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## **Refugee and Asylee Policy in the United States**

Hannah E. Domsic

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Lee Honors College

June 29, 2022

## **Refugee and Asylee Policy in the United States**

The United States has a global reputation of being the land of freedom, where opportunity is for everyone regardless of demographics or circumstances. Not only does this apply to its citizens, but the United States is known for being a welcoming safe haven to refugees and asylum-seekers abroad. However, beneath this reputation lies the reality of a large division within United States society regarding refugees and asylees. The division lies between those who want more closed borders and those who want open borders, and is fed by politics, media, historical biases, and harmful stereotypes. On the surface, the United States seems to be the ideal destination for refugee resettlement, but refugees are still met with struggles amidst the relief of being in a place deemed safe. The challenges for refugees start when disaster forces them to unwillingly leave their home, and do not end after setting foot within the United States.

This thesis began with the intention of drawing awareness to the difference between the reality of the refugee situation globally and how that impacts the United States, versus common misconceptions and biases promoted in United States society. The goal of this project is to present factual evidence as to all aspects of refugee and asylee policy in the United States so that valid, logical conclusions may be drawn, and the media messages can be measured and interpreted accurately.

Words have power; words can be weapons. Unchecked, unregulated, careless communication can have dire consequences, as in the case of much media surrounding the narrative of refugees in the United States. After identifying the facts surrounding refugees and asylum-seekers in the United States, this project takes the information and frames it in the context of applied communication theories. The theories presented in this study provide a foundation in not only understanding and analyzing communication towards refugees, but also in

getting an idea of how the refugees choose to communicate as well. By understanding the possible motives and intentions behind the refugees' methods of communicating in their new environment, citizens will be better prepared to respond effectively. There are several relevant communication theories that outline and provide a framework for understanding communication between refugees and their receiving communities, presented in this project. These theories are also useful in shaping communication used by native citizens toward refugee populations in the United States as well.

To create a thorough picture of what the life of a refugee looks like, this project begins with a comprehensive literature review, beginning with the first refugee policy created in the United States, and ending in the present day with the most up-to-date and current information available. Building upon this foundation is a section containing graphs of numbers and statistics that illustrate refugees abroad, and then on a national scale. The funnel of information continues to narrow onto information within the United States alone, leading into the mapping section. The maps provide a visual rendition of five of the most common refugee routes for those who are resettled in the United States and are the final element in creating a complete foundational understanding of refugee and asylee policy in the United States. Knowing the routes refugees take to come to the United States and getting an idea of just how vast that distance is helps build a perspective of the reality of their situation. Time and distance involved in refugees' journeys are large elements of shaping their experiences as refugees, which then impacts their communication styles as outlined by the theories included in this project. Lastly, the discussion section takes all of the information and uses it to fill the previous gaps in knowledge by application of theory and suggesting pragmatic implications, as well as possibilities for further study.

## **Literature Review**

In 1951, the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established primarily in response to the massive number of people displaced globally after World War II (The 1967 protocol, 2020). However, the policies outlined by the UNHCR were later amended by the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees in order to address new refugees to whom the original policies did not apply, creating a universal standard for all refugees (The 1967 protocol, 2020). The United States did not standardize guidelines specifically regarding refugees in accordance with the UNHCR until establishing the Refugee Act of 1980 (“An Overview,” 2021). Since then, the amount of displaced persons globally and consequentially in the United States, rather than decreasing, has increased greatly. As of 2021, there are an estimated 26.6 million refugees globally, and in the United States an estimated 13.7% of the population was born in a different country (Budiman, 2020). Since 1980, the United States has resettled over three million refugees specifically; therefore, refugees have significantly impacted the society and economy within the US (Budiman, 2020). The diversity and economic stimulation refugees bring invokes mixed responses in US citizens, some being adamantly against accepting refugees, while others advocate welcoming them with no restrictions. And especially in a country like the US, where racial and social issues have been persistent since its founding, topics like immigration and refugees are constantly discussed and the subject of various forms of media. Many citizens formulate their opinions based on what they see, hear, and read in media, and therefore it is crucial that media presents accurate, truthful information regarding refugees and the effect they have on the United States, good or bad. To understand the difference between refugees and asylees, and their challenges and impact, it is necessary to review the formation of applicable immigration policies from the first law regarding refugees in the United States.

## **History of Refugee and Asylee Policies in the United States**

In order to understand the policies and impact of refugees, it is essential to first determine the correct definition of what makes one a refugee. The UNHCR defines a refugee as “a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her home country because of a ‘well-founded fear of persecution’ due to race, membership in a particular social group, political opinion, religion, or national origin” (“An Overview,” 2021). Refugees are not considered refugees until they cross an international border; if they flee to a different are of the same country, they are considered internally displaced persons (IDP) (“An Overview,” 2021). Migrants, immigrants, and asylees all have their own definitions, migrants being the broadest term; a refugee falls under the category of migrant, but so would a person who moves from Texas to Michigan. Immigrants are people who move to a different country for any reason, and asylum seekers apply for protection directly in the country they flee to upon arrival to any port of entry (Asylum, 2021). However, one thing the terms “refugee” and “asylee” have in common is that both are considered a legal status; despite this, there are many people in the United States who refer to refugees and asylees simply as “illegal immigrants.” This terminology is incorrect.

The Refugee Act of 1980 acts in a way as a foundation on which the United States has built upon when addressing the issues surrounding refugees, such as establishing the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), the Office of Refugee Resettlement, and the Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions (“An Overview,” 2021). The USRAP is a group of both government and non-government organizations that work to identify refugees most in need of resettlement, and to help determine the capacity of refugee intake for a fiscal year (“The United,” n.d.). This allows the current president to establish the Presidential Determination for the refugee intake of that year (“An Overview,” 2021). The USRAP is managed by the

Department of State and partners with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as well as the Department of Health and Human Services (“The United,” n.d.). All refugees traveling to the United States are referred by the UNHCR and processed by the USRAP (“The United,” n.d.). The Office of Refugee Resettlement provides services to refugees and asylees, among others, to help integrate and settle into the United States after arriving and being processed through USRAP (“About,” n.d.).

The number of refugees admitted to the United States in a single fiscal year peaked in 1980 at a total of 207,116, and hit a record low of 11,814 in 2020 (“An Overview,” 2021). Of the over three million total refugees resettled in the United States since 1980, 77% either came from the former Soviet Union, or were Indochinese, coming from Vietnam (“History,” n.d.). In 2020, the top three home countries of refugees entering the United States were the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Myanmar, and Ukraine (Monin et al., 2021).

In recent years, as there has been a dramatic influx of refugees entering the United States, more and more attention has become focused on refugee and immigration policy. Each president has taken a different approach. Below applicable policies are reviewed from the Obama and Trump administrations, and the resulting current situation of refugee immigration.

### **Obama Administration**

Even though the United States receives the highest number of refugees for resettlement in the world and prides itself on diversity and individual rights and freedom, the reality is often different than what is advertised and visible on the surface. In recent years, due to the sudden influx of refugees especially from Syria and Central America, leaders in the United States have responded to these declared crises using methods that arguably violate human rights. For example, during the Obama administration, there was a surge of Central American refugees,

many of them unaccompanied minors, that crossed the southern border in 2014 (Luiselli, 2017, p. 39). There was a shortage of lawyers to help represent the migrants in court; despite this, the solution that the former president enacted was to shorten the timeframe of the process of applying for asylum from one year to twenty-one days. This meant that migrants coming from Central America, be they children or adult, English-speakers or not, had twenty-one days to apply for asylum and find a lawyer to work with them, or face being deported (Luiselli, 2017, p. 39). Rather than speeding up the processing of migrants, many were simply deported back to the countries from which they fled.

On the other hand, one policy the Obama administration established regarding undocumented youth brought to the United States is the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA (Daca, n.d.). This policy came into effect on June 15, 2012, and since then has been granted to an estimated 832,881 migrants as of September 2021 (Deferred, 2021). This policy is applicable to migrants who arrived in the US as children and gives them the right to a social security number and work authorization; it does not grant permanent or legal status, but it does postpone legal action such as deportation for up to two years (Deferred, 2021).

One thing both of these policies have in common is that, as most policies surrounding refugee immigration in the United States, they were only temporary solutions to problems that continued into the subsequent presidential administration.

### **Trump Administration**

Following the Obama administration, former President Trump took even more drastic measures to stem the flow of migrants in the southern states by separating families and holding people in detention for extended periods of time before they appeared in court to apply for legal status ("The Trump," 2021). Former President Trump also implemented the practice of



separating families at the border, keeping children in facilities that were not prepared, trained, or equipped to care for children (Lynch, 2020).

As each president is also in charge of setting a limit per fiscal year of the number of refugees to be admitted, Trump lowered the cap to a record low of 18,000 for the year of 2020, and due in part to the pandemic only 11,814 were actually admitted (Monin et al., 2021).

Another policy Trump established before the end of his presidency is called Title 42 and was enacted officially as a health provision supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), but reports trace the policy's creation to the Department of Homeland Security and the White House, raising suspicions over the credibility of its claimed CDC backing ("A guide," 2022). This policy utilizes the global COVID19 pandemic as a means to give border security officers the authority to deny entry to and immediately send back anyone that crosses the border, without any proof or reason, and refuse them the opportunity to claim asylum. Even today this policy is still in place and being utilized.

Another policy implemented by former President Trump is the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also called the "Remain in Mexico" program (Roy, 2022). Contrary to normally asylee processing which allows for applicants to remain in the United States while their cases are processed, the MPP forced asylum seekers to stay on the other side of the US/Mexico border while awaiting the results of their asylum applications (Roy, 2022). The results were that people were forced to wait in dangerous circumstances, and those who tried to cross the border were sent back on the basis of Title 42 (Isacson, 2018). In 2020 Trump went further to suspend case processing, but not stop deportations, so that by 2021 over 71,000 asylum-seekers had been deported without getting a chance to apply for asylum (Isacson, 2018).

Trump also established the infamous Zero Tolerance Policy, which demanded the separation of families at the Mexican border for processing. Children, husbands, and wives were separated and sent to different facilities for detention, sometimes in different states (“The Trump,” 2021). Records were not well kept, and reuniting the families still has not been fully completed to this day (“Zero,” 2018).

As polarized and political the topic of immigration has become today, it is worth noting that keeping migrants in inhuman conditions and treating them as criminals upon initial arrival is not a modern concept. In 1981, 40-50,000 Haitians crossed the Caribbean by boat to claim asylum at a port of entry in Florida. As individual cases were processed, the majority were considered economic migrants, and only a few hundred were granted asylee status (Huyck & Bouvier, 1983). Working with the Haitian government, the US began intercepting boats of Haitian migrants on their way to Florida in order to send them back, unless they could prove they qualified for refugee status. Those who were able to dodge the US government on the water and successfully reach Florida, approximately 2,000 Haitians, were kept in harsh conditions in Florida in order to dissuade anyone else from coming (Huyck & Bouvier, 1983). No single time period or political party is to blame for the issues surrounding refugees and immigration.

### **The Refugee Process Under Current Circumstances**

There is much literature and many studies have been done on refugees in US history, charting the journeys different groups have taken, and documenting the reasons behind their displacement. Reasons for fleeing range from government corruption and systematic, targeted persecution to gang violence and human rights violations (Luiselli, 2017, p. 77). The process of becoming a refugee and being resettled in the US can take anywhere from a matter of months to decades depending on the circumstances. Afghan refugees that were evacuated following the rise

of the Taliban in 2021 were admitted to the US on parolee status and sent to their final destinations within months. In contrast, there are refugee camps in Africa in which some people have spent more than twenty years; some people are born in these camps and spend the whole of their life waiting for their turn on a seemingly endless list to be sent from the host country to the resettlement country.

Under the current presidential administration of President Biden, there has yet to be significant change implemented in refugee policy, aside from raising the presidential determination on how many refugees are allowed to enter the United States (“U.S. Annual,” 2022). The process by which refugees permitted to enter the United States actually come varies depending on where they come from and how they enter the United States.

### ***UNHCR Refugee Process***

Refugees from Europe, Asia, and Africa typically begin their journey by leaving their home country and registering for refugee status through the United Nations. After they are granted refugee status, they are placed on a waiting list to be resettled; in the meantime, they stay in the host country and some refugees, if they are able, will work or attend school classes (United Nations, 2019). Once their case has been allocated to a resettlement organization in the US, the case is assured by the organization, and they begin preparing for travel. This includes background checks by multiple and separate authorities, as well as necessary medical clearances (“Refugee Medical,” 2012; “Refugee Processing, 2020). Upon arrival, each refugee is given three months to resettle; this means three months with a limited stipend of about \$1000 per person to live off of while they find a job and begin working to earn an income to have after the stipend is gone, enroll their children in school, apply for social security, find permanent housing, and adjust to an entirely new culture while navigating through a language barrier (Phillips,

2015). Those who travel with their families sometimes have an advantage because they are given a stipend per person, so they have more initial funds to work with. Those who are separated from family face the additional burden of trying to be reunified, and often the challenge of trying to earn money to send to their family until reunification is possible. And in some cases, refugees cannot even start on a basis of nothing, but actually arrive in debt to the United States due to loans from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (“An Overview,” 2021). These interest-free loans are given to refugees to cover the costs of their travel to the United States, and refugees are required to begin repayment of these loans within six months of arriving in the United States and must pay them off entirely within 46 months (“United States,” n.d.).

### ***Southern Border Migration***

Migration that occurs at the southern US border is primarily asylum-seekers from Central and South America who are fleeing gang violence, human trafficking, poverty, corrupt governments, or all of the above. However, not all people who cross the border are Latin American; Arabic, Chinese, and Slavic migrants have also been documented crossing the Southern Border (Lynch, 2020). In some cases, the only evidence is a discarded ID card found in trash cans; often the migrants will claim to be from a different country if they do not want to reveal their actual nationality (Lynch, 2020).

Often, the process of illegal border crossing along the US/Mexico border is run like a business. There is a person at the top who runs the entire operation and employs coyotes to recruit migrants, then coyotes will find men to lead groups to the US through the desert (Urrea, 2014, p. 53). The fee to cross with a coyote is steep, often well over one thousand dollars per person (Urrea, 2014, p. 67). The coyote keeps a share of this profit, and the men leading the groups get paid per person they successfully take to the US (Urrea, 2014, p. 67). This business is

advertised and men are recruited by word-of-mouth (Urrea, 2014, p. 50). Coyotes are employed to take women, men, and even children, with or without families, to the southern border (Luiselli, 2017, p. 76). However, costs are never certain; sometimes upon arrival the migrants are held for ransom, and if their families cannot pay, they may be trafficked instead (Gorman, 2010). In some countries, the journey to the United States begins by boarding a train called La Bestia (Luiselli, 2017, p. 19). People riding the train are sometimes given help, mainly by Catholic organizations or individuals, who provide snacks or water to pass to the migrants along the railroad tracks (Luiselli, 2017, p. 27). Some migrants travel by foot, or with the aid of a sponsor who purchases a plane or bus ticket for them (Jordan, 2018).

### ***Northern Border Migration***

An article published in 2017 stated that between 8,000 to 13,000 asylum seekers crossed the US/Canada border between 1995 to 2001 (Cowger, 2017). In comparison, 396,579 migrants were met at the US/Mexico border in 2018 alone, and this is recorded as “the fifth lowest total since 1973” (Isacson, 2018). At the time of that article’s publication, the author highlights a sudden increase in border crossings as a result of Trump’s strict border policies noting that most asylum seekers arrived from the United States (Cowger, 2017). Because the US was deporting and barring more asylum seekers, people were heading northward and making asylum claims in Canada as well as the US (Cowger, 2017). According to the same article, most of the asylum-seekers are from Africa and the Middle East (Cowger, 2017).

Canada has the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to monitor the border for illegal entrants (“Claiming,” 2021). If someone is found crossing the border between ports of entry, they are taken to the nearest port of entry to be screened and processed (“Claiming,” 2021). According to the Safe Third Country

Agreement between the United States and Canada, asylum-seekers are required to seek asylum in the first safe country they enter (“Claiming,” 2021). This means that asylum-seekers who arrive to Canada from the USA are disqualified from seeking asylum in Canada and may be sent back to the United States. If an asylum-seeker arrives in Canada from a different port of entry, they will go through a normal screening process to determine if they meet the UN definition of a refugee and are either approved for or denied legal refugee status.

While Canada’s rates of detention are far, far lower than the United States, the numbers show that during the Trump administration there was a steep increase in illegal entrants (intake of 433 to 2,159 within the span of 5 months); then, in 2020, those numbers changed drastically again, this time in decline as a result of COVID19 and Canada closing its borders (intake of 3,500 to 360 within a span of 6 months) (“Immigration,” 2022). The reasons for the difference between these statistics is partially geographical; in order to enter Canada by foot one must pass through the United States. This makes the journey incredibly longer and more difficult, and according to the Safe Third Country Agreement any asylum-seeker can be immediately sent back. There are exceptions to this rule, including but not limited to asylum-seekers who have relatives in Canada, or any unaccompanied minor who claims asylum (“Claiming,” 2021). The only other options would be to arrive by boat which is extremely dangerous, to come by a different port of entry, or overstay a visa. Canada also employed stricter policies during the pandemic in sealing its borders even to documented travelers.

### ***Exceptions During Crises***

In response to global crises, there have been times in the past when the United States made exceptions to expedite the refugee process for certain people groups. In 2021, the United States evacuated Afghans after the rise of the Taliban and granted them Parolee status in the

United States; this does not count as permanent legal status, however, and humanitarian parolees still need to make a separate application for permanent status (Zelaya, 2022). Then, after Russia invaded Ukraine in March 2022, Ukrainian refugees were given a similar status as an exception to the refugee process in order to allow them to seek refuge in the United States.

Whether traveling from the Northern or Southern border, or from abroad via the UNHCR, one thing that all of these processes have in common is that they are all legal forms of gaining refugee status within the United States.

### **Legal Versus Illegal Entry**

Refugee and asylee are both considered legal status in the United States, and both have paths to citizenship. Refugees and asylees who are resettled in the United States pay taxes, hold valid IDs, drive, own business, are authorized to work, and have social security.

Undocumented or illegal residents in the United States include those who enter the US without being processed through US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or overstay their visa (“Defining,” n.d.). People who want to apply for asylum are legally permitted to do so at a port of entry; these people are undocumented and unauthorized yet have the right to remain in the US until their asylum application is either approved or denied. If they are approved they are granted legal asylee status, and if they are denied, they are deported. One exception to this is the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), which requires illegal entrants and asylum-seekers to wait in Mexico until their appearance is required in court (Roy, 2022).

Undocumented or illegal aliens includes seasonal workers who do not register for work authorizations or document their presence in the US at all, and in 2019, statistics show that 27.3% of all agricultural workers were undocumented (“Immigration and Agriculture,” 2021). In order to work legally, workers are required to have a social security number and work

authorization from the DHS; without these, it is illegal to employ an immigrant (“Employment,” 2022). Currently, there are over 11,000,000 illegal immigrants living in the United States in total (“Profile,” 2022).

This reality has created a massive debate surrounding national security in the United States. While being known for an open, welcoming society and the possibility of achieving the “American Dream,” there are still measures that need to be taken in order to maintain that reputation, including addressing security threats that come with immigration.

### **Border Patrol**

Border patrol officers were first employed in 1924 during Prohibition in response to the smuggling of alcohol; during this time there were also many deportations of Mexicans searching for work in the United States (Public, n.d.). Since then, border patrol personnel have increased as the need to secure the borders has increased as well. There are strong stereotypes and biases surrounding Border Patrol, and many people do not think favorably of them. These stereotypes arise from stories and media depictions of aggression from border patrol officers towards migrants. For example, images of border patrol officers on horseback, forcefully deterring Haitian migrants from crossing into a migrant camp in Del Rio, Texas (Chappell, 2021).

Many people also assume that border patrol officers are restricted to an area of authority within a certain number of miles along the border; this is not true. As federal agents, the border patrol officers have the authority to enforce federal law anywhere in the United States (“Authority,” 2012). The border patrol officers do not, however, have the authority to deport migrants (Wise & Petras, 2018). All migrants apprehended by the border patrol are detained and processed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and issued a court date to apply for asylum by the Department of Homeland security (Wise & Petras, 2018).



Despite the challenges that come with offering refuge to people who find themselves unable to remain in their homes, the United States has benefitted greatly from receiving refugees. For the refugees themselves, there is also much to gain in being resettled in the United States; however, the benefits may not be so easily attained right away, especially from a local, day-to-day perspective.

### **Local Community Perspective and Integration**

The culture that refugees bring with them contribute to the diversity within the United States and as each culture is unique, that is something for the migrants to be proud of. However, there is a certain degree to which migrants need to adjust to life in a different country. They often must learn basic everyday functions like how to use indoor appliances or a public bus system until they get a driver's license, if they choose to. Language barrier is also another common and difficult hurdle. To overcome these struggles, interaction from citizens of the new country can be a major advantage. This is, again, why communicating truthfully about refugees in media is so important: to create attitudes of curiosity and sympathy that inspire others to help and ease the transition of the refugees, rather than to instill fear and reinforce biases and prejudice, making barriers among different groups in society that create instability and more problems. Most aid to refugees currently in the United States comes from sources such as nonprofit organizations or religious organizations, such as Church World Services (History CWS, n.d.).

Refugees too often face the harsh reality of being unable to stay in their home country and may feel unwanted anywhere else. A key to the definition of being a refugee is that you are forced to flee from your home; many people forget that refugees do not choose to come to other countries. If given the opportunity many would not have left their home country in the first place, and many of those who do dream of returning someday (Luiselli, 2017, p. 12-13). What is often

overlooked is the positive impact that refugees have on the United States. Many studies have been done to analyze the societal, cultural, educational, and economic impact of refugees in the United States, with good results.

Refugee and asylee policy in the United States is the center of much debate, and poses challenges for citizens and refugees alike. The stereotype surrounding refugees makes it more difficult for them to integrate into United States society, and for citizens to accept them. In order for peace and harmony to be manifested in society, it is important to have a clear view of what is true and what is bias or fear when approaching one another. The following theories offer a foundation on which one may approach the issue of how to promote successful integration of refugees into the United States that does not require them to lose their identity, and does not pose a threat to local society. These theories help promote understanding both for refugees and receiving communities of how communication can be utilized in helping refugees transition and adapt to their new environments.

### **Communication Theory**

The challenges and opinions surrounding the topic of refugee and asylee immigration in the United States can be made sense of in the frame of various communication theories. One of these theories is co-cultural theory (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 449). The term “co-cultural” is used to refer to groups that are typically minorities, subcultural, or nondominant (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 449). Co-cultural theory attempts to define and explain different ways that minority groups adapt to living in a place where their native culture is not the dominant culture. This applies to immigrants of all kinds, and helps explain the different ways refugees respond to being resettled in a new country. There are three main divisions identified in co-cultural theory: assimilation, accommodation, and separation; within each of these divisions are three levels of strength:

nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 450). Assimilators are the mildest adaptors who seek to conform to the dominant culture without trying to maintain their own cultural identity (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 451). Accommodators try to change the dominant culture to suit their needs and expectations, and separators seek to maintain a distinction between their culture and the dominant culture in which they live (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 454-455). Each refugee and immigrant is different, and how well they will or will not adjust to resettlement depends on where they come from and the method they choose to use in adapting. For example, Asian cultures tend to be higher context than Western cultures like the United States, meaning that communication depends more heavily on nonverbal cues than on spoken words, and meaning is derived from interpretation rather than direct messages. Differences such as this may lead refugees to feel confused or uncertain of how to communicate with locals in their new environment and may be a contributing factor into refugees seeking out other immigrants from the same or similar culture as theirs, and forming a sub-community within the new culture.

On the other hand, for assimilators as defined in co-cultural theory, the trauma or experiences the refugees have gone through may make them feel more inclined to putting their past culture and roots behind them and fully embracing the new culture. Sometimes, this applies more strongly not to the refugees themselves, but to their children. Children born in the new country in which refugees have resettled may not share the same memories of their parents' culture and choose to conform to the environment they are raised in instead. This leads us to the concept of norms and social influences.

Another communication concept that plays a role in multi-cultural settings are group norms and influences. Group norms and influence impacts the choices we make as individuals by manipulating our instinctual desires to be included and gain approval. This influence can be

informative, meaning that group seems “correct,” or it can be normative, which means that group sets the standard for how to “gain rewards and avoid punishments” (Gass & Seiter, 2016, p.125). Influence can be communicated with different factors including verbal persuasion techniques, such as the softening-up stage of cult indoctrination, and nonverbal cues, like facial expressions or appearance (Gass & Seiter, 2016, p. 127). Naturally, newcomers to a group want to be accepted, and those already in the group do not want to lose their place. The norms set and exhibited by a dominant culture can have strong influence over the habits of refugees and challenge their native cultural norms. Combined with co-cultural theory, group norms and influence set the standard to dictate expectations, and based on the individual’s response it may also determine their level of success navigating the new culture. However, another factor in success lies in the communication utilized by the receiving communities that refugees enter.

Communication accommodation theory is applicable to both the refugee and the native community. This theory examines the ways we change how we speak and communicate to minimize social distance (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 423). This is different from co-cultural theory because it applies to the receiving community as well as the refugee. Co-cultural theory focuses on how minority populations choose to communicate within the dominant population, but communication accommodation theory gives a framework that can be applied to communication coming from the native communities as well. There are two options: accommodation or nonaccommodation, with strategies of convergence and divergence. Convergence tends to make the message receivers more comfortable, whereas divergence can lead to stereotyping and greater social distance (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 425). Adapting to a society is the responsibility of the refugee to a great degree, but no matter how hard they try, if the dominant society is not welcoming or accommodating, they may become marginalized. This is why it is so crucial that

societies have accurate information on the reality of refugee lives and policies. By adopting accommodating convergence techniques in communication and interaction with refugees, the transition of becoming part of a new country can be made more easily.

These three theories work together in explaining how refugees respond to their new environment, and how their new environment responds to them. Co-cultural theory thoroughly outlines different levels of either integrating, blending without conforming, or separating entirely from a new culture. An understanding of co-cultural theory can help recognize communicative behaviors in refugees and give reasons as to why they may have adopted those kinds of behaviors. After a refugee's communication method is recognized, communication accommodation theory provides a way to measure communication both received from and used towards refugees and determine their willingness to interact, and a way to sound more inviting and encouraging to them. Finally, group norms and influence defines nonverbal factors of communication and how they may be perceived by refugees, the newcomers to the group. Group behaviors can be intimidating if unchecked, or welcoming if regulated. The key is understanding behaviors first in order to better control them, and utilizing these three theories is an excellent way to creating positive change and raising awareness in how communication is used towards refugees in the United States.

The methodology of this study is centered around identifying challenges refugees face, and the reality of what they contribute to the United States society. By compiling true and accurate facts and applying theory, conclusions are drawn on how people within the United States can take a more informed approach to tackling issues surrounding refugee and asylee policies in the United States, and how they can develop more effective and relevant policies in the future. Using communication theories as a framework for the information provides a method

of understanding obscure and baseless opinions and biases towards refugees. Once identified, they are replaced with facts, which then results in thoughtful and intentional communication and decrease in division regarding refugee and asylee policy in the United States.

### **Methodology**

The goal of this study is to review the history of refugee and asylee policy in the United States and how it has developed to its current structure, and to map the process refugees undertake to reach the United States. A visual map is key to understanding the content of this research by providing a scale of how much time and distance is involved in resettling a refugee to the United States. Government databases and studies were used to trace the development of refugee policy globally and within the United States. Classroom resources from a border studies course were also utilized by the student researcher to piece together the timeline of refugee and asylee policy in the United States. Journals, studies, and completed research formed the basis of this study for the purposes of collecting data, information, and constructing maps of the refugee journeys from various countries.

### **Participants**

No participants were required for the purposes of this study.

### **Apparatus and Materials**

The materials used for this study include government databases and reports, journals, articles, and news reports. All information was collected, stored, and analyzed on a laptop computer.

### **Procedure**

This study was conducted according to the following procedure: research and determine the timeline of refugee and asylee policy in the United States, identify challenges and issues

surrounding refugees and asylees that come to the United States, and connect the issues to communication theory. Information for mapping and the literature review was gathered from academic journals, government websites, documentaries, non-fiction books, textbooks, Pew Research Center, and nonprofit organization websites. By researching data and analyzing issues from a communication perspective, conclusions are drawn from the results of the study.

### **Statistics and Graphical Representations**

The following graphs illustrate global statistics related to refugee issues, and how refugee resettlement within the United States compares. The first graph illustrates that the United States has been a leader in global refugee resettlement (see Figure 1), and the second graph shows how those numbers within the US have fluctuated in the past (see Figure 2), leading to the US losing its leading status during the Trump Administration. Figure 3 illustrates the number of refugees entering the United States based on ethnic demographics, and finally, figure four shows the countries that host the most refugees prior to their resettlement. The graphs have been organized to lead into the mapping of the journey by providing context as to what the big picture of refugee resettlement looks like, before diving into the different pathways.

**Figure 1****U.S. trailed rest of world in refugee resettlement in 2017 and 2018 after leading it for decades***Number of refugee admissions, in thousands, by calendar year*

Note: Figures rounded to the nearest thousand.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees data, accessed June 12, 2019.

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Figure 1. U.S. Trained Rest of World in Refugee Resettlement in 2017 and 2018 After Leading It for Decades. Adapted from “Key Facts About Refugees to the U.S.” Retrieved May 22, 2022 from *Pew Research Center*.

Statistically the number of admitted refugees has almost always fallen below the Presidential Determination capacity (“US Annual,” 2022). The exceptions would be the years 2013-2016, when the number of admitted refugees reached or excelled the limit (“US Annual,” 2022). Due to the COVID19 pandemic and changes in policy during the Trump administration, the ceiling for determining refugee capacity dropped drastically in the years 2017-2020 (“US Annual,” 2022).

**United States Compared to the World (fig. 1)**

Since the 1980s, the United States had been a leader in refugee resettlement until 2017 (“An Overview,” 2021). In 2018 the United States lost its place as a leader in refugee resettlement for the first time, dropping below Canada (Radford & Connor, 2020). That same year, the United States reached a record low in refugee acceptance rates with a total of 11,814 (“An Overview,” 2021).

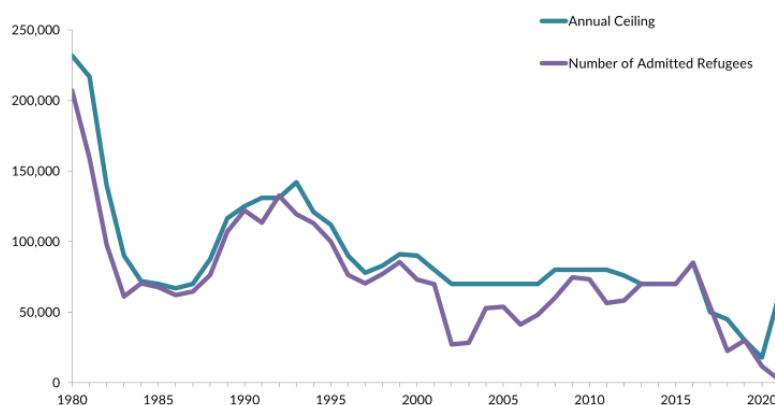
**USA Refugee Admissions Ceiling (fig. 2)****Figure 2**

Figure 2. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceiling and Number of Refugees Admitted to the United States, FY 1980-2021. Adapted from “Refugees and Asylees in the United States,” by U.S. Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services, *Migration Policy Institute*. Retrieved May 22, 2022 from U.S. Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services.



## Regions of Origin of US Refugee Arrivals (fig. 3)

The majority of refugees traveling to the United States historically came from European Slavic nations and Asia (Monin et al., 2021). This trend has shifted currently to Latin American and African countries being the origin of most refugees (Monin et al., 2021). In the past ten years, the top three origin countries of all refugees traveling to the United States are Myanmar (21%), Iraq (18%), and Bhutan (13%) (Monin et al., 2021).

## Top Host Countries 2019 (fig 4)

The countries with the most refugees passing through temporarily on the way to final resettlement as of 2019 are Turkey, Jordan, and Colombia (“The World’s,” n.d.). Although these countries allow refugees to seek safety and stay in refugee camps while awaiting resettlement, not all of them offer or utilize methods of granting citizenship to refugees (Council, n.d.). Therefore, refugees must wait until they are

**Figure 3**

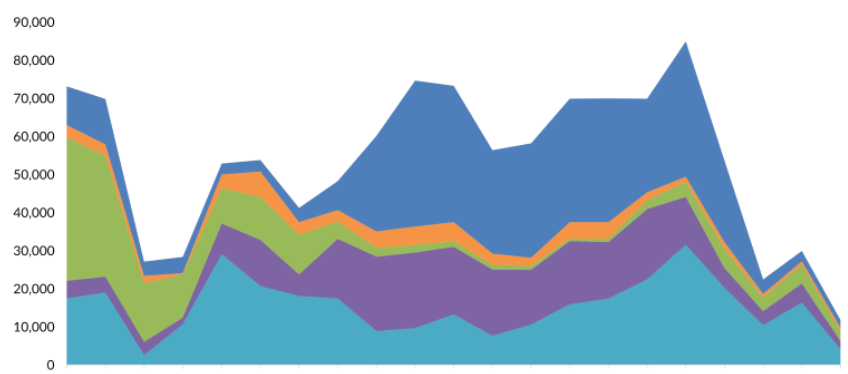


Figure 3. Regions of Origin of U.S. Refugee Arrivals, FY 2000-20. Adapted from

“Refugees and Asylees in the United States,” by U.S. Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services, *Migration Policy Institute*. Retrieved May 22, 2022 from U.S. Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services.

**Figure 4**



Figure 4. Regions of Origin of U.S. Refugee Arrivals, FY 2000-20. Adapted from “The World’s Refugees in Numbers,” *Amnesty International*. Retrieved May 22, 2022 from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/global-refugee-crisis-statistics-and-facts/>

resettled to a third country, such as the United States, to gain permanent residency.

## **Summary**

The information in these graphs is a framework for understanding the vastness of global refugee issues. Before diving into individual countries and paths to the United States, these graphs give an overview of the quantity of refugees traveling abroad, and the different countries that play a role in their journey. The following maps use the top five countries (i.e., Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar) from which refugees come to the United States to give a better illustration of the ways refugees are resettled and the options available to them. As seen in the graphs, there are more countries involved in this process and different volumes of people coming from the native countries used in the examples; these maps illustrate the most common routes for an example and are not meant to be an exhaustive representation.

## **Mapping the Journey**

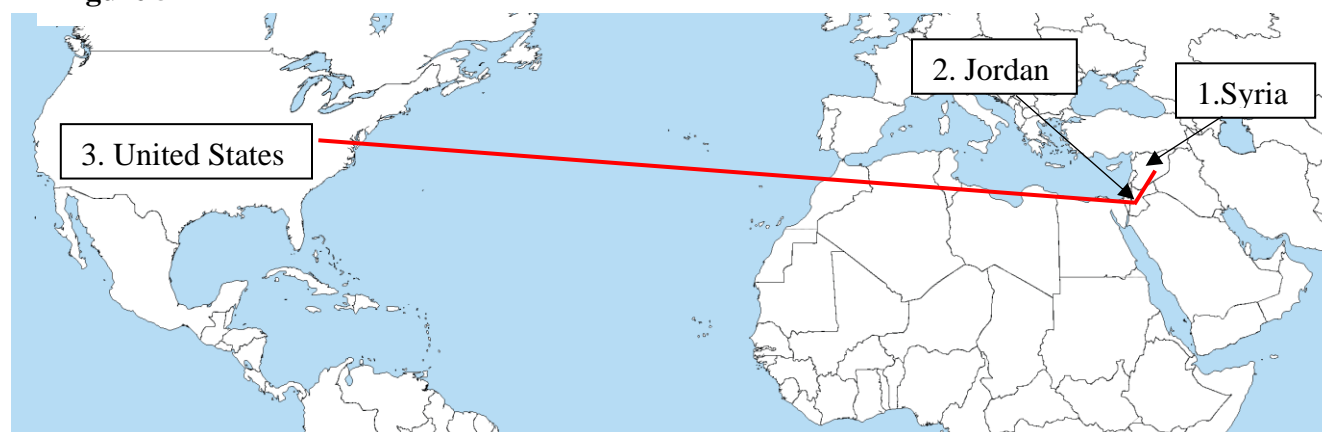
Currently, the top five nations from which refugees come globally are Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar (Reid, 2021). The journey for refugees to the United States normally includes at least three parts: fleeing the home country, arriving in the host country, and resettling in a third country if the host country does not offer a path to citizenship. The time it takes from fleeing a country to being resettled could be a matter of days or weeks, to a matter of years. Traditional routes from these five countries are discussed and illustrated in the following sections.

## **Syria**

Since the Syrian Civil War began, more than 6.8 million refugees and asylum seekers have fled Syria (Reid, 2021). Refugees coming to the US from Syria may flee first to a nearby host country such as Lebanon or Jordan (Reid, 2021). Here, they will apply to be registered for

refugee status under the UNHCR. If they are accepted, then they are put on a waitlist to be resettled. They will remain in their host country in a refugee camp, where they may or may not have the opportunity to go to school or work while they wait for their turn to be resettled. Once it is their turn, resettling organizations in the United States will be notified and if they have capacity, they will accept the refugee's case. Then the refugee is notified and prepared for travel; this preparation includes vaccinations, medical check-ups, and background screenings multiple different organizations ("Refugee Medical," 2012) ("Refugee Processing, 2020). After they have been cleared, they complete the final step of traveling to the United States (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**



## **Venezuela**

Venezuelans coming to the US often spend less time in host countries, and statistically more Venezuelans enter the United States seeking asylum than with refugee status (Monin et al., 2021). To come to the United States from Venezuela, if a person has a sponsor such as family or

a friend that is willing to help them travel, then they may purchase a plane ticket and arrive to Mexico to cross the border by foot. Otherwise, they will utilize other methods of transportation such as trains, buses, or walking. Some come alone or travel with family or friends, and some may pay for a coyote, or human smuggler, to take them to the border.

Coyotes are the most expensive, although not always the most dangerous, option. Those who reach a port of entry on the US/Mexico border may claim asylum, but others enter illegal through the desert, over the mountains on the border, or by climbing the border wall. No matter how they enter,

once they are apprehended by border patrol, they are taken to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and detained until they are identified and processed. Upon release from detention they are given a notice to appear in court to determine whether their asylum claim will be approved or whether they will be deported. Those who succeed in claiming asylum are granted asylee status and may remain in the United States (see Figure 6).

### **Afghanistan**

In the aftermath of the Afghan crisis in 2021, Afghans were evacuated and brought to the United States by exception under Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and given Humanitarian Parolee status upon arrival (see Figure 7). Most Afghans came from Afghanistan to the US, where they lived and were processed at US military bases, rather than traveling to host countries



prior to coming to the US. They were then transported to different states based on capacity, connections (US ties), or personal preference. After being resettled, they currently have two years in which to apply for asylee status. If they fail to apply within two years, they will no longer have legal status in the US and may be subject to deportation.

**Figure 7**



### **South Sudan**

After war broke out in the newly formed country of South Sudan in 2013, refugees began fleeing the country; an overwhelming amount of these Sudanese refugees, about 63%, are children (“South Sudan,” n.d.). Sudanese refugees coming to the US come as registered UNHCR refugees. They will often flee first to host countries such as Sudan, Uganda, or Ethiopia (“South Sudan,” n.d.). After arriving to the host country and registering with the UNHCR, they join the waitlist to be resettled in their third country (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8**



## Myanmar

Due to persecution of the Rohingya ethnic group in Myanmar, over 1.1 million refugees have left the country (Reid, 2021). There are currently 34 Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, and about half of the Rohingya refugees are children (Reid, 2021). After arriving in a refugee camp, the Rohingya refugees receive aid from humanitarian organizations such as World Vision, and await resettlement (See Figure 9) (Reid, 2021).

**Figure 9**



The United States is a global leader in refugee resettlement. In a 2018 survey of US citizens views on immigration, 68% had a positive view on accepting refugees and immigrants (Rasmussen & Poushter, 2019). Refugees contribute greatly to society; the culture and diversity they bring enriches the local communities, and they have hard work ethics and a desire to succeed having been given the opportunity to make a better life. In the US, 77% of adults believe that refugees and asylees take jobs that citizens do not want (Krogstad et al., 2020). This opinion is backed by data showing that in 2019, 48.9% of agriculture workers were immigrants, and 27.3% were undocumented (“Immigration,” 2021). These include jobs such as agriculture, manufacturing, and food industries (Krogstad et al., 2020).

A large factor in the development of refugee and asylee policy is that many people stereotype democrats as being more pro-immigration and republicans as being more anti-immigration. However, the issues surrounding the immigration system in the United States in all of its various forms originated from both democratic and republican administrations. The problems with and perspective on immigration in the United States cannot be blamed on one political party or another; refugee and asylee policy is much more than a political debate, despite politics being a massive factor in the development of these policies. While politics has a role in both negative and positive changes to immigration policies that impact refugees and asylees, claiming that one political party is better than the other in regards to refugees in the United States does not heal division, but rather increases it. Taking sides only makes the issues bigger and the division and polarization more pronounced. In order to address the issues surrounding immigration, it is important first to remember that the problems cannot be assigned solely to one political party or another.

Being a country founded and populated mostly by immigrants, the issues surrounding immigration in the United States cannot be ignored. The United States is extremely diverse, so naturally favorability of immigration in the United States should be increasing among citizens as the populations of immigrants are increasing simultaneously as well. In 2019, the majority of refugees came from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and studies show that today, one in every ten black people in the United States is an immigrant (Budiman, 2020)(Tamir & Anderson, 2022). The Asian population in the United States is growing as well, and researchers estimate that Asians will soon make up the largest percentage of all immigrants in the United States (Budiman, 2020). Regardless of any one person's ethnicity, heritage, or political affiliation, immigration and refugee policy should be a priority in civic duty.

## **Theory**

Understanding relevant communication theories can be a huge help in promoting effective and positive communication between refugees and the dominant society within the United States. The co-cultural theory principles apply to the results of this study because the principles provide a foundation which we can use to begin to understand the ways refugees need to be supported, based on their response to their new environment. Assimilation-response refugees who are more receptive and willing to engage in the new dominant culture will have different needs than separation-response refugees. Co-cultural theory also outlines some potential conflicts based on minority response to dominant culture. Depending on which communication orientation is utilized, immigrants may choose, for example, to take advantage of stereotypes to get what they want, or they may be stifled unintentionally by being overly cautious in communicating (Griffin et al, 2019, p. 453). By being aware and mindful of these challenges, dominant cultures will be better prepared to provide aid to newly resettled refugees and make the transition smoother for these vulnerable groups.

Utilizing communications theories in the study of refugee integration is useful in minimizing social distance in society. Understanding communication styles of refugees is half of a solution; the other half is monitoring our own communication towards them. The communication accommodation theory provides an easy illustration with convergence versus divergence, both of which may be useful in interacting with refugees (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 454). Convergence is a way we can change our speech to make them feel comfortable, and divergence is a way we can highlight our differences positively when learning about each other's culture.

## **Pragmatic Implications**



One of the most needed pragmatic steps to be taken in refugee and asylee policy in the United States is to more active enforce refugee and asylee rights to a translator by employing more accessible translation services for a greater variety of languages. Immigration services are legally obligated to provide language services as each migrant regardless of status has a right to information and understanding (“Frequently,” n.d.). However, due to the amount of indigenous languages present in minority ethnic groups in various countries, this sometimes proves to be more of a challenge. One way issues with immigration, particularly at the southern border, can be eased is by employing more speakers of indigenous and minority languages.

Another practical application on the topic of immigration would be sharing stories of refugees. There are many websites and organizations that seek to do so, but the need for advocacy must go beyond these few organizations. If the government were to launch a project or campaign to distribute refugee stories to the public via social media, news outlets, and print, then there is a greater chance that they would be more widespread. Rather than waiting for the public to seek out stories and information, information and stories should be published and brought to the public.

Similarly, there is a greater need for transparency in immigration dealings. Detention centers and government facilities often deny reporters or anyone else the access to go inside and see how they are maintained. This creates capacity for speculation and the spreading of false information. There also needs to be greater accountability in the work industries where immigrants make up the majority of employees. There is much trafficking and exploitation that occurs in industries where illegal migrants are employed, which is dangerous for the migrants and their families. Because these job positions are usually undesirable, it is often too easy for them to be overlooked.

## **Limitations and Recommendations for Continuing Study**

A significant limitation on this study was a lack of refugee testimonial-based research. Conducting research by gathering refugee participants to share their stories and experiences would be an immensely insightful and helpful contribution to a study on the challenges and process of immigrating to the United States as a refugee or asylum-seeker. One recommendation for further study would be to analyze the methods of adaptation based on co-cultural theory utilized by refugees of specific culture groups. For example, discovering what type of co-cultural theory adaptation method is used most commonly by refugees from Syria, and using the data to determine how the United States develop programs and systems to help them adjust based on that data.

Another recommendation for continuing study is to analyze media trends and the correlation between the way media depicts refugees and voting patterns on refugee policies. Media plays a major role in public opinion on refugees and asylees in the United States, and using media data to analyze the connection between media-based information and policy creation can show the potential of using media to promote accurate information sharing and create beneficial changes in policy that will help refugees and US citizens both. Many solutions to immigration issues are conflicting, temporary, and more destructive long-term. In order to implement effective, long-term change in a positive direction, public support and cooperation are crucial, and media can be a significant tool in achieving change.

## **Conclusion**

Refugees traveling to the United States face a long journey, complicated by the trauma they experience being forcibly displaced from their homes, in addition to the complications that are involved with moving to an entirely different country and creating a new life there.

Thankfully there is a trend in increasing favorability towards welcoming refugees in the United States (Younis, 2021). Next steps would be changing existing policies to reflect these sentiments and create a more welcoming atmosphere and practical resources to aid refugees in their resettlement by educating the current population on accurate, factual evidence and information regarding the refugee situation globally. Combining this information with appropriate, theory-based communication styles provides a solid framework for interactions between citizens and refugees.

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