

Refugee Resettlement and City Revitalization:
Prospects for Change in Utica, New York

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This paper considers the potential of international migration, specifically refugee resettlement for social and economic development in U.S. metropolitan areas characterized by demographic decline. Utica, New York serves a metropolitan case study in which we examine the role the refugee and immigrant settlement in stimulating economic growth and institutional change.

As most cities in upstate New York, Utica experienced absolute and large population loss during the 1990s. Between 1990 and 2000 the population of Utica declined from 68,637 to 60,651, a 12 percent change. Unlike other cities beyond the metropolitan catchment of New York City, however, Utica's population loss would have been a great deal worse, perhaps a decline of 20 percent, had it not been for the influx of over 7,000 refugees during the same ten-year period, a characteristic Utica holds in common with the big apple downstate. While Utica was a location of immigrant settlement at the beginning of the 20th century, it has not been imagined as an immigrant or gateway city in this current era of large scale immigration to the United States. Relative to its population size and geography, however, international migration has had significant and dramatic consequences for urban landscape and community development in Utica. International migration is of a very specific form, moreover, reflecting the refugee resettlement initiatives of a single community action program, the Mohawk Resource Center for Refugees.

Between 1990 and 2000, the foreign born of Utica nearly doubled its size since the previous census and now constitutes approximately 12 percent of the total population; fully five percent of Utica's population are refugees and their relatives who have been resettled from Bosnia-Herzegovina since the mid-1990s. Recent refugee groups resettled in Utica include Somali Bantu and persons from the former Soviet Union. What are the implications of this dramatic growth in a refugee population for an urban community which has experienced relentless loss of population and employers? In addressing this question, we focus on three sets of political actors in urban development in the Utica metropolitan area. First, we examine the ways in which international migration and refugee resettlement are incorporated into public discussions and planning initiatives for metropolitan and regional growth and development. Second, we consider the perspectives of employers concerning the role of foreign born workers in labor force and employment trends and prospects in the metropolitan area. And third, we consider the

agency of immigrant organizations and immigrant economic enterprise in fostering community development in Utica.

The study begins by describing the role of international migration and refugee resettlement on the social geography of the Utica-Rome metropolitan area. We then characterize the institutional perspectives on the past and potential effect of refugee migration and settlement on the Utica community. The approach is largely qualitative and follows the extended case method in order to interconnect macrostructures with individual and local experience.

We present results of interviews with a wide range community and institutional leaders and key informants concerning the implications of refugee resettlement for Utica. Informants were selected to represent critical sectors in the urban community. First, we identified key sectors of the community, political offices and public administration, prominent community groups (churches, civic, cultural and ethnic interest groups, etc.), educational programs, urban research groups, business and commercial interests, foundations, and social service groups such as the Refugee Resource Center. We also consulted with several individuals who have been involved in urban research and analysis in Utica for suggestions about prominent community groups (using the categories listed above) as well as key community leaders.

Several themes emerge from these conversations which have been conducted thus far, and include (i) the social, economic and political impacts of refugee resettlement, (ii) the potential benefits of refugees and refugee communities for community development and urban change in Utica, (iii) the challenges for Utica posed by refugee resettlement, and (iv) strategies which might be implemented to capitalize on the presence of refugees in Utica.

The study concludes with our initial interpretations on the challenges and opportunities that exist in Utica for refugee resettlement both generally as well as in relationship to specific groups of refugee populations. We reflect on avenues for productive exchange among these sets of actors and interests to foster positive social, economic and political change in the metropolitan community.