

Restructuring for Resilience:

A Toolkit for Reshaping Negative Narratives about Refugees Living in the United States

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Created by:

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The purpose of this toolkit is to provide users with effective strategies for reshaping negative narratives about refugees in the United States.

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Section I: Negative and Reshaped Narratives

Example 1: Security

Negative Narrative	Reshaped Narrative
<p>“Refugees are dangerous and bring violent ideologies inside our borders. They are contributing to increased violence within our communities.”</p>	<p>A refugee is someone who is forced to leave their country, often because of torture, persecution and/or violence directed at them. They flee because they are not safe. Someone may be a refugee simply because of where they were born, how they look, or the practices/values of their family. Refugees are seeking safety, which is a foundational need of all people.</p> <p>Refugees often flee to <i>escape</i> violence. Imagine how scary and intimidating it would be to uproot your entire life (and family) and go somewhere completely new and unfamiliar.</p> <p>Before coming to the United States, refugees undergo an extensive, and often multi-year, vetting process. See Appendix A for an infographic on this process.</p> <p>There are currently no data to support the idea that refugees make communities more dangerous; in fact, data show the opposite is true. One study found that in “nine out of the ten U.S. cities that accepted the largest number of refugees from 2006 to 2015, <i>crime went down</i>—sometimes dramatically” (Misra, 2017; New American Economy, 2017b). Another study found that in 70% of the U.S. metropolitan areas studied from 1980 to 2016, the immigrant population increased while crime stayed the same or decreased. In this study, the 10 U.S. metropolitan areas “with the largest increases in number of immigrants all had lower levels of crime in 2016 than in 1980” (Flagg, 2018; Weiss, Reid, Markle, Jaret, & Adelman, 2017).</p> <p>Unfortunately, refugees are often resettled in areas that already have high rates of crime. “Federal and state agencies do not maintain data that illustrate, beyond the city and county levels, exactly where refugees are resettled, but community leaders and current and former resettlement agency employees consistently report that the majority are placed in neighborhoods where housing costs are generally low and crime rates are generally high” (Mclaughlin, 2018).</p>

Example 2: Economics

Negative Narrative	Reshaped Narrative
<p>“Refugees are becoming public charges. They are here to get free handouts and are completely dependent on social services. They are taking tax-payer dollars to support themselves and are not contributing to the economy. When they do work, they are taking away jobs from Americans.”</p>	<p>Refugees have lost much of what they had and are rebuilding their lives. They are hard workers who, with time, bolster economies and give back to the communities they join.</p> <p>Refugees do not come to the U.S. for free. They pay their way; for example, refugees who arrive to the U.S. via airline flights are required to pay the government back for their tickets (World Relief, 2019).</p> <p>“Since resettled refugees arrive in the U.S. with very little, it is unsurprising that they initially rely more heavily on public benefits than U.S. citizens. However, research indicates that, as refugees integrate and establish themselves in the U.S., they use fewer public benefits and their income levels rise, approaching parity with the U.S.-born population” (Newland & Kapps, 2017).</p> <p>In fact, “refugees contribute meaningfully to our economy as earners and taxpayers. In 2015, the almost 2.3M refugees earned a collective \$77.2B in household income. They also contributed \$20.9B in taxes. That left them with \$56.3B in disposable income, or spending power” (New American Economy, 2017a). This is an average of about \$25K per individual in spending power. See Appendix B for an infographic about refugee spending power in the U.S. Data also support the contributions refugees make to local economies. See Appendix C for an infographic on refugees’ positive economic contributions in Cleveland, Ohio.</p> <p>In addition, data show that, over time, refugees actually end up paying more in taxes than they initially received in benefits. By the time refugees who entered the U.S. as adults have been in the U.S. for 20 years, they will have paid, on average, <i>\$21,000 more</i> in taxes to local, state, and federal governments than they received in benefits over that time span (Fitzgerald & Evans, 2017).</p> <p>There is no special treatment provided for refugees when they are seeking employment. The economic sectors refugees enter often do not have an adequate supply of American-born workers and look for immigrants to fill open positions. Beyond working in existing jobs, refugees have higher entrepreneurship rates than both the U.S.-born and the foreign-born populations, actually <i>creating</i> jobs for American-born workers (National Immigration Forum, 2018).</p>

Example 3: Culture

Negative Narrative	Reshaped Narrative
<p>“Refugees are not trying to assimilate to American culture. They can’t even speak English.”</p>	<p>Refugees are actively trying to integrate and adapt to American culture. In fact, most refugees become U.S. citizens. Specifically, “more than 84% of refugees who have been in the country for 16 to 25 years have taken the step of becoming citizens, compared to roughly half of all immigrants in the country that long” (New American Economy, 2017a). Furthermore, refugees enrich the United States with their diverse cultures, practices, and traditions. Instead of the expectation for assimilation, we should focus on “integration — a dynamic process that retains the connotation of individuality. Think salad bowl, rather than melting pot: Each ingredient keeps its flavor, even as it mixes with others” (Lalami, 2017).</p> <p>It is important to note that there are barriers that make it harder for refugees to integrate into U.S. culture, including language learning. Language barriers impact a refugee’s ability to communicate, limiting access to social services, healthcare, and employment.</p> <p>For many, learning a new language takes time, especially for adults. Refugees are often trying to learn English while also managing several significant family transitions, such as finding housing and healthcare, getting a job, and enrolling their children in school.</p> <p>Refugees do learn English over time. One study found that after living in the U.S. for more than 10 years, 86% of Somalis with a refugee background speak English “well,” and 61% speak English “very well” or exclusively. Among Hmong individuals with a refugee background who have been in the U.S. for more than 10 years, 67% speak English “well,” and 43% speak English “very well” or exclusively (Mathema & Kallick, 2016).</p>

Section II: Glossary of More Appropriate and Effective Terms or Phrases

Commonly Used Terms	More Effective Term	Why?
Chain migration	Family unification / reunification	Emphasizes how migration is personal and an opportunity to keep families together or bring them back together after separation
Free handouts / Government handouts	Government benefits / assistance	Refocuses programming and resources provided by the federal and state governments on the purpose: supporting and improving the well-being of individuals and families who need it
Negative terms for refugees: boat people, illegal migrants, terrorist, etc.	Refugee / former refugee / person with a refugee experience or background / New American	Combats the negative narrative/terms by reaffirming more effective terminology and reducing dehumanizing language. Some people do not like the life-long label of refugee, and would rather consider it an experience they endured rather than an identity, especially once resettled in a permanent host country

Section III: Resources

Key Migration Terms: <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms>

Reframing Refugees - Messaging Toolkit:

<http://www.welcomingrefugees.org/sites/default/files/documents/resources/Reframing%20Refugees%20Messaging%20Toolkit.pdf>

National Immigration Forum Bibles, Badges and Bridges – "a network of conservative faith, law enforcement, business leadership, and veterans have come together to establish a new consensus on immigrants and America":

https://immigrationforum.org/landing_page/bibles-badges-business/

The Opportunity Agenda – Telling an Affirmative Story and the Pitfalls of Myth Busting:

<https://www.opportunityagenda.org/explore/resources-publications/telling-affirmative-story>

Welcoming Economics (WE) Global Network – "a regional network of more than twenty initiatives across the Rust Belt tapping into the economic development opportunities created by immigrants":

<https://www.weglobalnetwork.org/>

Frameworks Institute – How to Reframe Refugee Resettlement:

<https://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/refugeeresettlement/#>

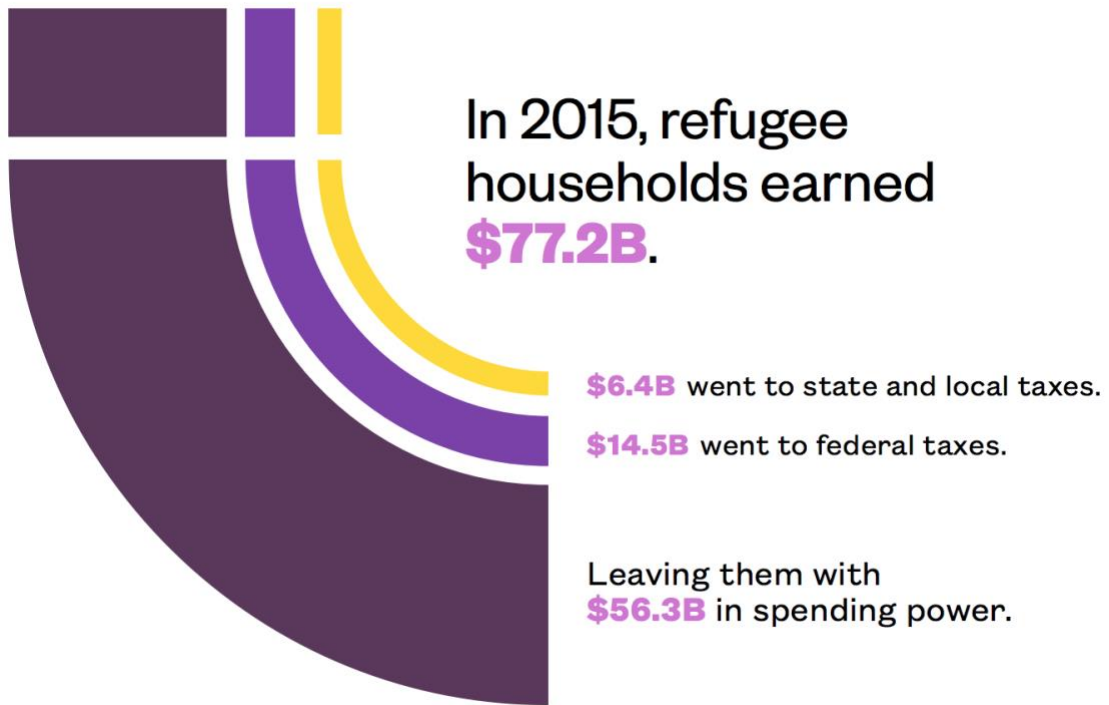
Section IV: Appendix

Appendix A: Refugee Vetting Process



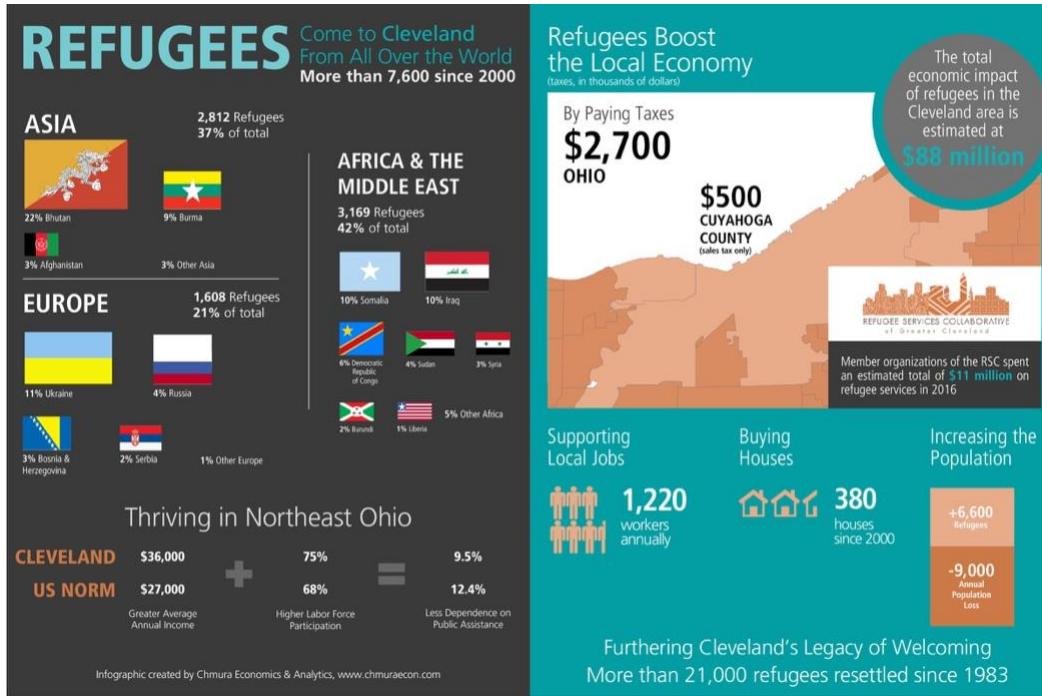
Source: <https://www.cvt.org/Refugee-Vetting-Process>

Appendix B: Refugee Spending Power in the U.S.



Source: http://research.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/11/NAE_Refugees_V6.pdf

Appendix C: Refugee Contributions to Local Economies



This is an example of refugee contributions to local economies. Spotlight on Cleveland, Ohio.

Source: <http://rscleveland.org/economic-impact-refugees-community/>

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