resettlement process were found to share characteristics. Most arrived understanding at least basic English, and often had parents with higher levels of educational attainment. They were currently living with one or both of their birth parents, had suffered shorter periods of separation from them, and had spent at least some time with them in the United States. They also tended to come from households with a larger number of working adults paying bills, or had one or two working parents with earnings higher than the minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour. They also were actively participating in programs for resettled youth that cultivate leadership and community participation opportunities, and academic preparation for college.

Young women and men in the study who struggled more in the resettlement transition also shared some distinct characteristics. This group had a higher proportion of males and females ages 19 and older, with more severely interrupted formal education. They had arrived in the United States with limited or no English proficiency. They reported limited capacity to participate in programs for resettled youth and had accessed few resettlement assistance services after their first three to six months in the United States. Many had extensive unmet ESL training needs even two years after their arrival. Struggling refugee and asylee youth mostly lived without one or both of their parents because of geographic separation or loss. Those with one or both parents in the United States who were employed coped with working long hours, night shifts or two or more jobs. These parents arrived in the United States with mostly low levels of educational attainment. Struggling young women and men in the study reported fewer working adults in their households, and greater prevalence of adults on disability. Struggling youth over age 19 who finished high school before they arrived in the United States still faced language barriers and capacity constraints in finding work or applying to college. Many were juggling heavy responsibilities to combine work and studies with caring for children in the household, the ill or elderly, and providing financial help to relatives still in their home country. Some more recently arrived young women in this group preferred to stay close to home to avoid travel expenses and perceived safety risks in using buses and subways to travel around NYC. This limited their searches for training or job opportunities to those located in their immediate or nearby neighborhoods, which were often economically marginalized areas within the city.

Whether they thrived or struggled in their initial years in the United States, the young women and men we spoke with brought many strengths to their new lives. Strengths included courage, a strong work ethic, strong values, empathy for the struggles of others, multiple languages and enriching cross-cultural perspectives on their studies, work and social lives.¹⁶ Recognizing their strengths is vital for seeking positive program approaches that meet the unique needs of these diverse young women and men in both displacement and resettlement contexts.

Findings: What We Learned from Young People

In Displacement: Limited Access to Programs and Opportunities

Education and Training

In displacement settings, particularly camp-based settings, inadequate and irregular food provisions negatively affected youths' capacity to study where they had opportunities to do so. Most, however, said they lacked opportunities to continue their formal education once they became displaced. "School" in displacement contexts meant different things to different young women and men. For some displaced in urban areas, it meant formal school with a standardized curriculum. For others it meant religious school. Many youth in camps did not have access to formal secondary schools. For these youth, "school" often meant nonformal education. For example, one Burmese young woman had not gone to a formal school while in the refugee camp, but had read books and math textbooks there with other young women. This helped her transition to her studies in the United States. Still, camp-based and urban displaced youth alike often viewed with skepticism the idea that nonformal education and training would be useful or recognized in places of return or resettlement.

Interruptions to respondents' formal education ranged from six months to several years. The Burmese appeared to have the most interrupted education, along with Liberians, both female and male. Pre-arrival educational attainment levels ranged from the equivalent of the third grade through bachelor degrees. Iraqis arrived with the highest education levels. In urban displacement contexts, those with the equivalent of high school diplomas, such as Iraqis in Syria, were not permitted to pursue higher education in their host countries prior to resettlement to the United States.

English Language Instruction

"English was taught, but I did not learn it."

Sierra Leone male

The range of previous levels of English proficiency varied across displacement contexts and respondents'

Program Example: IRC English as a Second Language Instruction, Thailand and Malaysia

The IRC is providing ESL courses in three pilot sites in Thailand and Malaysia for refugees approved for resettlement. The time between when refugees are notified that they will be resettled and when they travel to the United States is one to three months. During this time, the IRC has been able to provide 60 hours of ESL instruction in a four-week program. Topics covered include English language greetings and introductions, the alphabet, numeracy for counting and using phone numbers, directions and employment-related concepts to help participants prepare for job interviews, as they must find work soon after their arrival in the U.S. The program has shown a high attendance and completion rate, and students have achieved marked improvements over the four-week period, with many students having begun the course with no knowledge of English. Challenges to the program have included camp sprawl (informal expansion), poor weather conditions, low literacy rates and vision impairment. Staff found that 25 percent of students needed vision correction to read, so they collaborated with another civil society program to provide all of the students with glasses. Trainers found that providing ESL before refugees resettle to the U.S. enhances knowledge retention and skills building, as students can study in a safe environment before they have to face the stressors of resettlement and starting a new life in the United States. In fiscal year 2011, IRC's ESL pilot projects served 13,036 resettling refugees in Thailand, with a 99 percent student attendance rate.*

* Source: Presentation by Jason Crislip, Cultural Orientation Coordinator, IRC Resettlement Support Center East Asia, December 9, 2011.



origin countries. Some displaced young people had the advantage of English studies as a required subject in formal school in their home countries before they were displaced. For the youth who had access to English language classes in camps or host countries after displacement, many noted that the teaching method was ineffective, as it focused on rote memorization rather than a facilitated learning conversation.

Some Bhutanese respondents reported developing advanced English skills due to a bilingual focus in refugee camps in Nepal. Camp-based displaced young women and men across host countries found it extremely helpful to have had learned some basic English in classes provided in camps. However, they said that the classes would have been more helpful if they had been of adequate length for the students to achieve a minimum basic speaking and listening proficiency.

Employability and Vocational Skills Training

Employability and vocational skills trainings engaging young people in displacement settings were limited, and varied depending upon NGO presence. Many, particularly young women, were unaware of employability or vocational training provided in the camps or urban areas while they were displaced. Vocational training opportunities that respondents had heard about seemed inaccessible or irrelevant to them. Young women and men both self-selected out of the few available programs given the time and opportunity costs to participate relative to the likelihood that training would lead to actual paid work. Some also self-selected out of programs assuming that the topics would not be useful for them once they returned to their home country or resettled abroad.

Few displaced young people the Women's Refugee Commission spoke with found opportunities to study and earn income at the same time. Respondents consistently reported a lack of opportunities for building new skills or furthering existing skills. Missed years of education and little to no work opportunities led to time "wasted" while youth did not know what each year in displacement would bring or how to plan for the future.

Program Example: IRC Overseas Cultural Orientation, Thailand Refugee Support Center

The IRC provides 20 hours of classroom instruction in cultural orientation in the nine camps bordering Myanmar to refugees who are preparing for resettlement to the United States. Thirty-two trainers (25 classroom-based) who also speak needed languages teach in all nine locations, with two classrooms per location. A Cultural Orientation Monitoring Officer visits the classrooms on a rotating basis and performs consistency checks in the content and pedagogical approach. Classes are offered separately for age groups 8-12, 13-17 and 18 and older. Child care is offered at every site. The pedagogical approach is participatory and experiential, including an initial exercise asking participants to write a list of what they want to know about resettling to the USA to ensure that the course content helps them find answers to their questions. The course includes a Cultural Orientation handbook as a long-term resource, classroom visuals and group games and exercises. Demonstration sites to show a U.S.-style kitchen and bathroom* help trainers teach food storage, cleaning and proper storage practices for cleaning supplies. The IRC is pioneering approaches to connect overseas and U.S.-based cultural orientation training and to coordinate learning objectives for resettling refugees, providing support before and after their arrival in the United States.**

* These are without electricity or water in the sites and for demonstration purposes only.

** Source: Presentation by Jason Crislip, Cultural Orientation Coordinator, IRC Resettlement Support Center East Asia, December 9, 2011.

Employment

"No matter what skills you come with, here you start from scratch."

Liberian female

Young people we spoke with who came from encamped settings said they had no employment opportunities, and limited to no exposure to livelihood programs. After

having spent many years in refugee camps with heavy dependence on aid, refugees from protracted displacement settings, such as the Burmese, found few incentives to participate in education or training programs given the uncertain links with real employment. Some young women in urban displacement settings had found temporary, informal paid work in child care, cleaning or petty trade. A few of the older male youth had also found limited informal work doing manual labor or petty trade.

Before coming to the U.S, the youngest males and females in the study had the fewest paid work experiences or opportunities to date. Some of the older, more experienced young women and men had worked before they were displaced in petty trade or temporary jobs, or had assisted shopkeepers in the informal economies of their home countries. Among those who had previously worked for pay, females reported tutoring, engaging in petty trade, selling vegetables or fruit, hair braiding and administrative office work. Males had found jobs in woodworking and plumbing businesses, a computer shop, a shoe shop, a bakery and a salt mine. Some females and males from rural backgrounds had experience in farming before they were displaced. With the exception of Iraqis, most said that, looking back, the skills they had the chance to develop before and during displacement were not adequate to help them find secure work in the United States.

Cultural Orientation Training Pre-arrival

Respondents' access to cultural orientation programs pre-arrival was inconsistent, ranging from no orientation training to one hour to three days. Displaced youth about to resettle to the United States need practical, usable information on resettlement, immigration, education systems and employment in the United States. An IRC pilot program is working to improve and expand cultural orientation training offerings.

After Resettlement: What Worked for Resettled Refugee and Asylee Youth in NYC?

Facing new challenges in an unfamiliar environment can be daunting. Still, refugee and asylee youth arrive in NYC with the drive and energy to succeed. But “[t]o thrive, they need the help of educators.”¹⁷

Lessons learned from programs serving resettled refugee and asylee youth in the United States help us better understand the education, training and employment needs of youth in displacement. What worked best for refugees and asylees after their arrival in NYC included targeted refugee resettlement youth programs; partnerships between the Refugee Assistance Program implementing agency and their high schools, or their schools and nonprofit service providers; homework help and college preparatory support; education offering alternative pathways to graduation for those 19 and older; parental support; mentorship; community-based programs and cultural centers; employment readiness training; and employment services. Building social networks with peers and professional adults both in and outside of their social circles brought new information, exchange and contacts that improved both their education and employment prospects. Changes in traditional gender roles and identities opened up spaces for young women in particular to seize new opportunities and build confidence.

Youth Programs

The most “resilient” and thriving young women and men in the study participated in special youth programs for refugee and asylee young people in NYC, such as the IRC Youth Program. They also had gained experience in leadership and community participation through involvement in youth leadership training programs and working as volunteers, peer counselors or even case workers with community-based organizations and cultural centers to help others from their own origin country or region.

Program Example: IRC Youth Program*

IRC has offered a youth program since 1999 to support the cultural adjustment, personal growth and educational development of refugee and asylee youth.

Three main objectives of the program work to empower and build better life options for their clients:

1. Resettled refugee youth develop the academic and life skills necessary to positively transition to adulthood.
2. Refugee parents and families are effective supporters of their children's education and development.
3. Educators and community service organizations provide opportunities to support the positive development of refugee youth.

From 2010 to 2011, the IRC youth program enrolled 153 students from 28 nationalities, who speak 24 languages. The top countries of origin were Bhutan (17%), Guinea (16%), Tibet (14%), Iraq (9%) and Liberia (7.5%). Activities of the program include academic studies, creative arts and recreation, coaching through mentorship, life skills training and leadership development. The program works with families through its activities with schools, conducting workshops with parents and planning activities with students. The program engages the schools and communities where refugee and asylee youth live by providing resources, teacher training workshops and technical and financial support to community-based organizations. Social workers volunteer as academic coaches for refugee and asylee youth served by the program. One social worker coached up to 30 young people three days per week. She worked to link students to in-school and after-school educational services and programs. Although her focus was working with young people, she also engaged parents and families as an integral part of supporting the young clients' educational transitions.

* Source: IRC Youth Program Factsheet.

Strategic Partnerships Between Resettlement Agencies and Schools

"I am going to school safely and getting a better education."
Bhutanese female

In-school youth we spoke with attended one of the city's international schools, such as Brooklyn International High School,¹⁸ Manhattan International High School¹⁹ or Ellis Preparatory Academy²⁰ in the Bronx. These students greatly appreciated the cross-cultural competencies of teachers and learning materials, and the opportunity to study in a safe environment with other international students.

Partnerships funded through the Refugee School Impact Grant between schools and Refugee Assistance Program implementing agencies helped support educators in providing services to meet the specific needs

of refugee and asylee students. Services include ESL and Students with Interrupted Formal Education programs. Educators said working with refugee and asylee youth is a learning process, and they benefited from capacity development and cultural competency training funded through the Refugee School Impact Grant. Youth who seemed to particularly thrive attended schools with specific refugee student assistance programs funded through the Refugee School Impact Grant, such as Brooklyn International High School. In its 2010-2011 Annual Progress Report, the New York City Department of Education gave Brooklyn International High School top scores in student progress, student environment and school environment.²¹

School Example: Brooklyn International High School

Refugee and asylee youth at Brooklyn International High School are between the ages of 12 and 21, and come originally from Bhutan, China, Cuba, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Myanmar, Nepal, Sierra Leone and Tibet. Students ages 15 and older are placed in the ninth grade upon enrollment. Students' previous education experiences range from consistent formal schooling to an inconsistent mix of formal and nonformal education, with up to seven years of interruption.

Refugee and asylee students at Brooklyn International High School are involved in all school activities, including student government, UNICEF club, peer educator training, anti-bullying club and "Soccer without Borders" on Saturdays and in the summer. Students do not have separate ESL classes, as "every class is an ESL class."* A "zero period" in the morning focuses intensively on the alphabet, phonics and other English skills for students that need this support.

Brooklyn International High School works from a "family model" that emphasizes building in-school peer networks and social support, parental involvement and a sense of community, alongside academics.

It has been particularly challenging for students who come from rural camp-based environments to New York City to acculturate. "One Burmese [student] arrived speaking no English, and no one in the school at the time spoke his language. Kids take these kids under their wings."*

All refugee students at Brooklyn International High School receive academic mentoring and were on track to graduate at the time of interviews. One student last year had almost dropped out of school because she had to work and support her family, but the school successfully counseled her to continue her studies.

"We have to develop relationships with the kids, and the kids with each other, where they trust us. Trust is the biggest thing, and the hardest."*

After-school programs available to refugee and asylee youth at Brooklyn International High School include those implemented by the IRC youth program funded through the Refugee School Impact Grant, such as the Saturday Learning Series for homework help, the Leaders in Training and the Summer Academy.

Brooklyn International High School has been receiving refugee students in connection with the IRC for three years, and therefore does not yet have a lot of experience with refugee youth postgraduation. Last year, though, one student received a full scholarship to college, and two others are also now in college.

"The biggest conversation at BIHS [Brooklyn International High School] is what students plan to do after they graduate."*

* All quotes from interviews with Brooklyn International High School teachers, November 17, 2010.

Alternative Education for Youth Ages 19 and Older

Postarrival, resettled youth who enrolled in public high school at or below age 18 were able to continue until age 21. However, youth who were older than 18 on arrival in the United States were unable to enroll. Those ages 19 and over who had not finished high school before being resettled had "aged out" of the U.S. secondary education system on their arrival and had to seek alternative options to continue their education.

These respondents appreciated referrals by IRC Youth program and Employment Services staff to alternative education programs that would allow them to combine study with work, as well as provide transitional support for applying to jobs and college. Continuing education options that worked well for youth 19 and older included school models that offer multiple pathways to graduation, flexible early morning, evening and weekend class times and convenient locations.

School Example: Manhattan Comprehensive Day and Night School

Manhattan Comprehensive Day and Night School is a public NYC school dedicated to serving students ages 17-21 whose education has been interrupted, whether recent immigrants or long-time NYC residents. The school offers classes from 8:30am to 10:30pm Monday through Friday and on Sundays to provide flexibility for students who are combining studies with adult responsibilities. The school provides English language immersion for English language learners, as well as college preparatory and Advanced Placement courses. A nonprofit partner, Comprehensive Development, Inc., provides in-school tutoring support, college and career planning, scholarship information, legal assistance, housing and medical referrals, and postgraduation follow-up services.

Employment Readiness

A large proportion of refugees and asylees who arrive in the United States aged 19 and older would benefit from alternative education opportunities to complete their high school education at the same time that they train for jobs that are in demand in the United States workforce. Initiatives that offer older students multiple pathways to graduation improve completion rates, prevent dropout and facilitate entry into the workforce. An evaluation of the “Learning to Work” initiative of the NYC Department of Education submitted to the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation found that learning-to-work programs have been more successful at graduating “over-age, under-credited” students than traditional high schools. According to a White House press release, “The FY2010 budget will support the development and scaling of effective dropout and recovery models—such as transfer schools that combine education and job training for high school students that are far behind.”²²

Workforce Development Programs

A limited offering of workforce development programs

Program Example: CAMBA

Illiteracy is a barrier to achieving minimum livelihoods.
CAMBA staff member

CAMBA provides resettlement and workforce development services to about 100 refugees each year in Brooklyn, in addition to its immigrant clientele. The resettlement program functions through New York State and Matching Grant* funding. CAMBA's education and youth development, economic development and workforce development programs help refugee and asylee clients work toward greater self-sufficiency within six months of their arrival in the U.S.

The organization also offers a short training course in customer service. The workforce development program equips young people with the minimum skills to fill out a job application and to navigate phone and in-person interviews. Employability trainings are guided by job placement as a first goal, usually in retail and customer service.

Over 40 percent of those CAMBA serves are between the ages of 19 and 24. They work with young people with low levels of education using a “learning to work” approach to help them feel comfortable with the culture of work and searching for work, with a focus on soft skills training. CAMBA offers workplace ESL classes, as language skills can help clients secure jobs more quickly. CAMBA did not have funding at the time of the study for Basic Education in the Native Language (BENL) programs for those who have not become literate in their first language.

* “The goal of the Matching Grant program is to help qualifying populations attain economic self-sufficiency within 120 to 180 days from their date of eligibility for ORR-funded services. Self-sufficiency must be achieved without accessing public cash assistance.” http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/match_grant_prg.htm, accessed October 23, 2011.

in NYC, such as CAMBA, also provided targeted employment readiness training to refugee and asylee youth. More can be done to strengthen the links between training and job placement for these populations.

Mainstream youth workforce development programs in NYC, such as STRIVE, could build stronger outreach to refugee and asylee young women and men in the 19 and over age range to build skills for “living wage employment and societal re-integration.”²³

Employment Services

Refugees and asylees ages 18 and older are expected to become economically self-sufficient within the first six to nine months of their eligibility for assistance through the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Youth in

Program Example: IRC Early and Extended Employment Services

Early Employment Services: The IRC provides vocational counseling, résumé preparation, job search and placement services, and financial assistance for basic needs with the goal of helping refugees find their first job in America and achieve early economic self-sufficiency.

Extended Employment and Social Services: This extended employment program assists refugees for up to five years from their date of arrival with job preparation, placement, training and transitional support.*

IRC Employment Services help clients secure their first job in the U.S. and job upgrades. It serves participants up to five years. Clients have found work in:

- Factories, manufacturing and warehouses
- Service industries, hotels and restaurants
- Stores, as sales clerks, cashiers or stock people (e.g., for Whole Foods)
- Moving companies, as loaders and packers
- Construction and demolition

The program places refugee and asylee young women in the same industries as young men. Employment services staff also make referrals to GED, vocational education or career planning programs.

* Source: IRC website, <http://www.rescue.org/us-program/us-new-york-ny/programs>, accessed October 25, 2011.

the study accessed employment opportunities mainly through their social networks or through special resettlement assistance-related employment services. Several refugees and asylee respondents 18 and older were clients of the Employment Services program of the IRC Refugee Resettlement Unit in New York.

Community-based Programs and Cultural Centers

“Playing soccer together keeps us away from trouble.”
Liberian male

Community-based programs and cultural centers provide needed information and referrals, skills training, mentorship, safe spaces and social support to help ease the acculturation and integration process for resettled youth in NYC. Community cultural centers, such as the Arab American Family Support Center,²⁴ Sauti Yetu,²⁵ the Century Dance Complex²⁶ and Women for Afghan Women,²⁷ provide vital places where young women and young men interact, learn new skills and access needed services. Center activities create safe opportunities for leadership and community participation. Youth said that cultural centers provide places to interact with their peers, feel a sense of belonging and comfort, get help if facing violence in the home and engage in traditional music, dance and sports.

Youth that did not have access to ethnic, national or region-based cultural centers in NYC said they wished they could find a culturally familiar, safe place to interact with peers and adults from similar backgrounds.

Social Networks

A study on how young resettled refugees spoke about their own well-being found that relationships and social networks mattered vitally to their social and economic transitions from displacement to resettlement.

[Y]oung people were far more likely to talk of their degree of connectedness within their family, their own ethnic community, their friends and within [society] at large.²⁸

Resettling refugees and asylees seek out and create

Program Examples: Sauti Yetu and Century Dance Complex

Sauti Yetu:

Sauti Yetu is a CBO that works with West African immigrant, refugee and asylee women and girls and their families, in NYC. These programs address family violence prevention and education, reproductive health and women's rights, leadership capacity building for African women, cross-cultural competency training for service providers and female genital cutting (FGC). Services the organization provides include:*

- Information and referrals for crisis intervention.
- Free legal consultations on marriage, violence against women and immigration issues.
- Information and referrals for jobs, training programs, résumé writing, English tutoring.
- Court accompaniments and translation assistance.
- Information and referrals for access to shelters and housing.
- Community outreach, awareness-raising campaigns and advocacy.

Century Dance Complex

The Century Dance Complex, on Staten Island, was founded by a young Liberian woman and developed with multi-year financial and technical capacity development support of the IRC. It is a well-managed, safe and creative space for young women and young men, and particularly adolescent girls. CDC programs allow young people to focus on developing their talents for dance and drumming, while the learning life skills of discipline, rules and responsibility. It is considered "a second home for young West Africans whose parents are not home much because of work." **

* Source: <http://www.sautiyetu.org/viewer/home/whatwedo.asd/vts/design001>.

** Interview with Rose Kingston, Executive Director and Founder of CDC, May 24, 2011.

social structures to support their own self-reliance. They turn to social networks for emotional support and material resources, guidance and employment contacts. Recently arrived young women and men in this study without adequate social networks in NYC found themselves lacking needed social support and information. Peer-, school- and work-related social networks tended to grow with the length of residency in the city. Out-of-school young adults faced greater difficulty than in-school youth in building peer networks. Several out-of-school young men built their social networks through teammates befriended on the soccer field. Family, peer relationships and community relationships are critical for refugee and asylee youth to complete their education and work toward economic self-sufficiency.

Membership in formal networks for in-school refugee and asylee youth, such as the IRC Leaders in Training,

offered these young women and men opportunities to socialize with others who have also survived war and had to leave their country. Leaders in Training members hear and share information about internships and colleges through the program, and the group helps them find out about different careers and how to prepare for them. They visit colleges, learn about college application processes and about skills needed to get a job.

Most respondents, female and male from all backgrounds, look to their family and peer networks to find work.

"There are many ways to find a job, but only social networks work in my experience. "

Iraqi male

“Bridging” Relationships

Efforts to build social networks go beyond national or ethnic communities. It is critical for young refugee and asylee males and females to have opportunities to form “bridging” relationships with those outside of their country or ethnic networks to support exposure to a wider array of education, employment and life options. Bridging relationships bring essential information exchange, new ideas, contacts and sometimes new directions and opportunities.

For one Burmese refugee young woman, her first bridging relationship came through interactions with an American English language instructor.

“I was able to have a dialogue with him like friends and this helped me think that other Americans would understand me.”

Burmese female

One Iraqi young man felt fortunate when an American professional whom he met through his sponsor offered him an office job. He wished that more professionals would take a chance on hiring resettled refugees and asylees:

“We need more people to say, “Come work for me.” We need luck. People like me are just waiting for a chance to show up.”

Iraqi male

Mentorship as a bridging relationship emerged from the interviews as a largely unmet need, but a highly effective way for displaced youth to gain practical knowledge about education and work options. Yet only five respondents—three males and two females—had a mentor. The males knew professional adults who helped them find work. The two females were being mentored by university graduate students who helped them fill out their college applications and learn about financial aid.

Peer mentoring, pairing newly arrived young women or men with peers with two or more years of residency in NYC, was also cited as a good practice. Peer mentorship created opportunities for the newly arrived to ben-

efit from the knowledge of experienced resettled youth in NYC. Peer mentors shared ideas on how to get into school or college and on the path to a career.

“If I want to change the world, I have to change myself and others like me. So, I’ll help kids go and get degrees. Change one kid and he will change his life. We need to think from the end goal and start from there. What does a resettled refugee young person need? They need to learn from stories of people who resettled and succeeded, like me.”

Iraqi male

Needs and Service Gaps

In Displacement: Youth Need Education and Training in Transferable Skills

Program practices during displacement that can help equip youth with transferable skills for the U.S. resettlement context include English, basic literacy, financial numeracy, computer skills, job preparedness and vocational training for entry-level jobs. Services and training that youth said they would have liked to receive while displaced were longer, higher quality ESL classes, computer classes, vocational training and livelihood programs that would have helped them gain relevant practical experience and that were directly linked with real income-earning opportunities while displaced. Where displaced youth were close to finishing high school when they were about to be resettled, they wished they could have delayed resettlement by three to six months so that they could finish high school.

“Stay in school if you have the option and try to finish before coming if you can.”

Congolese male

Youth noted that if they had had more knowledge before arriving, they would have got more out of resettlement orientation training. To better prepare them for life in the United States, youth said they needed detailed information for understanding the U.S. immigration system, the resettlement process and the U.S. Refugee Assistance Program, as well as U.S. secondary and

postsecondary education systems and training in how to find and apply for jobs in the United States. All said they were unprepared to navigate these critical systems and processes. Youth from all origin countries in the study said they were largely unaware of resettlement processes or the Refugee Assistance Program prior to arrival and unaware of critical legal, educational and employment information. Each shared some struggle or misfortune related directly to their lack of information in one or more of these areas.

“I didn’t have proper guidance when I came here.”
Tibetan male

Refugee and asylee males and females who arrived with the equivalent of high school diplomas, and even college degrees, said that they needed some orientation to the U.S. higher education system, with its academic calendars and documentation requirements.

“Bring your degrees. My brother had to repeat high school because he did not have the paperwork.”
Liberian male

“I did not know how the university system in the United States is structured, or how foreign four-year degrees are evaluated. The entire system and processes were not clear. Academic calendars are different here. I lost time in applying to college as I did not know these basic things. It took me over one year to get copies of my transcripts from home.”
Iraqi male

In NYC: Resettled Refugees and Asylee Youth Need Access to Education and Training at the Right Level

Service providers and teachers confirmed that the majority of refugee youth they work with have many years of interrupted education and are not at the same educational level as their American peers. For those still of school age, several were enrolled in grade levels according to their age and not their level of educational attainment. One Liberian young woman with a fourth

grade education was placed in the ninth grade in the United States simply because she was 15 years old when she enrolled. Young men from Liberia said that they were “better off hanging out than going to school—imagine going to school at ninth grade here when you were in the third grade back home.” A few were placed in special education in error. Several reported dropping out of U.S. high school and taking the GED test instead.

Service providers and teachers advised that the education and training needs of refugee and asylee young people can only be understood when broken down by country of origin and displacement context. For example, in 2008, Bhutanese students showed higher spoken English proficiency than in previous years, due to in-camp language instruction provided by the NGO Caritas. It has been hard, though, for these students to transition from writing in Nepali to English.²⁹ A large percentage of Bhutanese students have had interrupted formal education and difficulty with math skills. In contrast, Iraqi refugee students arrived with strong literacy skills and high grade levels, and only a few have had interruptions to their formal education. High literacy skills in their first language became advantageous for Iraqis in learning English as a second language. Parental involvement in Iraqi young men’s and women’s academics has been strong, and students have shown interest in advanced classes in school. However, social workers observed that the Burmese have experienced the most difficulty in their academic transitions. Language barriers for Burmese refugee students have been particularly high, as most were not taught to write their national language (Burmese), but rather to speak different Burmese dialects (Karen, Karenni). Not having learned a national written language impedes capacities to become literate in a second language.

Service providers said they observed high dropout rates among the refugee youth they work with who struggle with English skills. For most youth the Women’s Refugee Commission spoke with, English was not the second language, but a third, fourth or fifth. Several young women and men said they had needed literacy training and education in their first language before they would be ready for ESL classes. For some who arrived in the United States without literacy skills in their native

language, English became the language in which they learned to read and write for the first time. Upon arrival in the United States, respondents' English language proficiencies ranged from no knowledge to advanced reading comprehension, but with limited spoken and written skills. Two-thirds had some prior training, ranging from a couple of weeks to several years in primary and secondary school, or study in college (Iraqis only). Most had two months or less of English classes once or twice per week before their resettlement to the United States.

A 2008 evaluation commissioned by the Office of Refugee Resettlement found that refugees who often have better education and employment outcomes arrive in the United States with some English language proficiency and receive ESL services.³⁰ In this study, postarrival access to quality ESL or vocation-based ESL services varied widely. Respondents felt that initial ESL classes helped them postarrival, but that they needed ongoing English language training. Resettled youth had unmet needs for ESL instruction to improve their grammar and writing skills even after two years in NYC. Those integrating in other parts of the United States report similar inconsistencies in the coverage and quality of ESL services. "Almost 50 percent of all refugees receive ESL or vocational ESL services in Houston within one year, 75 percent in Sacramento and just 14 percent in Miami."³¹ In Sacramento, ESL is combined with employment services. In Houston, ESL services were provided at refugees' apartment complexes, along with child care services. Across resettlement program evaluations, many refugees reported preferring to focus on English language and employability skills improvement prior to employment in their first six months in the United States.

"A man is expected to be as fast as a machine here. You cannot move that fast if you don't have an adequate level of English."
Ivory Coast male

In NYC: Youth Need Employability Training That Builds Upon Their Existing Skills

Service providers emphasized English language literacy as the most critical factor in successfully matching skills with employment opportunities in the United States. The less literate often become underemployed in informal, insecure temporary forms of work despite their legal documentation. Service providers observed that in order to find work, resettled young women and men have to learn new skills and enroll in training programs to work successfully toward economic self-sufficiency. Barriers to finding employment beyond basic English literacy include the need for job-readiness skills, such as office skills (including computer and Internet skills), soft skills (such as punctuality and self-presentation) and basic know-how in navigating job applications, interviews and employment services.

Still, youth voiced the need for educators and employment specialists to recognize the skills that they bring with them as starting points for developing and professionalizing their strengths and career interests over time.

"It's not enough to send young people to "computer school" as this will not get them a job in itself. Build upon existing skills so we can do something we already know, but do it professionally. Develop the skills we have. Girls' skills in particular need to be valued."
Liberian female

Match our existing skills with jobs to help us fit into the community here. Expecting us to learn something entirely new right away makes our transition difficult and frustrates us as we're already far, far away from what we're used to.
Liberian male

For those who did arrive with skills and experience in using computers and the Internet, most reported using the Internet as a communications tool (e-mail, Skype, instant messaging, social networking) and not as an information resource to learn about services, programs, application processes or education and employment opportunities. Those who can read English have an advantage and

can use the Internet to support their studies and efforts to earn a living. But only six out of 58 young people we spoke with reported ever using the Internet to find out about job opportunities, vocations or career planning. Most found out about jobs only through friends and word of mouth, and did not yet feel confident using the Internet for job information or career resources. Most who had researched colleges and college application processes online had been encouraged to do so through their participation in a youth program.

Respondents who had arrived with experience in agriculture wished that they could find a way to use their skills in New York State or elsewhere in the United States.

In NYC: Youth Need Ongoing Employment Services and Workforce Development Programs

Along with adults, refugee youth ages 18 and older are expected to find employment within weeks of their arrival to become economically self-sufficient. Among out-of-school young women and men, most struggled to find even an initial “survival” job paying at or only marginally above the minimum wage. Once they secured a survival job, most then had a hard time finding better paying work. Many said they felt unclear about the processes behind job placements and referrals of employment services programs or job centers. Jobs immediately available to them were mostly low-pay and low-skill jobs. Most ended up in fields that offer basic qualification but low pay, such as domestic work, office cleaning, cosmetology and nursing assistance.

“I don’t like cleaning jobs. I didn’t come to the United States to clean. I need a job. I have skills.”

Iraqi female

Young women often ended up in “backbreaking” jobs as home health aides. Females in particular said they needed higher paying, better work, but faced barriers in entering training programs or higher education without financial assistance and ESL for the workplace. Many reported increased social and economic isolation, with limited to no access to needed language classes and child care services.

Even after two years in the United States, most working age young women and young men in the study were unemployed or under-employed and looking for work. One Liberian female was looking for a second job since her work as a Certified Nursing Assistant did not provide enough hours or income. She combined this part-time work with welfare money and food stamps to support herself and her two children. All respondents said they needed to earn income to help their families, pay education expenses for themselves or siblings or send money to relatives back home.

The vast majority of respondents found out about work opportunities from a friend, regardless of sector. Several had found short-term work through IRC Employment services. Less than half of in-school youth could find summer employment, including as unpaid interns or volunteers. Those who had finished U.S. high school or passed the GED test and found work still struggled to earn enough to cover their expenses. Some females took up volunteer positions at cultural community centers with hopes of being hired in time as a paid staff member.

“I wanted to show them I have the capacity to get hired.”

Afghan female

Both female and male students who did secure summer or part-time employment during the school year handed their paychecks over to their parents to help with bills and household expenses. Students and out-of-school young women and men reported contributing part or all of what they earn to pay household bills and for the basic needs of siblings, their own children or unemployed or disabled parents.

“We’re in an age between adults and children, and so we want to help the family, go to school and work. No one will hold our hand. People support with knowledge, but no one can take care of our needs all the time.”

Burmese female

Refugee and asylee young people who arrive in the United States with professional qualifications also faced bar-

riers to employment due to the need for recertification. Iraqi males we interviewed had arrived with professional qualifications and work experience. One was an engineer in Iraq. Despite holding a professional degree and having work experience, it took him one year to be able to support himself in the United States, and then only as a temporary contractor. Another Iraqi male who arrived with a bachelor's degree and several years' professional experience now works as a receptionist with multiple office management and operations roles in a small office. Both reported challenges in finding affordable college degree programs that would allow them to recertify and practice their professions here.

Employment services program staff observed that young women from all origin countries faced added barriers to employment, such as child care needs for their children or younger siblings, restrictive social norms concerning women and paid work and family discouragement from working nights or weekends.

Service Gaps Need to Be Addressed at the New York State Government Level

The Bureau of Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (BRIA), located within the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA), reported that there is no refugee youth program at the state-wide level in New York. Refugees up to the age of 18 may be eligible for the New York Refugee School Impact Grant program, which is for children ages 5-18 and their families to help them adjust to the educational system. BRIA staff interviewed said the Refugee School Impact Grant should be extended to youth ages 19-21, as "nineteen-year-olds easily fall into the cracks of the mosaic of refugee resettlement." Services include support of school staff, summertime Refugee Academies, academic coaching, translation and interpretation, parent orientations and family activities. Youth 18-21 are not eligible for the program. The Refugee School Impact Grant to NYC, which the IRC implements, was discontinued in fiscal year 2012 due to budget cuts. The reason cited was the low number of refugees resettled to NYC. This could leave in-school resettled refugee and asylee youth ages 18 and under without the support

that the Refugee School Impact Grant program funding provides. To date, implementing agencies such as the IRC have been able to continue programs in NYC with other funding, but efforts to secure funding are ongoing.

For out-of-school refugee and asylee youth, or those juggling studies and work, there has been no New York State program or enough funding for employment training. According to BRIA staff, the poor economy has been the number one factor in the low success rate of refugees and asylees in New York State, and that finding work has not been easy for anyone, refugee or not. BRIA does not collect data on employment trends, but staff interviewed cited hospitality and retail as the main sectors where refugees find work as some jobs require only minimal communication or previous work experience.

Contextual Factors Affecting Youth Efforts to Learn and Earn in NYC

Urban Poverty

Living in urban areas with high poverty rates created added barriers to school performance and building job-readiness skills. A single mother in her early 20s with whom we spoke noted that living in NYC housing projects was a factor in shaping young people's behavior, with refugee youth being highly vulnerable to bullying or to being involved in gang activities.

Effects of the Economic Crisis

Resettled and asylee youth faced intense pressure to work in tight job markets. The economic crisis has affected everyone. However, recently arrived youth may be more vulnerable to the impacts of the crisis given the short time they have to build their English and employability skills.

"The financial crisis has meant no jobs. It was already hard to find jobs in 2006, 2007. Employers would not employ people who did not speak well and did not have experience here."

Iraqi male

Unemployment rates in the Bronx (13%), Brooklyn (10.5%), Queens (8.5%) and Staten Island (9.3%), where all the youth the Women's Refugee Commission spoke with lived, were all higher than the NYC average of 8.3 percent.³² Sectors of the labor market with the largest job losses in the New York State economy from August 2009 to August 2010 included manufacturing, construction, trade, transportation and utilities—all sectors that affect refugee and asylee prospective workers seeking more than minimum wage jobs.³³ Sectors with job gains included leisure and hospitality, education, health and other services.³⁴ Many working age refugee and asylee young people in the study had accessed jobs in service sectors, but mostly in low-skill positions offering less than a true living wage.

Security Concerns

Most youth in the study reported feeling safer overall in NYC than in their home countries or displacement contexts.

"I feel safe here. I didn't feel safe in my country. I felt afraid. I sleep relaxed here, and couldn't before because I felt in danger."
Iraqi female

"I can now communicate, be safe and alive, travel around the city, read English—none of which was easy before."
Iraqi male

Still, many males and females both reported trying to go out only during the day and early evening, avoiding travel after 9:00 or 10:00pm if they can, and only going to school, work and home again. Young women avoided evening or night work when possible.

Some struggled with feeling unsafe in the neighborhoods where they live, such as "French Harlem" in northeastern Manhattan,³⁵ in the Bronx or on Staten Island. They fear the harassment, theft, assault, gang violence or rape that they hear has taken place there. Young men said they try to be careful in choosing their friends and avoid peers involved in smoking, drinking, drugs or gangs. Young women in the study reported

steering clear of young men known by their peers to engage in these behaviors. Apart from the police, teachers or a parent or relative, both males and females said they would have no one to help them in a crisis.

"My school is a safe place, and there are no gangs there. My neighborhood is dangerous though. There are a lot of drugs, drinking, shooting and gang activities outside my apartment building. The neighbors respect my family, though, and don't do anything to them. They even say hi."
Bhutanese female

Change in Identities as Young Women and Men

Resettlement to NYC has brought important changes to the identities, gender roles and responsibilities, and social norms affecting the lives of young refugees and asylees as they live, study and work in and navigate the city. For many young women in particular, feeling safer in NYC than at home or in displacement settings opened up opportunities for greater mobility and exploration. Young women reported increased confidence and courage, and feeling proud of themselves for traveling alone around the big city successfully to go to school, work or other places important to them. One Afghan young woman in particular felt empowered through her new mobility to go to school and work, and how it enabled her to exercise her human rights as a woman. She drew a striking contrast in the link between her personal experiences as a young woman in Afghanistan and in NYC:

"Pakistan, Afghanistan claim respect for women, but I've never seen this take place in these Islamic contexts. I feel more safe here than in an Islamic country. I see women's rights here, so—I found Islam here. I cannot walk alone safely, then women are not being respected."
Afghan female

Many males in the study said their identities had not changed significantly since their arrival in the United States, and yet many reported a sense of loss of identity and status and wish that they could better maintain

their cultural traditions here. In contrast, many females were challenging social norms and practices that had limited their personal development and security prior to resettlement.

"I wouldn't have become independent in traveling alone in years of living at home as a young woman. I have learned and grown in NYC."

Burmese female

"I am now more confident and straightforward. I know more and can take care of myself."

Bhutanese female

"Now I know who I am and what I can do for myself. I feel I can do great things for myself, my family, my country and for women!"

Afghan female



Young people resettled in New York City participate in IRC's Summer Academy.

Recommendations

1. Increase donor support for education and training in displacement settings. Investments need to be increased in education and training for displaced youth to ensure that their time is spent developing transferable knowledge, skills and experience for wherever they may go after displacement. Transferable skills are essential for any solution to displacement to be durable, whether it be return, local integration or resettlement to a third country. Youth resettling to the United States need skills-building opportunities in English, financial literacy, computer technology and the Internet, and job-readiness for entry-level work. Donors should fund vocational training relevant to the growing fields in the United States, including health care, customer service, manufacturing and construction related to green jobs.

2. Increase access to more comprehensive and consistent orientation programs.³⁶ Orientation classes provided through Resettlement Support Centers (RSCs) need to set realistic expectations, and include basic information to help youth and parents prepare for U.S. secondary and postsecondary education and employment practices. Programs need to provide more than minimal information on language and culture, and on what to expect in the United States Orientation programs should also inform refugees of the actual costs of living versus the value of resettlement assistance, and set realistic expectations for the need to work as soon as possible upon arrival. Finally, cultural orientation programs should include modules specifically for adolescents (ages 10-16) to address the unique realities that females and males in this age group are likely to face in the United States.

3. Expand ESL training in displacement and resettlement contexts. In displacement contexts, efforts should be focused on youth and parents who are about to be resettled. More ESL instructors should be recruited and trained from among refugees who speak English. In resettlement contexts, ESL needs to be workplace oriented and ongoing for up to two years. Resettled youth need classes to build their English language skills beyond the initial three to six month

period postarrival. ESL oriented to the workplace can help support more successful transitions into the U.S. workforce.

4. Document education experience in displacement. Documentation for formal and nonformal schooling in displacement settings needs to be improved. Youth about to be resettled should be provided with a clear checklist of documents that they will need to enroll in U.S. schools. Without a high school diploma or other accepted documentation, previous education may not be recognized in the United States.

5. Build transferable skills for the U.S. context in displacement settings. Young women and men need life skills and job-readiness training both in displacement and resettlement contexts. These should include skills for the U.S. workplace at the entry level for those without prior work experience. Training programs should also include financial literacy, as youth need to become financially savvy to manage their resources and risks as they transition to new labor and financial markets. Finally, trainings should also be relevant for jobs in growth sectors in the United States, such as health care and hospitality.

6. Provide ongoing information sessions post-arrival. Resettled youth continue to deal with information asymmetries postarrival due to language and cultural barriers and lack of familiarity with using the Internet as a research resource and not just a communication tool. Refugee and asylee youth and their parents should be informed of their rights in the United States and told about available services through initial and refresher information sessions. They need instruction and guidance in how and where to find vital U.S.-based information and how to apply for school, college, jobs and government services (where applicable) online. Information sessions need to communicate refugee and asylee rights consistently across resettlement agencies implementing the Refugee Assistance Program.

7. Match existing skills to overcome youth barriers to job training and employment in the United States. Some youth arrive in the United States with skills they developed in displacement, such as community mobilization, teaching, mentoring, math, shop keeping, ag-

riculture and small manufacturing. Programs should work to build upon their existing skills by identifying individually appropriate next steps for education, training and job placement. Some youth arrive with prior professional certifications and need special support and scholarships for U.S. recertification in their fields. Resettlement agencies and employment specialists should continue to work with schools and employers to raise their awareness about the skills that refugees and asylees bring with them. Skills matching needs can be addressed through vocational training programs, training “plus” programs combining vocational and on-the-job training with support services, and having prospective employers help design the training content.

8. Strengthen U.S. education systems to serve resettled students’ specific needs. Education service providers identified several opportunities for addressing needs and service gaps in serving resettled students. School districts should allow a budget for translation to help new students and families communicate with the school. This can enhance academic success and parental involvement and can help teachers address challenges. Education services specialized for refugee and asylee populations succeed in large part because of targeted resources provided by the Refugee School Impact Grant and the cultural competencies of instructors and staff. Youth programs should be funded as part of the Refugee Assistance Program to guide young refugees and asylees through U.S. education system processes at high school and college levels. Schools should create partnerships with resettlement agencies for ESL classes, GED programs, after-school educational support, vocational training programs and help with college and job applications. ESL classes should be combined with vocational training classes in jobs that will lead to careers and should be employment based with flexible scheduling to meet the needs of parents, students and workers. Schools should collaborate with employers to facilitate school-to-work opportunities.

9. Prioritize secondary school completion. In displacement, youth need access to secondary school in camps and urban host areas to prevent large interruptions in their education. Resettled young women and

men who have had significant interruptions to their formal education need extra support and alternative pathways to graduation that include preparation for the GED test and combine studies with work and adult responsibilities. U.S. school districts should increase funding for students with interrupted formal education so that schools can meet their needs. Information and services should support young people aged 19-21 whose education has been interrupted so that they do not become a “lost group” once in the United States. Services are also needed for 19- to 24-year-olds to prepare them for career mobility, as they face pressure from families and agencies to start working immediately. Education programs for resettled youth should follow a “learning to work” approach and encourage students to think about college and future employment through student development programs and paid internships.

10. Resettlement agencies in the United States should cultivate strong partnerships with high schools, CBOs, nonprofits and employers where youth can further their educational and employment skills. Partnerships can help further develop referral systems to send young refugees and asylees to schools and community-based programs that are equipped to serve their specific needs. Agencies should also partner with college preparatory and leadership programs that prepare refugee and asylee students to perform well in higher education and the workplace.

11. Engage and support parents. Support of and for parents is needed to help ensure that young women and men stay in and complete high school, where possible, in displaced settings and in the U.S. resettlement context. Parents themselves need support to acculturate to the United States and build their English skills so that they do not turn to their children to act as interpreters and social mediators once in the United States.

12. Improve employment services, workforce development programs to include and serve resettled refugee and asylee youth more effectively. Employability and job training programs should work more closely with refugee and asylee young women and men ages 19 to 30, not just older adults. Programs should work with employers to provide more paid internships, as most young refugees and asylees cannot afford to

take unpaid internships to build job skills. Employment services programs need more financial resources and staff to match people with relevant jobs and help clients balance their expectations with current opportunities. Service providers should work to identify growing industries that provide employment and career pathways for young people and better align refugees’ interests and skill sets with job availability.

13. Increase peer mentorship opportunities. Peer-to-peer mentorship in displacement and resettlement contexts can provide youth with needed social support and guidance from others like them who have “been there.” Mentorship can help increase their protection and well-being through greater social accountability. In-school and after-school mentoring programs between older, more experienced refugees and asylees and younger, more recently arrived ones can help smooth the acculturation and integration process.

14. Link youth with working and professional adult mentors. Displaced and resettled youth need exposure to successful working and professional adults. Similar to Big Brothers, Big Sisters,³⁷ mentor relationships between a resettled young woman or young man and a professional adult can help them develop career planning ideas and provide guidance to help them achieve their goals. Youth need mentors and tutors in their communities and links with those who can help them form ties with professional adults outside of their immediate social networks.

15. Support youth in building their social networks. Young women and men in displacement and resettlement contexts can be safer, more informed and better supported through mobilizing and raising awareness of their needs and interests. Young women in particular can develop greater confidence and self-efficacy from participation in group-based processes through shared learning, mentorship, leadership and community participation opportunities. Trainings in financial literacy, transferable skills for entry-level jobs, English instruction, human rights and sexual and reproductive health can better motivate and retain young women’s and men’s participation when delivered through peer groups.

16. **Develop capacities of community-based organizations to work with displaced and resettled youth.**

In displacement contexts, voluntary CBOs, often staffed by refugees themselves, provide needed language, literacy, numeracy, mentorship and social support where national and international NGOs do not have the resources to offer programs, or the social capital to attract youth participation. Small voluntary organizations should be invested in to develop their capacities to further serve youth. In the resettlement context, CBOs provide essential services that support integration and connect youth with mainstream services. Young women and men need safe spaces where they can have a sense of community and access education, training and arts programs and socialize with others from similar backgrounds.

17. **Organize community-based child care cooperatives for young parents.**

The lack of free or affordable, quality child care services is a barrier for resettled young mothers in particular, and sometimes young fathers, in pursuing education and employment opportunities. Young women without children of their own still struggle disproportionately under the weight of sibling and elder care, and domestic responsibilities. CBOs can help community members organize child care cooperatives that can start to address this need collectively.

Next Steps

The Women's Refugee Commission is sharing the findings and recommendations of this report with policy makers, donors, service providers, community-based practitioners and the youth contributors themselves. We encourage these organizations and individuals to take up relevant recommended priority actions as they take steps to fund, plan, implement, monitor and evaluate programs to support young people displaced by armed conflict.

Information gathered from this case study will inform a guidance document for field practitioners, policy makers and donors that synthesizes findings and recommendations across all field assessments of the Displaced Youth Initiative conducted in Liberia, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Jordan and the United States. The guidance document also will synthesize findings from a global desk review of innovative education, training and employment programs for youth in humanitarian and development settings.

Organizations Consulted

African Refuge

Arab American Family Support Center

Brooklyn International High School

Bureau for Refugee and Immigrant Assistance

CAMBA

Century Dance Complex

International Rescue Committee

New York State Office of Temporary
and Disability Assistance

Sauti Yetu

Women for Afghan Women

Notes

¹ D. Martin, "Refugees and Asylees: 2010," Annual Flow Report, May 2011, Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, Policy Directorate, p. 1., http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_rfa_fr_2010.pdf, accessed October 23, 2011.

² Ibid., p. 3.

³ Ibid., p. 5.

⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵ UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Protracted refugee situations. Millions caught in limbo, with no solutions in sight. www.un.org/events/tenstories/06/story.asp?storyID=2600, accessed October 23, 2011

⁶ Note: Only resettled refugees receive pre-arrival cultural orientation training. As asylees arrived in the United States on their own and not via a refugee resettlement program, they do not receive pre-arrival orientation training.

⁷ For more information on unaccompanied children arriving in the United States, please see WRC (2009) *Halfway Home: Unaccompanied Children in Immigration Custody*, Women's Refugee Commission and Orrick Herrington & Sutcliffe LLP, Washington, D.C., http://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/docs/halfway_home.pdf.

⁸ For more information about the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program, please see: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/orr/programs/unaccompanied_refugee_minors.htm.

⁹ New York State resettlement statistics are not disaggregated by sex, age and marital status.

¹⁰ Available data on immigrants and the foreign born helps to show how multicultural NYC is as a refugee-receiving city. The number of foreign born counted in the 2000 NYC census was 2.87 million or 36% of the total population at the time. The largest populations of foreign born were from the Dominican Republic, China, Jamaica, Guyana, Mexico, Ecuador, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, Colombia and Russia. The number of Africans in NYC continues to increase, with more than 56 percent of the current population having arrived in the 1990s.

¹¹ October 1, 2009 – September 30, 2010.

¹² Source: Bureau for Refugee and Immigrant Assistance (BRIA).

¹³ Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Refugee, Asylum, and Parole System (RAPS).

¹⁴ Report to Committee of Foreign Relations, US Senate 7/21/2010, p. v.

¹⁵ Adapted from Tom Kuhlman, 1991, "The Economic Integration of Refugees in Developing Countries: A Research Model." *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 4, pp. 1-20; cited in M. Potocky-Tripodi, 2003, "Refugee Economic Adaptation: Theory, Evidence, and Implications

for Policy and Practice," *Journal of Social Service Research*, 30(1), pp. 63-91.

¹⁶ S. Schmidt, L. Morland and J. Rose, *Growing Up in a New Country: A Positive Youth Development Toolkit for Working with Refugees and Immigrants, Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services*, 2009, p. 7.

¹⁷ J. L. McBrien, "Educational Needs and Barriers for Refugee Students in the United States: A Review of the Literature," *Review of Educational Research*, Fall 2005; 75, 3: p. 357.

¹⁸ See <http://www.mybihs.org>.

¹⁹ See <http://mihs.nycdoe.org/>.

²⁰ See <http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/10/X397/default.htm>.

²¹ See http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2010-11/Progress_Report_2011_HS_K439.pdf.

²² White House Press Release, March 10, 2009, cited in T. Crotty and T. Pendelton, "The Learning to Work Initiative: Year 4: Mid-year report, Continuing Innovation," presentation, NYC Department of Education, Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation, 2009, p. 2, schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/CDFA2070.../Y4MidYearReport.pdf, accessed October 24, 2011.

²³ See: <http://www.strivenewyork.org/strivesite/>, accessed October 23, 2011.

²⁴ See: <http://www.aafscny.org/>.

²⁵ See: <http://www.sautiyetu.org/>.

²⁶ See: <http://www.centurydancecomplex.com/>.

²⁷ See: <http://www.womenforafghanwomen.org/>.

²⁸ M. Brough D. Gorman, E. Ramirez & P. Westoby, "Young refugees talk about well-being: a qualitative analysis of refugee youth mental health from three states" in *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 38.2 (2003) : p.193 (16), p. 206.

²⁹ Bhutanese refugees in the study were Nepali ethnic minorities expelled from Bhutan who first learned to speak and write in the Nepali language.

³⁰ M. Farrell, B. Barden and M. Mueller (2008) "The Evaluation of the Refugee Social Services (RSS) and Targeted Assistance Formula Grant (TAG) Programs: Synthesis of Findings from Three Sites," " The Lewin Group, prepared for U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement. Available at <http://www.lewin.com/publications/Publication/307/>.

³¹ Ibid, p. 19.

³² U.S. Department of Labor, http://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.ny.htm#eag_ny.f.P.

³³ New York State Department of Labor, <http://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/index.shtm>.

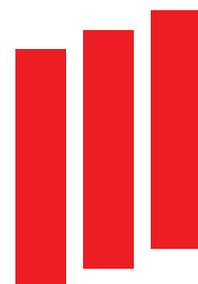
³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ A section of East Harlem in Manhattan where many francophone

African immigrants have lived historically.

³⁶ Note: Only resettled refugees receive pre-arrival cultural orientation training. As asylees that arrive in the United States on their own and not via a refugee resettlement program, they do not receive pre-arrival orientation training.

³⁷ For further information, see: <http://www.bigsnyc.org/index.php>, accessed October 23, 2011.



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