

REFUGEES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES: A WIN-WIN?

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Refugees from around the world flee to the US to avoid situations of hardship, persecution, and violence. In the United States, many rural areas face depopulation as their young people settle in urban areas. These two problems of human migration – at times half the world from each other – may provide a unique opportunity for refugee resettlement and rural community revival.

Since the Refugee Act of 1980, almost 2.5 million refugees – people forced to involuntarily leave their home country – have entered the United States, 95 percent of whom have been resettled in cities and suburbs of urban areas (Signer et al., 2006). While the number of people who entered the United States officially as a refugee in the past 30 years is substantial, the number of people who have migrated to the US effectively as someone fleeing their home country, albeit not officially as a refugee, is larger.

Once a refugee gains US citizenship status it becomes easier – either through increased wages or immigration sponsorship – for their family and friends to follow them to the United States. 2.5 million people found asylum in the US as an official refugee; there are, however, approximately 7 million people who migrated to the United States from one of the top 30 refugee-sending countries. (See Table 1 on page two for a list of top refugee sending countries and totals of refugees received by the US from each country.) It is likely that many of these people were also fleeing undesirable living situations, political stress, or social pressures whether or not they migrated to the United States officially as a refugee or not.

Figure 1 shows US counties and the percentage of the population born in a top refugee-sending country. US counties with proportions greater than five percent are overwhelmingly located in metropolitan areas and surround large urban centers such as New York City, Los Angeles, or Miami.

The Rural-Urban Continuum Code (RUCC) categorizes US counties in nine groups based on population and proximity to a metropolitan area. Figure 2 charts the percentage of the population of the nine RUCC categories born in a top refugee-sending country. Categories one through three represent metropolitan areas, which are made up 2.60 percent people born in a top refugee-sending country. Nonmetropolitan areas, represented by RUCC categories four through nine, are made up of only 0.32 percent people born in a top refugee-sending country.

Many rural areas have been experiencing a slow but steady decline in population over the past few decades. This trend, however, may be accelerating. For an unprecedented three straight years, between 2010 and 2013, nonmetropolitan areas in the United States have experienced a decrease in population, peaking between 2011 and 2012 with a net loss of 47,500 people (USDA, 2014).

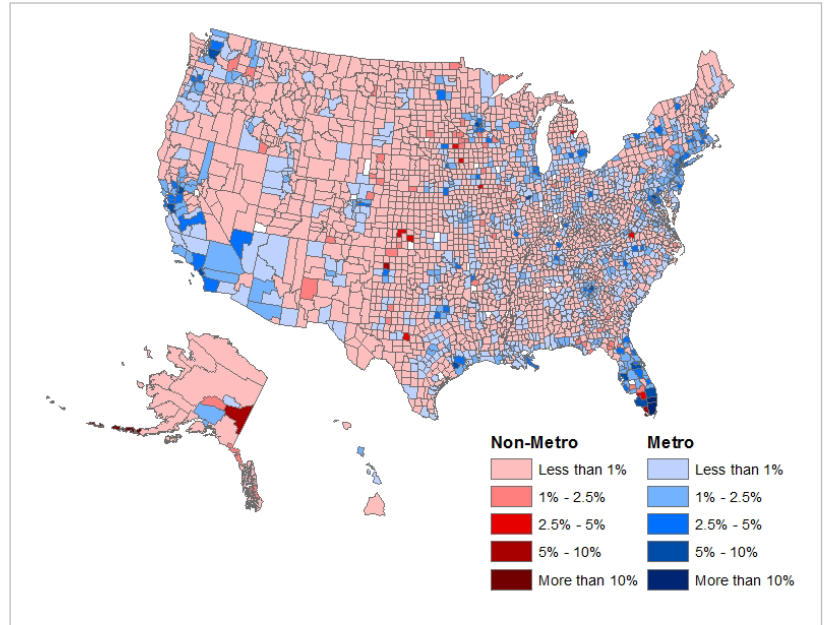


Figure 1. Approximate Refugee Population by Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Areas, 2012.
Source: Author's tabulation of American Community Survey data, US Census Bureau.

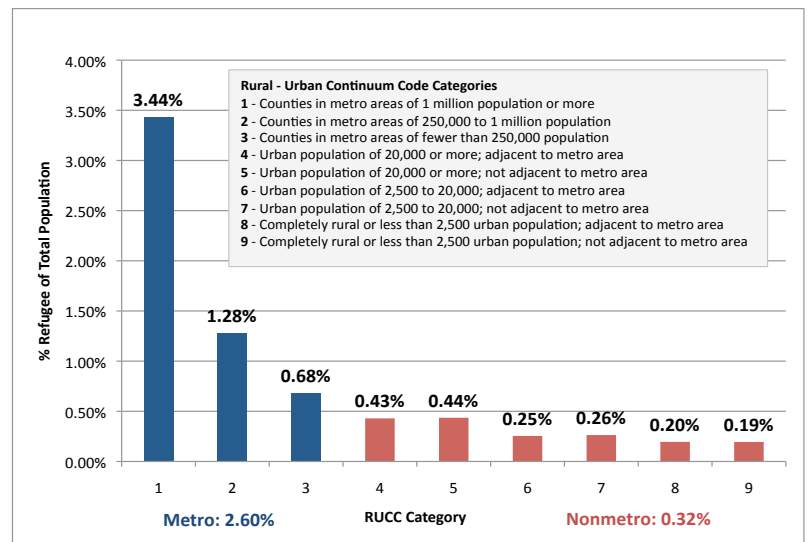


Figure 2. Percent Refugee of Total Population per RUCC Category.

The implications of this trend are startling. In places where school districts are determined strictly by a headcount, depopulation could mean reductions in faculty size or closing of entire schools. In areas with an already low population, migration out of the area could result in the closing of family medical practices, grocery stores, hospitals, and other places of employment due to the disappearance of a viable customer base.

There is an opportunity here for both refugees and rural communities. Most refugees come from countries where agriculture is the primary driver of the economy and so are potentially comfortable with the lifestyle and employment sectors of the rural United States. Refugees are often fleeing devastating situations and are looking to rebuild their life from scratch. They crave employment, affinity with the surrounding community, education, affordable housing, safety, and a host of public benefits such as English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Many of these things are naturally provided by metropolitan areas, but some – affordable housing and low crime rates in particular – are not.

Some businesses and municipalities of nonmetropolitan areas already recognize the repopulation benefits of refugee resettlement. In Barron County, Wisconsin, a meat processing plant has been particularly proactive in attracting Somali refugees to the area. The company assigned a representative from its Human Resources Department to sit on the community's Diversity Council. They hired bilingual trainers particularly focused on streamlining communication with Somali employees. They have an Employee Liaison who assists employees in various areas such as making medical appointments, translating bank statements, and communicating with landlords. Until recently when the local community began organizing such classes, the company even held on-site ESL classes (Wisconsin Advisory Committee, 2012).

If rural counties were proactive about attracting refugees to their towns there could be gains for both the refugees and for rural communities. Refugees are often resettled in metropolitan areas due to the existing social infrastructure such as diverse communities and public amenities (e.g. employment services, language training, and public transportation). While this infrastructure often does not exist in many rural communities, it can be developed over time, if made a priority.

With proactive policies and innovative companies, rural areas are not forced to stand by and watch as their towns depopulate. At the same time refugees can be given an excellent chance at rebuilding their life.

If rural communities were to create strong incentives to encourage a few of the first refugee families to move into their town, then perhaps

a trend could follow. Provisions could be made initially to reduce living expenses or subsidize transportation. After some time this incentive scheme could be shut off and the town could soon recoup any costs involved through the benefits of repopulation. It is likely that the total costs of encouraging such a policy would be lower than the current urban-oriented resettlement due to lower housing costs in rural areas, and below capacity use of other public infrastructure such as roads and schools.📍

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Table 1. Largest Refugee-Sending Countries, 1983-2012.

Rank	Country	Total Refugees, 1983-2012
1	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics**	470,127
2	Vietnam	398,137
3	Yugoslavia***	168,819
4	Laos	123,216
5	Iraq	109,369
6	Somalia	94,763
7	Burma	93,973
8	Iran	89,403
9	Cuba	82,874
10	Cambodia	71,500
11	Bhutan*	48,467
12	Ethiopia	41,822
13	Afghanistan	35,151
14	Romania	34,674
15	Liberia	30,854
16	Sudan	29,127
17	Poland	28,809
18	Democratic Republic of Congo	12,539
19	Burundi	10,677
20	Thailand*	9,788
21	Eritrea*	9,581
22	Czech Republic	7,535
23	Sierra Leone	7,305
24	Haiti	6,823
25	Hungary	5,124
26	Albania	3,663
27	Rwanda	2,344
28	Bulgaria	1,971
29	Austria	1,555
30	Nicaragua	1,537

* This category refers to countries where the refugee count only includes the years 2000-2012.
 **This category refers to all the newly formed countries of the Former Soviet Union after 1992
 ***This category refers to all the newly formed countries of the former Yugoslavia after 1992
 Source: Author's update of Singer, A et al., (2006) tabulation of ORR data