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## A Comparison of the Experiences of Economic Adaptation and Integration for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Maine

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A COMPARISON OF THE EXPERIENCES OF ECONOMIC ADAPTATION AND  
INTEGRATION FOR REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS IN MAINE

by

Grace Kiffney

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(International Affairs, Concentration Anthropology)

The Honors College

University of Maine

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## Abstract

The migration of refugees and asylum seekers affects them and the communities where they resettle, as people from different backgrounds and cultures come together. In the United States, the federally funded refugee resettlement program supports refugees with welfare benefits, case management, and other services to assist with integration. However, no such federal program exists for asylum seekers, who are considered displaced people, but who have not received immigration status as refugees. This project sought to answer the question: How is the experience of supporting oneself different and similar for refugees and asylum seekers, in the context of Maine?

Research involved a literature review on the use of social capital within immigrant groups, an analysis of recent local newspaper articles on the migration of asylum seekers to Maine, and eleven semi-structured key informant interviews with asylees, refugees, community leaders, and service providers. It appeared that their communities were an important source of information, temporary housing, and served as a forum from which to celebrate culture, for both refugees and asylum seekers, though perhaps more so for asylum seekers. Many refugees and asylum seekers shared the challenges of integrating into a new culture and seeking better opportunities after their credentials were devalued. This study proposes that NGOs develop mentoring programs for asylum seekers modeled on the mentoring programs organized by Catholic Charities Maine Refugee and Immigration Services. These would build bridges of understanding between refugees and members of the receiving community.

## Acknowledgements and Dedication

First and foremost, I owe a huge thank-you to my thesis advisor, Professor Rob Glover, for sharing his expertise in helping me design this project, and for his constant support and encouragement when I felt lost in the process. I would also like to thank all the members of my committee, Ken Farber, and Professors Mazie Hough, Ann Acheson, and Sam Hanes for their feedback on my project and their help designing it, as well as their help putting me in touch with contacts for this project. I would like to thank everyone who shared their valuable time and insights through allowing me to interview them. I am grateful to Rendle and Patricia Jones for the generous fellowship that helped me undertake this research. Finally, I would like to thank my family for helping me get to this stage, and my friends and fellow honors students for commiserating with me throughout this process.

This thesis is dedicated to all newcomers to the state of Maine, and everyone who is working to make the state a more welcoming place.

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## INTRODUCTION

*When I arrived in Maine I didn't know anybody. I just came to Maine because I heard of some assistance that refugees<sup>1</sup> could get from the government and that it was really helpful for the newcomers, and they were coming from all over the country. And when I heard about Maine from different people, I came here. I really had no one to help me out.*

*When I arrived at the bus station, I saw a woman was standing two steps away from me. She was on the phone and I heard her speaking Kinyarwanda, my language. I was really afraid to arrive in a new place because I didn't know how people behaved, how Maine was, I didn't know about the shelter . . . I didn't know anything.*

*But when I heard her speaking, I felt relieved. So I tried to approach her, and asked her some questions, like what part of Rwanda was she from. We talked a bit and she accepted me to stay at her place for a while until I found a place to live. Now she is like my aunt. I know she is there for me, and I am there for her. We are like family.*

-Excerpt from an interview with an asylee living in Portland, Maine

Moving can be hard for anyone. But imagine you are uprooted from your home by the threat of persecution or violence and must flee to another country in order to be safe. Perhaps you needed to leave so quickly you had to leave your family behind. When you arrive, you may not know the language, you do not know where you will live, you do not know anyone who will tell you where the grocery store is, let alone comfort you and assist you through the period of adjustment. This is the reality confronting many refugees

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<sup>1</sup> The interviewee may have been implying asylum seekers.

and asylum seekers around the world, including the asylee from Rwanda speaking above. However, as the story above illustrates, members of the community where refugees and asylum seekers resettle, if they extend their help, can make all the difference for a newcomer.

The terms “refugee” and “asylum seeker” are often confused or misunderstood, even though these distinct immigration status categories entail different benefits, opportunities, and experiences for refugees and asylum seekers once they reach the United States. Whereas refugees are assigned their immigration status before they are resettled and it is never in question, asylum seekers apply for asylee status—which equates to refugee status—once they arrive in the country where they hope to resettle. The law prevents asylum seekers from working for months while they await a decision to be made on their ability to remain in the United States. Their whole future is in doubt.

While the United States has a fairly comprehensive refugee resettlement program, with temporary financial assistance, case management, and employment services, asylum seekers cannot access any of these federally funded programs or benefits until they receive asylum. Lack of access to these benefits, programs, and the ability to work, can undermine the process of integration for asylum seekers and their economic security. Considering these factors, this study will attempt to answer the question: How is the experience of supporting oneself and integrating different and similar for refugees and asylum seekers in Maine? This study will focus on Maine because a significant number of asylum seekers have migrated to Maine over the past decade and a half. Though several thousand refugees have been resettled through the federal refugee resettlement program over the past thirty years, there is often a disconnect between the federal refugee



and asylum policy and its implementation at the local level, which has often led to frustration among long-term Mainers and among refugees and asylum seekers. Additionally, as the least racially or ethnically diverse state, Maine presents an interesting backdrop from which to explore the tensions that have arisen between some long-term Mainers and new Mainers such as refugees and asylum seekers, who often have distinct cultural and ethnic backgrounds than the majority of Maine's population. Furthermore, the state of Maine and its cities provide General Assistance, which is one of few welfare programs in the nation that serves asylum seekers, adding to the complexity of the issue.

However, this study will move beyond analyzing the different welfare benefits and opportunities afforded to refugees and asylum seekers in Maine, and compare the ways refugees and asylum seekers support themselves using social capital. Social capital is often embedded within co-ethnic immigrant communities, and members of these communities often utilize social capital in order to "make it," due to the challenging conditions presented by their new home: the language barrier, devalued credentials, few belongings and little wealth, and possible discrimination from the receiving community. Social capital is defined as the "feature of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to work together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam, 1995: 665).

This study will explore how refugees and asylum seekers use social "bonds" and "bridges" to adapt to life in Maine and improve their opportunities. While "bonding" refers to the ties of trust that become established within an immigrant group, "bridging" refers to the ties built between immigrant groups and the receiving community or other immigrant groups (Allen, 2007: 91). These ties can result in social safety nets for

newcomers, or may lead to cross-cultural understandings. Cross-cultural understandings may make the host community members more welcoming and tolerant as they learn from the newcomers about their cultures. They may also ease the process of integration, as newcomers learn about the cultural norms and day-to-day aspects of life in their new home from members of the receiving community. If social bridges improve the process of integration, they may result in better economic opportunities for newcomers.

There is some research on refugees' use of social capital, but there is far less research on asylum seekers' use of social capital to survive, let alone succeed in their new circumstances. This is significant, because in the United States, asylum seekers are afforded a much smaller safety net than refugees, perhaps leading asylum seekers to rely more on their communities for help than refugees. This informal asylum seeker community support is essential, but cannot take the place of programs and policies, such as those that serve refugees, in assisting asylum seekers with the process of integration. Because U.S. immigration policy has not been significantly reformed for decades, it may not be likely that U.S. asylum policy will be modernized soon. Thus, integration policies for refugees and asylum seekers will likely have to be made at the state or local levels. Local level programs that serve refugees, such as those run by Catholic Charities Maine Refugee and Immigration Services, though they receive significant federal funding, may be able to serve as models for integration programs for asylum seekers in Maine and elsewhere.

The first chapter of this thesis will briefly chronicle the history of the international refugee system, and the history of the refugee and asylum systems in the United States. It will explore some of the issues within the U.S. asylum system, both for asylum seekers

and the communities where they resettle. It will also compare the issues facing the US asylum system with the US refugee program, which has not been significantly modernized since the 1980s, when it was established, and which faces its own challenges. The second chapter will focus on the Maine case of refugee and asylum seeker resettlement, concentrating on the last fifteen years. It will provide a brief history of the main refugee and asylum seeker migrations to Maine from the Middle East and Africa, and how the receiving community has responded over time to these migrations. Specifically it will discuss the General Assistance controversy and the immigrant rights advocacy that the controversy sparked, and the rhetoric that both sides of the debate used to support their cause. The third chapter will analyze the use of social capital within immigrant communities, and reference previous studies on how refugee communities in Maine have used social capital. This analysis will provide a framework for understanding how asylum seekers may use their social networks to support themselves in comparison with refugees. Chapter four will attempt to answer the research question above by analyzing the insights that asylees, refugees, community leaders, and service providers offered through interviews. Finally, chapter five will review the main ideas from the study and offer suggestions for moving forward.

## **Methodology**

The research methods for this project were a literature review, an analysis of local news media, and a series of eleven semi-structured key informant interviews with asylees, refugees, service providers, and community leaders. The literature review

included the history of the U.S. refugee program, and the use of social capital within immigrant groups, especially refugee groups in Portland. The news media analysis provided information about the migration of asylum seekers to Maine and chronicled the controversy over whether or not asylum seekers should be eligible to receive General Assistance.

The key informant interviews, held with members of the community who are leaders or are very knowledgeable about their community members' experiences, yielded qualitative information. Because Portland is home to asylees and refugees from diverse backgrounds and many countries of origin, I did not impose any limitations based on country of origin, or year of arrival in the United States, in attempting to contact and interview people. A comparison of the experiences of immigrants based on immigration status, refugee or asylee, would need to encompass people from all backgrounds. Thus, I attempted to interview people from many different countries and backgrounds.

To recruit participants, I began by contacting the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project and the Maine People's Alliance, and used snowball sampling from there to reach potential interviewees. Because of the nature of snowball sampling, it can produce sample bias. Indeed, the refugees and asylees I interviewed came from four main countries: Burundi, Rwanda, Iraq, and Iran. However, many of the interviewees also made a concerted effort in trying to connect me with people from diverse backgrounds.

In the end, I interviewed five asylees (two from Burundi and three from Rwanda), three refugees (two from Iran and one from Iraq), and an additional three community leaders and service providers from the receiving community. Many refugees and asylees interviewed for this study were also active in advocacy or service provision organizations

as well. Some of these interviews were conducted in person and some over the phone. In-person interviews were recorded and transcribed, and I took notes on the phone conversations. These interviews lasted thirty minutes to an hour. I asked asylees and refugees to recount their experiences getting themselves established since arriving in Maine, and asked questions about the role or importance of community, the various forms of economic support they had received, their opinions on the response of the receiving community to their arrival, how they thought the experiences of refugees and asylees differed, and their ideas or plans for improving opportunity for refugees and asylees. I asked the members of service provision and community organizations about their experiences working with asylees and refugees, and their opinions on what the community, city, and state does well in assisting refugees and asylees, and ideas for how to improve opportunity for newcomers.

To minimize risk, I sought approval for this project through the University of Maine Institutional Review Board. Participants signed consent forms that explained the research project and addressed issues of confidentiality. Asylum seeker and refugee participants will remain confidential in this report; however, if they were involved in advocacy or played a leadership role within their community they had the option to have their opinions and statements attributed to them. Service providers also had the option to have opinions and statements attributed to them.

Because the scope of this project was limited, I do not propose that the individuals interviewed for the project represent all the ideas and opinions of their communities or organizations as a whole. There is the possibility that interviewer bias has affected the way the information shared in the interviews was interpreted in this thesis. However, this

study was able to provide a number of insights that are shared among many members of asylee and refugee communities.

The first three chapters include the literature review and local news media analysis while the fourth and fifth also include analysis from the interviews. My analysis of the interviews involved reviewing the insights shared and identifying common themes and contrasts as well as my own perceptions. This project presents a sample of the main differences and similarities in the experiences refugees and asylum seekers face and a narrative of these experiences within the current context of the immigration debate in Maine.

## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND: THE CHANGING INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE AND ASYLUM CRISIS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

The current international refugee system, initiated at the close of the Second World War with the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951, cannot adequately address the worldwide refugee and asylum seeker crisis. This system, created to avoid another catastrophe like that which befell victims of the Holocaust who were denied asylum, has endured and adapted to the changing world order of the past 70 years. Its original goal was to aid European refugees from World War II; later it was intended to protect European refugees of the Cold War, then it was extended to protect refugees from all over the world fleeing international and internal state conflicts. However, with the current record number of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons in the world—59.5 million—the international refugee and asylum system struggles to assist so many people (UNHCR Global Trends, 2014: 2).

Refugees have a specific legal status that allows them to immigrate to a safe country and receive certain benefits. The formal UN Refugee Convention definition of a refugee is someone who is “unwilling or unable to return to their home country because of past persecution or a ‘well-founded’ fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 17). Official designation as a refugee is a lengthy process that requires interviews with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) staff, and often additional screening interviews with government officials of the resettlement

country. It often takes many years for a decision to be reached about the refugee's status and a resettlement site assigned (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 24-25). Many refugees are processed and given refugee status at camps. However, many people who fall under the definition of refugee face an imminent threat to their life or wellbeing, and do not have the time to undergo this lengthy status determination. Additionally, there may be no structured system in their country, such as a UNHCR refugee camp, to allow them to apply for this status (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 95). Thus, these people flee persecution and claim asylum after arriving in a safe country.

Asylees are defined by the same criteria as refugees according to the UN Refugee Convention; however, their status is determined after they reach the country where they hope to resettle (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 24). Until a decision is made about their immigration status, they remain asylum seekers, a tenuous legal status that does not permit them to access the same support services as refugees in some countries, such as the US. According to the UNHCR Global Trends report of 2014, in that year, of all the forcibly displaced, 19.5 million were classified as refugees and 1.8 million as asylum seekers. In 2014 more people were forcibly displaced than any year in recorded history, and it was the largest annual increase in displaced persons (UNHCR Global Trends, 2014: 2). 2015 saw the same trends continue, with a global spotlight on the Syrian asylum seeker crisis. That year, 86 percent of refugees and asylum seekers were settled in developing countries and 25 percent were settled in the Least Developed Countries (UNHCR Global Trends, 2014: 2).

The record number of displaced persons around the world underscores a number of issues with the international refugee system, including individual states' exacerbation



of conflicts that produce displaced people, reluctance to resettle refugees, and a vague definition of “refugee” that does not account for all the situations that cause people to flee their homeland. More than a third of the world’s refugees live “in a protracted state of displacement,” with no immediate resettlement option or the ability to return home (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 588). It was not always this way. Before open migration policies were ended in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people could move relatively freely across borders. But when states became more concerned with national security, they instituted a number of blatantly racist border controls, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and other national quota laws (Barkdull, 2012: 108). The increased regulation of national borders made it harder for people to immigrate, precipitating the asylum crisis (Loescher et al., 1992: 13).

Also, throughout the last half-century, foreign intervention and the proliferation of the global arms trade have produced conditions that led to many refugee movements (Loescher et al., 1992: 11). But many states are unwilling to change their refugee-producing foreign policy. The definition of “refugee” is also problematically vague: what constitutes “persecution” on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a social group is difficult to define (Loescher et al., 1992: 21). This causes challenges for immigration officials in deciding whether someone qualifies as a refugee, leading to a host of legal questions and resulting in denial of asylum to some people fleeing danger in their homeland. However, despite its flaws, the existence of an international refugee and asylum system has at least provided a framework to protect the world’s most vulnerable people (Loescher et al., 1992: 13). The flaws within the

international refugee and asylum system introduce issues in the US's refugee and asylum system.

### **History and Challenges of Refugee Resettlement in the United States**

U.S. refugee policy began with the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act, based on the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, and was modified to its current practice with the 1980 Refugee Act (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 16). Refugee resettlement in the US requires the cooperation of the supranational UNHCR, various departments within the US government, and the work of voluntary agencies known as VOLAGS. The US government designates VOLAGS with the project of resettlement—establishing contacts within the communities where the refugees will be resettled and assisting with the process of integration. The US refugee program has evolved through the years to become more inclusive and fair; however, current refugee policy faces a number of structural challenges. Still based on Cold War ideology, the US refugee program has become outdated. Widespread public misperceptions of refugees often undermine the fairness of refugee policy. Finally, the US refugee program struggles with a lack of funding, sometimes placing strain on local communities where refugees are resettled.

After decades of ad hoc refugee admissions under the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act, internal pressure for a cohesive and inclusive refugee policy led to the creation of the 1980 Refugee Act. In the Refugee Act of 1980, the US adopted the international definition of a refugee, and created a formal process for receiving refugees and granting asylum (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 18). It also established the Federal

Refugee Resettlement Program (Barkdull, 2012: 109). A Coordinator of Refugee Affairs and the Interagency Coordinating Committee were created; the Office of Refugee Affairs grew out of cooperation between the US Dept. of State and what is now the Dept. of Health and Human Services (Loescher et al., 1992: 61).

Funding for the Refugee Resettlement Program is allocated by the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. This funding supports VOLAGS which are contracted by the government to resettle refugees (Barkdull, 2012: 113). VOLAGS are diverse organizations, some faith-based, such as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society or Catholic Charities Refugee and Immigration Services, and some secular, such as the International Rescue Committee. VOLAGS are responsible for picking refugees up from the airport, administering the Reception and Placement Grant (a one-time grant to assist with initial resettlement costs such as a housing security deposit), providing case-management, and any other programming to ease the transition to life in the US and the process of integration (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 591-2). The US refugee resettlement program is fairly comprehensive; however, it has not been significantly updated since the 1980 Act, which creates challenges for the program.

The US's out-of-date refugee policy still struggles to overcome its Cold War ideological origins (Barkdull, 201: 114). During the Cold War, US refugee policy was influenced by the country's desire to appear morally superior to its rival, the USSR. Thus refugees from that part of the world were privileged for resettlement in the US (Loescher et al., 1992: 63). Though the US abandoned its previous definition of a refugee as someone from a "Communist, Communist-dominated, or Middle Eastern country" (Loescher et al., 1992: 60), even today refugees privileged for resettlement in the US are

from the former USSR and Cuba, as well as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Iran, Bhutan, and Burma (American Immigration Council, 2015). Until the 1980s, the majority of refugees entering the US came from the Eastern European communist bloc (Barkdull, 2012: 114). Now refugees mainly originate from developing countries. In 2015, the US accepted 70,000 refugees for resettlement, one third of whom originated from the Middle East and South Asia, another third of whom originated from Africa, and one quarter from East Asia (American Immigration Council, 2015). These new refugees, with distinctly different ethnic backgrounds and religions from the majority of the U.S. population, may be seen as a threat to the American “way of life” (Loescher et al., 1992: 2).

Indeed, the fairness of US refugee policy is often undermined by misrepresentation and misperception of refugees and asylum seekers as economic migrants or even terrorists. “Economic migrant” is not a specific legal category like “refugee” or “asylee;” instead it refers to the spectrum of immigrants who migrate to improve their economic prospects. Economic migrants have various immigration statuses, and some may have temporary work visas or may be undocumented. Though refugees may also face economic hardship in their home countries, those migrating solely for economic reasons are not eligible for refugee or asylee status. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 brought national security to the forefront of national concerns, which resulted in the tightening of immigration policy and restrictions on allowing refugees to resettle (Barkdull, 2012: 109). The Real ID Act of 2005 and the PATRIOT Act of 2001 imposed restrictions on immigration with the goal of improving safety, though outcomes were negligible and refugees were negatively affected. Some legislators and citizens are

increasingly suspicious of refugees as terrorists resulting in the now more widespread use of detention of asylum-seekers (Barkdull, 2012: 111). Despite the fact that of the 784,000 refugees resettled in the US since 9/11, only three have since been arrested for plotting terrorist activities (two were plotting attacks not on the US, and the third's plot was "barely credible") (Newland, 2015). Misrepresentation is an example of the systemic challenges facing the refugee and asylum system.

Another challenge facing the US's refugee program is a chronic lack of funding which affects the localities where refugees are resettled. Despite being a federal program, the US refugee program only provides VOLAGS 39 percent of the funding they need to carry out reception and placement services (Barkdull, 2012: 114). VOLAGS thus often rely in part on the financial support of the receiving community. Local social service providers, already limited by tight budgets, must absorb refugees into their clientele. In small urban centers that do not have a history of resettling refugees, the financial limitations of the refugee program can overlap with racial prejudices to produce tensions within receiving communities.

While refugees were once almost exclusively resettled in large cities—New York, Chicago, and LA—they are now increasingly resettled in smaller urban centers that may not have the social service infrastructure and resources to serve them. Small municipalities often receive little notice of when a large influx of refugees will be resettled (Barkdull, 2012: 114). When some small municipalities struggle to provide services to long-term residents, refugee resettlement can cause tensions between long-term residents and service providers and newcomers (Barkdull, 2012: 115). For example, Barkdull describes a small community in Illinois where a large number of refugees were

resettled one year. Schools had rapidly growing enrollment, but lacked the ability to hire more teachers. ESL budgets were limited and struggled to serve the influx of refugee children. As a result, some local parents were concerned that the schools appeared to be “failing” according to the standards set by No Child Left Behind—which would have affected the schools’ reputations—because of the influx of ESL students (Barkdull, 2012:113). An unfortunate consequence of the lack of coordination between the federal refugee program and the local VOLAG resulted in the host community lashing out against the refugees, improving the situation for no one.

While the US’s refugee program has adapted to some degree to the changing times and has become more inclusive and comprehensive, there has been no significant modernization of refugee policy since the 1980 Refugee Act. Thus, US refugee policy faces a number of challenges, especially a lack of funding, which affects both refugees and the communities which receive them. The issues facing US refugee policy are mirrored in US asylum policy, which developed alongside it, and many challenges that refugees and their receiving communities face are also faced by asylum seekers and the communities where they resettle.

### **History and Challenges of Asylum Policy in the United States**

The international refugee system, which grew out of the World Wars, struggles to cope with the number of people around the world seeking refuge from today’s conflicts. The norm of asylum is one way that the nations of the world attempt to account for the people who slip through the cracks, who cannot be assisted through the international

refugee system. While the norm of asylum has long existed in many nations, in the United States a formal process for seeking asylum was established in the 1980 Refugee Act. There are many issues with the U.S. asylum system, including a large backlog of asylum cases in immigration offices and courts and the use of deterrence measures such as detention. Deterrence measures are intended to dissuade asylum seekers from entering the country, but result in a high emotional toll for asylum seekers and a high financial toll for society. Though slight reforms were introduced to the system in 1991 to improve the asylum system's functioning, there are still flaws. While the international asylum system fulfills an essential worldwide political function and is morally necessary, the problems with the U.S.'s asylum system affect asylum seekers and the communities where they settle.

It was not until the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act that those already in the United States and fitting the definition of refugee could apply for asylum (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 19). Asylum seekers, unlike refugees, pay for their passage to the United States up-front, and obtain their own visas. Asylum seekers, who flee persecution like refugees, enter the United States on various visas, such as business, tourist, or student visas, or are undocumented. Sometimes asylum seekers enter the country with forged or fraudulent documents, because they would be apprehended by authorities in their countries if they traveled with their own documents, or because they would not be able to obtain documents if U.S. consular officials thought they were moving to the United States (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 95). Immigration officials in the United States often discount asylum seekers' cases if they arrived in the United States with forged or

fraudulent documents, even though this is acceptable under international law when the cases are deemed credible (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 251).

Asylum in the United States is obtained in three ways: “affirmatively,” “defensively,” or derived as the child or spouse of an asylee (Martin & Yankay, 2014). To obtain asylum affirmatively, the asylum seeker submits an application and is interviewed by an asylum officer. If the application is denied during the hearing, the applicant is placed in removal proceedings by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, where an immigration judge will hear the case. This is considered a defensive asylum application. Asylum may be obtained defensively without the applicant originally appearing for a hearing with an asylum officer, for instance, when one is placed in removal proceedings for being undocumented. (However, even if an asylum applicant is undocumented or has fraudulent documentation, as soon as an asylum application is filed, that person has legal immigration status.) In 2013, 15,266 people obtained asylum affirmatively, and 9,933 people obtained asylum defensively (Martin & Yankay, 2014). One challenge facing the fair adjudication of asylum cases is the backlog of cases in the United States’ immigration courts.

The origins of the immigration court backlog can be traced to the beginning of the asylum system in the 1980s, when tens of thousands of Central Americans fleeing civil war entered the United States and applied for asylum (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 19). Though reforms to the asylum system were introduced, they have done little to diminish the backlog. When the Central American asylum seekers made their cases, the majority were denied. But, in 1990, a class action lawsuit declared that it was unfair to deny the claims of these asylum seekers. These asylum seekers were able to redo their asylum



hearings, further burdening immigration officials with an additional 250,000 cases (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 20). Reforms to the asylum system introduced in 1991 removed the adjudication of asylum claims from the enforcement section of Immigration and Naturalization Services, and created a separate agency with its own specially trained staff to hear cases (Loescher et al., 1992: 5). However, the Immigration and Naturalization officers continue to be overwhelmed by the number of asylum cases each year. Indeed, the backlog of cases reached 449,569 in May of 2015 (Osuna, 2015).

Though the United States recognizes the need for an asylum system, many facets of U.S. asylum policy are designed to deter people from seeking asylum in the United States, due to a generalized suspicion of immigrants as freeloaders or a security threat. For example, the 1996 Immigration Control and Fiscal Responsibility Act, based on the fear that asylum seekers are economic migrants seeking a route to permanent residence, installed more measures of deterrence in asylum policy (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 37). One deterrence measure was the delayed issuing of work authorizations to asylum applicants—if asylum seekers could not support themselves, maybe they would not come (Miller, 2014). Asylum seekers must now wait five months to receive a work authorization after submitting their asylum applications. Another deterrence measure that is increasingly used is detention. The 1996 immigration reform law requires that asylum seekers submitting applications at ports of entry to the United States be detained through the first steps of their application process. If deterrence of asylum seekers is employed because of their supposed financial cost and security threat, it is odd that detention—a costly process—is used to control them, especially since 90 percent of those referred to court appear to have their cases heard (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 74). Additionally, after

9/11, legislation was passed to crack down on undocumented immigrants to improve security. As mentioned earlier, many asylum seekers arrive with false documentation, and this is often held against them when they make their cases, making it less likely that even credible asylum seekers will have their cases approved (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 21).

The U.S. asylum system serves a valuable and essential function by offering protection to those people who cannot be protected through the country's formal refugee admissions program. However, the system is antiquated and struggles to function, highlighted by the immigration court backlogs. Sometimes it appears the real goal of the asylum policy is to deter more asylum seekers from arriving than from offering asylum to credible asylum seekers (Barkdull, 2012: 111). Detaining asylum seekers is expensive and costs taxpayers; detention may also entail a high emotional cost for asylum seekers who have just escaped from traumatic experiences in their home countries, and can hamper the process of adjustment to life in the United States.

### **Conclusion**

The international refugee and asylum system, as well as its implementation in the United States, is antiquated, politicized, and struggles to cope with the scale of the global problem of displaced persons. The international refugee and asylum system was established in the post-World War II world, and shaped by the dynamics of the Cold War. U.S. refugee and asylum policy has not been substantially modernized since this period, and still reflects antiquated foreign policy goals. While states recognize a moral obligation to receive refugees and asylees, their governments and citizens also perceive

accepting refugees and asylees as a financial and social burden, which is sometimes compounded by nativism and fear. Thus, while governments have institutionalized refugee and asylum policies, there are also mechanisms within these policies intended to deter asylum seekers from immigrating. However, international refugee and asylum policy plays a vital role in international security because large numbers of internally displaced people can destabilize a country (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008: 251). A well-functioning and updated refugee and asylum policy in the United States will be fairer to these newcomers and the communities where they resettle.

## CHAPTER 2

### REFUGEE AND ASYLUM SEEKER RESETTLEMENT IN THE MAINE CONTEXT

Maine, hardly isolated from the global migration of displaced people, has faced its own struggles associated with the arrival and resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers. The vast global migration of displaced people has concrete repercussions in the communities where the displaced people resettle. History has shown us that when large waves of immigrants arrive in a host community, a reaction, at times hostile, is sparked in the host community. This is true for Maine. Immigrants from many different countries have resettled in Maine; however, in the last twenty to thirty years large numbers of people fleeing conflicts in Africa and the Middle East have begun arriving, reshaping the state's demographics. Many long-time Mainers have responded positively to the growing diversity in the state, welcoming newcomers for increasing the state's workforce and for initiating a project of cross-cultural understanding.

However, there have also been negative reactions to the growing refugee and asylum seeker population in Maine, founded on fears of these newcomers using up local resources or changing the "Maine/American culture." A noteworthy example is the tensions between some long-term Lewiston residents, voiced by two Lewiston mayors, and the many Somali refugees who migrated to Lewiston over the past decade and a half. The first flashpoint in Lewiston was former Mayor Laurier Raymond's open letter in 2002 to Somali community leaders asking them to discourage more Somali migration to the city because it was putting pressure on the city's social services and schools (Langellier, 2006: 97). However, this negative sentiment directed at the Somali

community generated a far greater outpouring of support in Lewiston and across the state in support of the newcomers, culminating in the hugely successful Many and One rally.<sup>2</sup> However, tensions in Lewiston have continued, voiced in the inflammatory statements of the current mayor, Robert Macdonald. Mayor Macdonald has gained international attention for his controversial remarks which seemed to many to be directed at Somali refugees, particularly his exhortation to immigrants on a BBC interview in 2012: “You come here, you come and you accept our culture and you leave your culture at the door” (Lippman, 2012). In Lewiston’s 2015 mayoral elections, Ben Chin, a liberal graduate of Bates College who ran on a platform of social change and attempted to counter Mayor Macdonald’s rhetoric, was ultimately defeated by the incumbent (Russell, 2015). Lewiston, and Maine, are still rife with immigrant-nativist tensions.

The General Assistance controversy of 2014-2015 is another example of these tensions and the ripple effect that they can cause. In a state-wide decision that mainly affected the city of Portland, Governor LePage channeled anti-immigrant sentiment in the state to attempt to cut General Assistance for some noncitizens, mainly Central African asylum seekers. This move developed into a year-long controversy that inspired activism within the asylum-seeker/asylee and other immigrant communities, generated wide support for this group throughout the state, and ended in legislation that guaranteed continued state support for asylum seekers.

This chapter will briefly chronicle the significant refugee and asylum-seeker migrations to Maine. It will also review how differences in immigration status—refugee

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<sup>2</sup> The Many and One rally of 2003 was held to counter an anti-Somali rally held by white supremacist group World Church of the Creator. While around 40 people attended the World Church of the Creator rally, perhaps as many 5,000 people attended the Many and One rally, overflowing the capacity of the gymnasium where it was held (Groening, 2003).

versus asylum-seeker—affect what public benefits refugees and asylum-seekers can access. Finally, it will recount the General Assistance dilemma in Maine: how rhetoric is used by pro- and anti-immigration advocates in Maine to garner support for their causes, and how this dilemma highlights a need at the state and local level for policy to address the integration of newcomers here.

### **Refugee and Asylum-Seeker Resettlement in Maine and Access to Public Benefits**

Over the past two to three decades, Maine has hosted the resettlement of several waves of African and Middle Eastern refugees and asylum seekers, noticeably impacting the communities of Portland and Lewiston. In the 1990s, refugees from Somalia began arriving in Maine. While some Somali refugees are directly resettled in Maine through Catholic Charities Refugee and Immigration Services (CCMRIS), the majority arrived in Maine as secondary migrants, leaving their original resettlement sites in other states (Langellier, 2006: 98). In fact, about 75 percent of new Mainers, that is, immigrants resettling in Maine, are secondary migrants (CCMRIS, n.d.). There are no precise data on numbers of secondary migrants or asylum seekers from each country; however members of these communities and service providers provide rough estimates. Today about 5,000 Somalis live in Portland (Bell, 2012); many more also reside in Lewiston. Sudanese refugees arrived in the next wave. There are about 4,000 Sudanese in Maine, the majority of whom arrived in the United States as refugees (MIRC, 2015). Many of these refugees waited years in refugee camps to be resettled in the United States. In 2015, the largest group of resettled primary refugees, or those whose initial resettlement location was

Maine, was from Iraq. CCMRIS resettled 442 primary refugees from six countries: Iraq (215), Somalia (192), Congo (20), Afghanistan (11), Eritrea (3), and Iran (1) (CCMRIS, n.d.).

However, today, Central African asylum seekers are the fastest-growing immigrant group in Portland. About 90 percent of asylum seekers resettling in Portland come from four countries: Angola, Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi (Miller, 2014). Though asylum seekers from Central Africa began arriving as early as 2000, their numbers have greatly increased since 2010. City officials and community leaders estimate that the population of Central African asylum seekers in and around Portland is approximately 1,000 (Bell, 2012).

The migration of asylum seekers is a trend on the rise. In the Northeast, asylum cases nearly doubled between 2010 and 2013. In Maine in 2014, there were 587 asylum applicants still waiting for their cases to be heard by asylum officials. In 2013, Maine's Immigration and Naturalization Services staff conducted between 30 and 40 interviews, less than 10 percent of the cases filed (Miller, 2014). Once asylum seekers' cases are approved, they gain refugee status and are eligible for some services offered by Catholic Charities.

The key difference between asylum seekers and refugees is immigration status; their immigration status allows refugees to receive federal welfare benefits and pursue employment immediately, while asylum seekers can do neither. In Maine, Catholic Charities Refugee and Immigration Services is the only designated refugee resettlement organization through the federal refugee resettlement private-public partnership program. All refugees are allocated a Reception and Placement grant of \$1,875 upon arrival in the

United States, to be spent on resettlement costs such as a security deposit for housing, winter clothes, food, etc. (\$1,125 goes directly to the refugee while \$750 is intended for service provision and administration) (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 591-2; Nezer, 2014: 136).

Refugees also may receive Refugee Cash Assistance and MaineCare for eight months after their arrival: a single person receives \$230 per month and a family of four receives \$611. Refugees' access to MaineCare is funded by the Refugee Medical Assistance grant awarded to states by the federal government. After the first eight months, only those refugees eligible for the federally-funded Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which provides a small amount of financial assistance to extremely low-income families, may continue to receive MaineCare. Refugees may continue to use other federally funded assistance for up to five years after arrival (Refugees and Access to Funds & Benefits in the U.S., CCMRIS). This five-year limit on access to TANF benefits for refugees mirrors the five-year limit for U.S. citizens and is linked to the 1996 welfare reform law, discussed below (Singer, 2002). Refugees are also eligible for various services offered by Catholic Charities including case management, employment services, elder services, mentoring and interpretation services (CCMRIS, n.d.). Thus, refugees receive some financial assistance and access to other services to help them integrate when they arrive in the United States.

On the other hand, asylum seekers cannot access the federal benefits available to refugees because of their immigration status. However, in some cases asylum seekers may be able to access state or local benefits. The United States is one of few developed countries that does not offer federal benefits to asylum seekers or allow them work



authorization for 150 days, putting them in a financial limbo where it is challenging to support themselves (Human Rights Watch, 2013). These specifications have their roots in the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, a welfare reform law passed the same year as the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (Byrne, 2015). In the absence of access to federal benefits, a few states—California, Washington, New York, Minnesota and Hawaii—allow immigrants who are ineligible for federal benefits, including asylum seekers, to access state and local benefits (Miller, 2014). Prior to 2014, Maine had provided General Assistance (GA) to asylum seekers. General Assistance is intended to serve as a “last resort” form of welfare for any person who is experiencing a period of need and may not fit within the guidelines of any other welfare program. GA is funded jointly by the state and municipalities, with the state reimbursing the municipalities for their expenditures. Funding is generally split 50-50 between municipalities and the state, but if a municipality spends over a certain threshold, the state will begin to reimburse the municipality at a rate of 90 percent to 10 percent (*DHHS*, 2015). The fact that asylum seekers in Maine could access General Assistance was the rallying point behind the next wave of anti-immigrant sentiment in Maine initiated by the governor, Paul LePage.

### **The General Assistance Controversy and its Implications**

In 2014, the LePage administration declared that municipalities who continued to provide General Assistance to immigrants without determinate status, including asylum seekers, would not be reimbursed by the state for their expenditures, sparking a

controversy throughout the state over its obligation, or lack thereof, to support asylum seekers (Miller, 2014). The Maine Department of Health and Human Services instituted a policy whereby municipal officials were required to ask General Assistance applicants to verify their immigration status with supporting documentation (Byrne, 2015). To buttress this policy, Governor LePage “pledged to withhold all state reimbursement to any municipality that continued offering General Assistance to undocumented immigrants” (Moretto, 2014). The Maine attorney general, Janet Mills, criticized the policy and questioned its legality and constitutionality (Moretto, 2014). Various cities, including Portland, Bangor, and Westbrook, defied the new policy and continued to provide General Assistance to asylum seekers. In July of 2014, the cities of Portland and Westbrook, supported by the Maine Municipal Association, the American Civil Liberties Union of Maine (ACLU), and Maine Equal Justice Partners, filed suit against the LePage administration in the Maine Superior Court to block the policy. The LePage administration countersued (Miller, 2014). Meanwhile, the ACLU of Maine and Maine Equal Justice Partners urged the Maine Legislature to draft a law explicitly allowing asylum seekers to receive General Assistance (Byrne, 2015).

During the summer of 2015, a court decision was reached that was a partial victory for the LePage administration. In a somewhat contradictory decision, a Cumberland County Superior Court justice ruled that the state may indeed withhold General Assistance reimbursements to municipalities for funds spent on asylum seekers. However, the justice also ruled that the state may not penalize municipalities for providing General Assistance to asylum seekers by withholding all reimbursements (Byrne, 2015). The justice additionally found that the Maine DHHS did not follow proper

rulemaking procedures in its rewriting of General Assistance policy. Finally, the court found that the state had overstepped its authority in attempting to enforce federal law. The Maine DHHS attempted to enforce the 1996 federal welfare reform law, though it only has the power to enforce state welfare policy (Byrne, 2015). It also would have required city officials to assume de-facto immigration officer roles by asking General Assistance applicants proof of their status. Thus, the justice found, cities offering General Assistance to asylum seekers were not complying with federal law; however they did comply with state law that did not disqualify General Assistance applicants due to immigration status (Byrne, 2015).

In response to this controversy and following the court decision regarding General Assistance, city and state lawmakers took action to address what could have been the end to assistance for asylum seekers. While the Maine Legislature was deliberating legislation to explicitly allow asylum seekers to receive General Assistance, the Portland City Council deliberated having the city fund General Assistance for asylum seekers (*Portland Press Herald*, 2015). One City Council member drafted a budget for the city to fund General Assistance for asylum seekers for one year, which would rely in part on surplus funds gained from increasing property taxes 3.1 percent (Billings, 2015). After a long City Council meeting, where many asylees, asylum seekers, and their supporters testified on the need for General Assistance to be available, the council ultimately voted in favor of the city funding the program for one year, by a margin of five to four (Billings, 2015). This Portland Community Support Fund, as it was called, however, fell \$1.5 million short of the \$4.1 million needed to fund any services beyond housing, and the city asked the community to help bridge the gap (Billings, 2015). It is apparent that this was a strained

and temporary solution to the issue of supporting asylum seekers in Portland without the passage of legislation at the state level.

However, the Maine Legislature passed a law, L.D. 369, or “An Act To Clarify the Immigration Status of Noncitizens Eligible for General Assistance,” that allows lawfully present immigrants to receive General Assistance for two years (Miller, 2015).<sup>3</sup> Those who have submitted an application for asylum may continue to access General Assistance for up to 24 months (Miller, 2015).

In addition to ensuring one form of economic assistance to asylum seekers in tenuous financial situations, the controversy surrounding the General Assistance dilemma of the past two years galvanized widespread support for new immigrants in Maine. LePage instituted his policy of withholding General Assistance from asylum seekers during a Maine gubernatorial election year, while he sought reelection, attempting to rally support from his constituents by igniting two emotional topics, immigration and welfare reform (Miller, 2014). However, mirroring the anti-immigrant events in Lewiston in 2002, LePage’s efforts to mobilize anti-immigrant sentiment largely backfired, at least in terms of policy.

There was an outpouring of support for asylum seekers in Portland and across the state. Asylees and immigrant rights advocacy organizations such as the Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition testified before the Legislature about the need for General Assistance to be available to asylum seekers (Nahimana, personal communication, 2015). The Mayor of Portland at the time, Michael Brennan, repeatedly voiced his commitment to ensuring

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<sup>3</sup> L.D. 369 became law in what seemed to many of the bill’s supporters a serendipitous act of fate, after Governor LePage did not veto the bill within the allotted 10-day window of time. Because the Legislature was adjourned at the time, Governor LePage believed that he had more time to veto this bill, along with 65 others. However, the Maine Supreme Court issued an advisory ruling that rejected Governor LePage’s assertion, and he decided not to challenge this ruling and agreed to implement the laws (Mistler, 2015).

support for asylum seekers. In a bipartisan move, the Maine Legislature, including a Republican-controlled Senate, passed L.D. 369 in a 29-5 vote (Mistler, 2015). The General Assistance controversy in Maine highlights how a wave of anti-immigrant sentiment can mobilize a greater reaction of support. Some claim that if Governor LePage had not generated the GA controversy, the Maine Legislature would not have passed L.D. 369 explicitly allowing asylum seekers to receive General Assistance (Nahimana, personal communication, 2016). The controversy also highlights the rhetoric used by nativists and immigrant rights advocates.

In Maine, opponents of providing General Assistance to asylum seekers often referred to them as “illegal” immigrants, and sought to portray asylum seekers as drain on social services, harming the needs of long-term Maine residents. Governor LePage often used the term “illegal” to refer to asylum seekers, as did some of his supporters, including Lewiston Mayor MacDonald (Miller, 2014). Many immigrant rights activists take issue with the use of this term because most asylum seekers in Maine arrive on valid visas, and once they apply for asylum, asylum-pending status is considered legal (Miller, 2014). They assert that the use of the term “illegal” is political, meant to provoke distrust of immigrants. Maine legislators who opposed General Assistance for asylum seekers also asserted that budget limitations necessitated withholding aid from them, many contending that supporters of L.D. 369 were more concerned with the welfare of immigrants than with Maine’s elderly and disabled (Miller, 2015). This discourse, while specific to Maine’s particular situation, is often used by those with a nativist or more conservative stance on immigration.

Immigrant advocates in Maine, including many who supported offering General Assistance to asylum seekers, have responded to anti-immigrant rhetoric about the cost of supporting immigrants with an argument they hope will resonate with them: the economic benefits of immigrants. In Maine, many assert that immigrants bring economic vitality to the state. An oft-cited case is the revitalization of Lewiston due to Somali migration. In response to the open letter by former Lewiston Mayor Raymond, Somali community members pointed out that their presence had brought in federal funding and that they had contributed to the workforce in an aging community (Timberlake, 2007: 23). Additionally, many Somali immigrants cite that their start-up businesses in once-abandoned buildings bring economic activity to the area and generate property taxes for the city (Timberlake, 2007: 169-170). Refugees originally settled in Portland bring in about one hundred thousand dollars a year to the city through the Office of Refugee Resettlement grants, funding the city shelters and other services which are used by any city residents. They also helped to initiate the development of other services such as improved bus services (Timberlake, 2007: 170, 172).

Recently, many pro-immigration advocates have stressed Maine's need to encourage immigration to the state because of an aging population and workforce. James Tierney, former Maine attorney general and vocal proponent of encouraging immigration to Maine, cites Maine's aging population as a sign of boding economic troubles. The proportion of baby boomers to those under 20 is 39 percent to 18 percent: as baby-boomers retire, there will be fewer working-age people to fill their positions (Tierney, 2015). This issue is echoed by economists and the leader of the Portland Regional Chamber of Commerce, who cited that employers in the area face a shortage of skilled

workers to fill positions (Fishell, 2015). Tierney and other immigration advocates link diversity to the survival of Maine's population and economy (Tierney, 2015).

The General Assistance controversy in Maine is an example of the disjuncture between federal immigration and welfare policies and local implementation of those policies. This can be seen in the difficulties that are faced by local refugee resettlement agencies such as CCMRIS and the towns that resettle newcomers. Sometimes municipalities must come up with additional funding and must figure out how to organize the resettlement program in their local context (Timberlake, 2007: 7). For example, Lewiston lacked adequate financial resources and social service infrastructure and was unprepared for the sudden arrival of many Somali secondary migrants, which heightened nativist-immigrant tensions within that community. This mirrors Barkdull's study on the small Illinois town that faced tensions after the rapid resettlement of hundreds of refugees. However, within the Refugee Resettlement Program, there are other programs intended to cope with this disjuncture, such as the Unanticipated Arrivals Program. This provides funding for services needed in the time between when refugees arrive and when their numbers are counted toward U.S. Census population data used to determine funding amounts (Timberlake, 2007: 11). The Refugee Resettlement Program is not perfect but it at least provides the framework for cooperation between the federal government and local government. There is no such federal support for municipalities assisting asylum seekers.

That Maine now provides General Assistance to asylum seekers is a victory for immigrants in Maine and immigrant rights advocates; however, it also illustrates the lack of alignment between federal immigration policy and local realities.<sup>4</sup> While reforming

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this issue surfaced yet again in March 2016, when Governor LePage proposed a bill that would withhold state funding from municipalities that prohibit police and city officials from asking individuals'

asylum policy can only happen in Congress, supporting asylum seekers until they are established happens at the state and municipal levels, through state and local welfare programs such as General Assistance in Maine, and city-run programs, non-governmental organizations, and other support networks in cities such as Portland. The General Assistance controversy in Maine did spur Maine Senator Angus King to introduce a bill in July of 2015 that would shorten the waiting period for asylum applicants to obtain work authorization from 150 to 30 days (Fishell, 2015). However, since the future of this bill is uncertain as is broader immigration reform, the General Assistance controversy highlights the need for the state of Maine and the city of Portland to implement their own policies to integrate and assist new Mainers, especially those most vulnerable, such as asylum seekers (Nahimana, personal communication, 2016). Portland had responded to this need with its Refugee Services program, which mainly serves secondary migrants, asylum seekers, asylees, and some refugees, through case management, counseling for torture survivors, employment case management, and cultural and life skills training (Portland, Maine Health and Human Services Department, 2014). This program is mainly funded through a number of grants, most importantly the federal Survivors of Torture Grant from the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement. This grant is unique because it allows federal funds to be directed toward asylum seekers. However, this grant, which the city has received since 2009, along with another grant, is not being renewed in 2016, leaving the Refugee Services program in danger (Billings, 2015).

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immigration status or sharing information about individuals' immigration status with federal officials. LePage accused Portland of being a "sanctuary city" for immigrants—a city with these prohibitions in place. While Portland does not allow municipal officials to ask about immigration status, it does require that its police officers cooperate with federal officials. Opponents of the proposal stated it would increase the use of racial profiling by the police and penalize certain municipalities unnecessarily. Maine Democrats in the Legislature used an obscure parliamentary procedure, "tabled unassigned," to put discussion of the bill on an indefinite hold (Miller, 2016).



## **Conclusion**

Tensions between Maine’s long-term residents and refugees and asylum seekers have been exacerbated in several conflicts throughout the years, indicating that Maine is not sheltered from the conflicts arising from the international migration of displaced people. Such conflicts include the former Lewiston Mayor Raymond’s open letter, current Lewiston Mayor Macdonald’s controversial remarks directed at immigrants, the General Assistance controversy, and most recently, LePage’s proposal to end state funding for supposed “sanctuary cities,” though this is not an exhaustive list. The expression of anti-immigrant sentiment rises and falls within the state, and tensions between the receiving community and newcomers are sometimes voiced or aggravated through municipal and state politics. Maine is affected by the United States’ outdated refugee program and broken immigration system.

Maine cities like Portland have developed strategies to deal with these wider issues and must continue to do so. New Mainers and immigrant rights advocates respond to nativists in Maine by emphasizing the benefits of accepting newcomers into the state. They are trying to change the negative narrative surrounding newcomers in Maine. One aspect of this narrative is newcomers’ use of social services. While much of the media attention and rhetoric surrounding immigrants in Maine (and everywhere) is focused on their use of social services, immigrant communities and host communities play an essential role in assisting refugees and asylum seekers in adapting to their new home. Social services such as General Assistance or programs provided by refugee resettlement agencies are very important, but they do not account for the entire integration process.

Social capital embedded within immigrant communities, including sponsorship arrangements and grassroots community organizations, can play a valuable role in facilitating integration and building cross-cultural understanding between newcomers and long-term Maine residents. The next chapter will explore the ways social capital has been used by immigrant communities in general, and among refugee communities in Portland, and will consider the value of multiculturalism.

## CHAPTER 3

### SOCIAL CAPITAL, SPONSORSHIP, AND COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

Refugees and asylum seekers arrive in the United States with few possessions and little wealth. Refugees have access to public support for a relatively short period of time and must rapidly attain self-sufficiency through the Refugee Resettlement Program. Asylum seekers receive even less public support and face the additional challenge of supporting themselves without work authorization for at least five months following the submission of their asylum application. Therefore, it is important to understand how they support themselves, for instance, with the resources embedded within their social networks (Allen, 2007: 22). Refugees and asylum seekers or asylees, unlike economic migrants, cannot return home because they face the threat of persecution. As a result, they often try to improve their skills and human capital and over time do better economically than economic migrants (Allen, 2007: 28). They often must work hard to recreate social networks because of fragmented family and friend groups in their relocation site (Allen, 2007: 28). Additionally, the U.S. Refugee Program is relocating more refugees to small cities, such as Portland, and less populated areas, both of which lack the density of social services available in large urban centers, and lack experience with diversity (Allen, 2007: 23).

While publicly funded benefits—Refugee Cash Assistance for refugees and General Assistance for asylum seekers here in Maine—have an undeniably important impact on the livelihoods of refugees and asylum seekers, they are only a part of the complex social support system essential for the economic survival of immigrants,

refugees and asylum seekers included. Because of their different immigration status, refugees and asylum seekers may have differing economic survival systems. This chapter will evaluate some key differences between economic migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers or asylees. It will also explore how social capital, the ties built on trust and reciprocity among members of a group, has been used by immigrant communities in general, and by refugee communities in Portland in particular. Finally, it will look at the role of refugee sponsorship as a form of social capital, and how resettlement organizations integrate refugees. Much scholarly literature discusses how refugee communities use social capital to support themselves; also, local resettlement agencies offer many services to refugees and asylees after they receive asylum status. However, close to no research exists on how communities of asylum seekers use social capital and support themselves.

### **Social Capital within Immigrant Groups**

Although the struggles they face often overlap, there are key differences between the tactics that economic migrants and refugees or asylum seekers use to adapt to life in the United States and their economic survival strategies. This is due to the different conditions in their home countries that push immigrants to leave. Cortes (2004) discusses how the different reasons that economic migrants and refugees leave their countries affect their economic systems in their new country. While many economic migrants may return home, refugees are essentially unable to do so (Cortes, 2004: 465). Many economic migrants, especially those with temporary work visas, live in the United States

temporarily to earn money and then return home to be with family. Refugees, however, tend to have fewer contacts in their homeland than do economic migrants (Cortes, 2004: 465).

There are also important demographic differences between economic migrants, refugees, and asylees. Economic migrants are most likely to be working age (18-35), and many bring their very young children. Refugees' ages are more variable (Cortes, 2004: 468). In 2013, 34 percent of refugees arriving in the United States were under age 18, while 37 percent were between the ages of 18 and 35 (Martin & Yankay, 2014: 4). Asylees do not factor into Cortes' study; however, a larger percentage of asylees than refugees is of working age: 16 percent of asylees granted asylum in 2013 were 18 years or younger, and nearly 50 percent of asylees were between the ages of 18 and 35 (Martin & Yankay, 2014: 7).

Because of differing timelines in their host country, refugees tend to invest in more host-country specific human capital than do economic migrants, devoting more effort to learning the language, pursuing more education, and becoming citizens (Cortes, 2004: 465). Thus, refugees may be more likely to assimilate to the average host country population's earning potential. Language proficiency is one of the main factors associated with earnings increases (Cortes, 2004: 466). However, refugees and economic migrants are often united in a need to "make it" in their new home (Cortes, 2004: 467).

Many social scientific studies explore how social capital helps or hinders immigrants in "making it" in America. While Cortes focuses on human capital (skills, language, etc.), social capital is also important for "making it." Social capital is defined as the "feature of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to

work together more effectively to pursue shared objectives.” The density and importance of social capital within a community is hard to measure, though social scientists have attempted to do so (Putnam, 1995: 664-665). In his study on refugees in Portland (discussed below), Allen measured the effects of sponsorship, a type of social capital, on income: whether or not sponsored refugees obtained higher incomes over time than unsponsored refugees (Allen, 2007: 33). It can also be measured in terms of people’s membership or involvement in civic organizations (Putnam, 1995: 665). Social capital is especially associated with immigrant communities because it provides a support system to help newcomers succeed in the unfamiliar circumstances of their host country. New immigrants are often disadvantaged by the challenges of communicating in a foreign language and their credentials being devalued within the host country (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1322). However, the way communities use social capital is embedded in their cultural norms of behavior and historical context (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1322).

There are four main types of social capital used within immigrant enclaves: value introjection, reciprocity transactions, bounded solidarity and enforceable trust. Value introjection is the values and morals embedded in cultures that teach us to “behave in ways other than naked greed” (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1323). Reciprocity transactions are favors done for another person driven by a feeling of debt owed to that person because of a past favor. Bounded solidarity and enforceable trust are most associated with immigrant enclaves. Relying on social capital has benefits and drawbacks (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1327).

Bounded solidarity is strong group cohesion and support that forms among members of a group in response to outside oppressive forces, such as systemic economic challenges and discrimination, against that group (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1324). Bounded solidarity is often stronger when the immigrant community is culturally and linguistically different from the dominant society. Cultural and linguistic differences affect how the larger society will react to the immigrant community and how the community will respond to those reactions. Facing economic challenges and discrimination, members of the immigrant community turn inward for support from each other. Bounded solidarity may be weaker if there is the opportunity for the newcomers to escape oppression from the larger society. One form of escape is returning home. Refugee communities, with little opportunity for members to return home, may experience stronger bounded solidarity because of a lack of escape (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1329). Also, bounded solidarity may be weaker if the immigrant community is widely accepted into the larger society: there are out-group ties the community members can take advantage of.

Bounded solidarity can inspire great generosity among community members and can also be beneficial for immigrant start-up businesses. A community with strong ties of solidarity provides a pool of dependable low-wage labor: a lack of opportunity outside the community leads many members to seek employment inside the community, at small start-ups, for instance. Along similar lines, solidarity provides access to capital for investment in start-ups. Entrepreneurs may be unable to access investment outside the community, especially if the community is discriminated against (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1329).

The other form of social capital associated with immigrant communities, enforceable trust, requires community members to protect their reputations within the group. Community members must maintain their reputations to benefit from the social connections that can lead to employment or investment from the community (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1325). If not, they may be subject to sanctions, usually non-material, from the group, which can hold them back. A benefit that originates from enforceable trust, as well as bounded solidarity, is access to informal credit. For recent immigrants who lack an established credit history used to access credit in our society, social ties and a good reputation within the immigrant community may enable a newcomer to receive informal loans or investments in start-ups (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1333-4).

However, though outside forces like discrimination can strengthen immigrant social support networks, outside forces can also undermine the benefits of social capital. For example, if a community has a high level of access to resources or connections outside the community, enforceable trust and bounded solidarity become less important for members of the community to “make it” (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1336). Expansive support systems in the larger society may unintentionally undermine strong support networks within immigrant communities. Additionally, when some members of the community are very successful and assimilate to the middle class of the receiving community, and others do not, successful members may become estranged from the community, weakening the community (Zhou, 1997: 975). Thus, leveling pressures may be exerted on successful community members to not surpass other less successful community members for fear of ostracism (Zhou, 1997: 989).



On the other hand, prolonged discrimination and/or persistent lack of economic opportunity can also undermine the benefits of social capital within a community. This particularly affects resource-poor communities and communities located in the inner city. In the inner city, community members may have more contact with impoverished Americans and may be more likely to integrate aspects of their lifestyles. Younger generations may feel little desire to remain part of the community, or will form a bounded solidarity “that negates the possibility of advancement through fair market competition and that opposes individual efforts in this direction” (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1336-7). Discrimination and a lack of economic opportunity, such as few middle-skilled jobs, can lead second generation and immigrant children to adopt a rebellious outlook on life (Zhou, 1997: 979). If the larger society views their culture as “un-American,” immigrant children may push away from their parents’ culture, identify with rebellious minority youth, and face downward mobility (Zhou, 1997: 994-5).

The construction of a cohesive community identity is important for the building of social capital. In circumstances where outside discrimination is not overwhelming, being a member of a community with a unified cultural identity can help members be successful (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1331). Culture brought from the homeland, thrown into relief by American culture, can become a powerful part of an immigrant community’s identity and a source of strength. Newcomers also negotiate their cultural values and practices within the larger society and create new identities for themselves with old and new practices (Zhou, 1997: 981). Zhou lists the “ethnic advantages” of a strong cultural identity within an immigrant community: children in a tight-knit community are more psychologically healthy, do better academically, and have higher

aspirations than those living in isolated conditions (Zhou, 1997: 993). For children, spending time with other children of the same ethnicity can mitigate downward mobility caused by lack of opportunity (Zhou, 1997: 997). For example, after-school youth language classes in the ethnic language are one way to strengthen the community's culture and validate cultural identity. Within a tight-knit immigrant community, members may acculturate to American life, but not lose all aspects of their home culture. This path is represented by the theory of multiculturalism, which rejects the assumption that there is a unified "non-ethnic" core of America, to which immigrants are expected to assimilate. Multiculturalism asserts that many groups with diverse cultural identities make up overarching American culture.

However, it is important to note that members of immigrant communities are not homogenous and there are often different opinions or perhaps divisions within one community. Likewise, it is important to consider the relationships between sub-groups within the community, as determined by socio-economic status, generation, historical contexts, etc. (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1335).

Because new immigrants face challenges supporting themselves in their new host countries, many turn to their communities for the support they lack from the broader society. This social capital, embedded within a community, is strengthened by a strong community identity, negotiated within the context of the receiving community. However, outside social forces can undermine the benefits of social capital, and social networks can pressure community members in detrimental ways. Context is important for understanding how members of a community rely on and use social capital. For instance, if there are ways community members can escape discrimination from the larger society,

social capital will be less important. Refugees and asylees cannot return home to due to dangerous conditions; thus the social capital embedded in their communities may be more salient. Many social ties between members of the immigrant community to the members of the receiving community may diminish the importance of social capital within the immigrant community. However, social capital accessed by refugees is not limited to that which is embedded within their communities: support provided by refugee resettlement organizations and sponsorship are also forms of social capital refugees use.

### **Sponsorship, Integration, and Multiculturalism**

Refugee resettlement organizations, community groups such as religious congregations, and refugee sponsors, provide additional social capital accessed by refugees. In addition to providing some financial support, these organizations and individuals often play a role in linking refugees to opportunities and in helping refugees integrate into their communities. They also mediate between newly arrived refugees and the receiving community, helping the community to adapt to the newcomers (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 594). However, there is often a disconnect between the federal Refugee Resettlement program and its implementation at the local level. The federal government provides funding to resettlement organizations and to refugees, but this funding is limited and is supplemented by the financial contributions made by refugees' co-sponsors (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 593). Eby and co-authors sum it up: "Refugees aren't moving into our government, they're moving into our communities"

(Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 596). A lack of structure and support at the local level for refugee resettlement creates challenges for refugees and long-term residents.

When resettlement occurs without the engagement of the host community—religious congregations, schools, and other community groups—people are more likely to see resettlement as intrusion (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 599). Additionally, when the underfunded federal refugee program resettles refugees in smaller urban locations that may lack systemic support for newcomers, tensions may arise between long-term residents and refugees in these communities (Barkdull, 2012: 112). However, involvement of the host community diffuses tensions and can make long-term residents more receptive to recently arrived refugees. One important tactic for involving the host community in refugee resettlement, and also providing a valuable support system for refugees, is sponsorship. Sponsorship can be formal or informal.

Sponsorship, the relationship established between a recently arrived refugee and a local resident to provide guidance and support to the refugee, is a form of social capital. Historically, resettlement agencies matched refugees with long-term receiving community residents. Today, fewer refugees are sponsored, and those who are sponsored are often matched with other refugees of the same ethnicity who arrived years earlier (Allen, 2007: 32). In 2009, 3.9 percent of refugees had official sponsors, that is, the sponsor signed an official sponsorship form with the resettlement agency. This is down from 12.3 percent in 2008 and 19.9 percent in 2001. But, informal and ad-hoc sponsorship is a growing trend (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 604). Resettlement organizations themselves, rather than sponsors, now assume more of the financial

responsibility for refugees and invest more time and services to assist with integration (Allen, 2007: 32-33).

Sponsors may provide some financial or material resources to help refugees get established and help them find jobs. Co-sponsors often help refugees find housing, pay rent initially, or provide furnishings for a first apartment (Allen, 2007: 30; Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 593). In regard to employment, Allen's study of Somali and Sudanese refugees in Portland found that co-ethnic sponsorship did not lead refugees to higher-paying jobs initially, perhaps due to devalued credentials, lack of English, or the need to rapidly find employment. But in the long term, sponsored refugee men earned a statistically significant amount more than did un-sponsored refugees (Allen, 2007: 23, 51). Additionally, a refugee's relationship with a sponsor can "help to increase refugees' local integration potential." Sponsors and co-sponsors also provide emotional support, and help refugees navigate the system and learn about the local culture (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 592-3).

In addition to providing some material resources and information about employment opportunities, sponsors, along with community organizations, help refugees integrate into their community. Integration involves many factors: employment, housing, education, health, social bridges, bonds, and links, language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability, and eventually citizenship (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 597). Integration is a two-way process, involving the refugees and the host community. It requires the receiving community and the resettled refugees to communicate, work together, foster respect, and create opportunity. A "friendly" community is correlated with refugees experiencing a higher quality of life (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 598).

Because resettled refugees often belong to different religions and cultures than the majority of members of the host community, the process of resettlement is a powerful way to build cross-religious and cross-cultural understandings (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 594). Eby et. al. describe examples of faith-based resettlement organizations requesting to resettle Muslim refugees in their communities to counteract hatred and Islamophobia (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 594). This is an example of receiving communities making a concerted effort to understand refugees with different backgrounds from themselves. These communities may have become more tolerant and welcoming, and may have provided a better environment for integration for refugees.

Barriers to successful integration can be caused by refugees' unfamiliarity with the language and culture, a lack of safety and security, and, as mentioned previously, outside discrimination (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 599). There is an unequal power dynamic between the host community and refugees. For instance, long-term residents hold a privileged economic position in the society: the poverty rate is higher among immigrants than among the native born population (Singer, 2002). The receiving community may also discriminate against refugees or hold negative perceptions of them. The relationship between service providers and refugees is also one of unequal power: in some cases this relationship assumes refugees are helpless or passive receptacles of service provision. In fact, many refugees later become involved with resettlement or advocacy agencies, and many are motivated to succeed in the United States and give back to their communities (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 596). Many established resettled refugee community organizations take the lead in supporting and welcoming new arrivals (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 603).

Social capital exists within refugee communities and between refugees and members of the host community, through sponsorship and the host community's involvement in the resettlement and integration process. Social networks can be a valuable support system for refugees. However, culture often affects how refugees will use the social capital embedded within their networks. The next section will delve into the factors that shape how some refugees in Portland, Maine have used social capital to support themselves, and how they have integrated into the receiving community.

### **Social Capital and Integration in Portland and Lewiston**

Forms of social capital, such as reciprocity norms, bounded solidarity, and sponsorship, can be found within Somali and Sudanese refugee communities in Portland and Lewiston. According to a study by Ryan Allen, reciprocity norms and bounded solidarity influence some members of Somali and Sudanese communities to share information about job opportunities, share other non-material resources such as rides or child-care, and, to some extent, share financial resources (Allen, 2007: 26). Social norms of behavior found within refugees' cultures, and shaped by the American context, can structure how refugees access social capital. For instance, there are different procedures for asking for non-monetary assistance (employment information, rides, child care) and monetary assistance (Allen, 2007: 74). Many refugees, while seeking self-sufficiency, access social capital in such a way that will preserve their dignity and reputation. However, the complexity of the norms that regulate asking for assistance can impede refugees from doing so, putting some in financial risk (Allen, 2007: 87). Additionally,

fostering a strong community cultural identity can be challenging because of refugees' diverse experiences and backgrounds, even within one nationality. However, despite this, many Somali and Sudanese refugees stressed the importance of forging a strong community identity.

At the time of Allen's study in 2007, the social networks of many Somali and Sudanese were significantly smaller than in their home countries and they collectively had fewer resources, so material economic support embedded within the communities was limited (Allen, 2007: 71). Migration caused their social networks to shrink, and challenging economic circumstances depleted their resources. Powerful reciprocal obligations within these communities at times caused members economic strain from the need to offer support to other members, or repay favors or money (Allen, 2007: 25). Additionally, many refugees had to support immediate family and relatives in their home countries before helping friends within their communities (Allen, 2007: 73). It may be challenging for a refugee to access financial support within a community that lacks resources.

Many Somalis and Sudanese also had to adjust aspects of their cultures to the American context and adapt to new experiences. For example, many Sudanese and Somali refugees did not own a car or did not drive before coming to the United States. They needed to learn to drive, ask for rides, or learn to navigate Portland's public transit system. Also, many refugees were not formally employed in their home country, and needed to become so in the United States to attain self-sufficiency (Allen, 2007: 69). Gender roles embedded within Somali and Sudanese cultures influenced many refugee men, especially those with families, to become employed quickly to provide for their



families (Allen, 2007: 51-52). Many refugee men also felt social pressure from reciprocal obligations to help others paying bills and invest in start-ups (Allen, 2007: 52). Gender roles for some Portland refugee women influenced them to not enter the labor market, but to maintain the household (Allen, 2007: 31). For example, it is customary for many Somali women to remain home to help their families and close friends with childcare, cooking and cleaning, and other chores (Allen, 2007: 50-51) Informal childcare arrangements were widely used in Somalia and Sudan, and continued in Portland but to a lesser extent (Allen, 2007: 69). Many Somalis and Sudanese noted having considerably less leisure time in Portland than in their home countries, complicating their efforts to help others. This culture shock initially produced anger and frustration in many newcomers, until they adapted to new rules and norms (Allen, 2007: 72).

Many Somalis and Sudanese in Portland found it less burdensome to ask for non-monetary resources and would readily help their acquaintances with rides, childcare, and employment leads (Allen, 2007: 75). However, some social capital researchers argue the benefits of using social networks to find well-paying work are negligible. They maintain that strong ties among close-knit community members may lead to a smaller selection of opportunities because of redundancy. For instance, within a close-knit group, many people may have the same connections and the same information, entailing fewer job leads. On the other hand, members of a tight-knit community may trust each other more and may be more willing to vouch for each other for job opportunities (Allen, 2007: 26). In Portland, most refugees work in the administrative services industries, followed by social assistance, hospitals, and education services, manufacturing, accommodation and

food services, and wholesale trade (Allen, 2007: 39). While non-monetary resources were readily shared by community members, monetary assistance was more regulated.

Monetary assistance is often only requested from trusted family or close friends because money is far more important in the U.S. economy than in Somalia or Sudan, where many families supplemented their needs through food from family farms. Cultural norms regulating giving or lending money have reacted with the reality of life in America and evolved: once in the United States, many refugees from Somalia and Sudan felt more pressure to repay those who had lent them money (Allen, 2007: 76). Also, asking for money is often associated with shame and failure, and can affect one's reputation within the community. Therefore, asking for money is restricted to those most close and trusted, who will not spread rumors about those asking for money (Allen, 2007: 77-78).

However, despite the relatively high importance of money in the United States compared with Somalia and Sudan, family members frequently lend money and refuse repayment. As a result, many young refugee men prefer not to ask family for money because they want the option to repay the money (Allen, 2007: 77-76). Leaders within the refugee communities often face challenges with asking for and lending money. As esteemed community members, it is more difficult for leaders to ask other community members to lend them money. Thus, when asking for a loan, elites more often asked their out-group social connections. They often have more out-group social ties than other community members because of their position within their community (Allen, 2007: 79). Additionally, it is more difficult for community leaders to refuse lending money to other community members because of their position, although they often do not have excess resources to share (Allen, 2007: 80). Many refugees are opposed to receiving handouts

from community members; they insist they will repay the money in the future. Taking this into account, in some instances it is inappropriate, due to cultural factors, to assume refugees may rely solely on their communities for financial assistance (Allen, 2007: 88). Many members of Somali and Sudanese communities in Portland support each other by offering non-monetary resources, and sometimes financial support, but also emotional support. Maintaining their cultural identity has been important for many members of refugee communities and a source of strength.

Many Somalis and Sudanese in Maine stress the importance of maintaining their culture in the American context. As mentioned earlier, a strong cultural identity can favor the building of solidarity within immigrant communities. A study by Langellier et. al. explores how Somali cultures adapted in Lewiston, Maine. It is important to note three contextual factors of Somali migration to Maine. First, Somalis migration to Maine increased around the time of 9/11, when many non-Muslim Americans viewed Muslims with heightened suspicion. After sustained Somali migration to Lewiston, some long-term Lewiston residents felt threatened by the transforming ethnic make-up of their town and responded negatively toward Somalis (Langellier, 2006: 98). Tense conditions such as those in Lewiston may foster bounded solidarity within immigrant communities. Secondly, Somalis in Lewiston are mainly secondary migrants, meaning they have left their original resettlement sites in order to raise their children in a safe location with good schools (Langellier, 2006: 98). This suggests that, having met their basic needs for safety and security in the United States, many Somalis are moving in search of better living conditions and opportunities for their children. Third, there is not one monolithic Somali culture even in Lewiston. Somalis in Lewiston are members of different clans and are

from different regions. An important sub-group is the Somali Bantus. The Somali Bantus have faced a history of oppression in Somalia (Langellier, 2006: 99). This illustrates the role that historical and cultural contexts in the country of origin play in shaping how various members of refugee communities will relate to one another in their host country.

However, regardless of sub-group identity, many Somalis stressed the importance of maintaining their cultures once in the United States, especially for the success of their children. Many Somalis said they felt “‘trapped between two cultures,’ Somali and American, particularly as their immigrant children [came] of age in Maine and the new generation [was] born here” (Langellier, 2006: 98). Also, many Somali adults stated that their greatest fear was that “‘their children are losing their culture, history, and identity” (Langellier, 2006: 102). Generational differences between adults who arrived from Somalia and their children, born in Maine, are becoming pronounced. Somalis’ desire for their children to maintain their Somali cultural identity, calls to mind Zhou’s finding that a strong cultural identity within immigrant communities is linked to bounded solidarity, a source of social capital.

Like many Somalis, many Sudanese in Portland want their children to maintain their cultural identity. The Sudanese community in Portland, like Somali communities in Maine, is diverse, not monolithic: it is made up of many ethnicities such as Nuer, Azande, and Acholi for example (Allen, 2007: 67). Many Sudanese Mainers assert that protecting their culture is one of their main concerns with adjusting to life in Maine (MIRC, 2015: 20). In response to this concern, members of the Sudanese community wanted to form a community center. This community center would be accessible to children and could serve as a venue for the preservation and celebration of Sudanese

cultures (MIRC, 2015: 21). Social capital is embedded within refugee communities in Maine, though culture can affect how refugees use social capital. The desire shared by many Sudanese and Somalis in Maine to maintain their cultural identities may indicate that a strong cultural identity keeps these communities resilient.

## **Conclusion**

As Somali and Sudanese refugee resettlement in Maine illustrates, social capital embedded within refugee communities often helps refugees survive. New immigrants, including many recently arrived Somali and Sudanese refugees, face the challenges of communicating in a foreign language, tensions and discrimination from the receiving community, and a lack of economic opportunity because of devalued credentials. In these circumstances, social capital such as reciprocity and bounded solidarity may take on great importance for members of refugee communities. The formation of a tight-knit community, in which social capital is embedded, is also linked to a strong cultural identity that unites the community. Somali and Sudanese communities in Maine expressed desire to maintain their cultural identities for the benefit of their children. Some literature suggests that second generation immigrant children that are members of a tight-knit community with a cohesive cultural identity are better able to resist leveling pressures exerted by the receiving community (Zhou, 1997).

However, integration into the receiving community is also important for the success of newcomers. Learning the language and customs of the receiving community and the way the “system” works can lead to better employment opportunities. Some

studies show that when the receiving community is involved in the process of refugee resettlement, perhaps through sponsorship, the receiving community is more receptive to the newcomers. Also, when the receiving community is more involved in refugee resettlement, oftentimes refugees have a more positive experience and better quality of life in their new home, factors that may improve integration (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011). This is important because, though refugees may access many levels of support within their communities, oftentimes these communities are resource-poor, and refugees may need to seek additional support from the receiving community. It is apparent that many factors influence how refugees support themselves and integrate into American culture, factors not limited to the services provided by CCMRIS. Because community support and community dynamics (both within refugee communities and between refugees and the receiving community) are so important for refugee survival and integration, they may be just as important or more so for asylum seekers. The next chapter will analyze the insights from interviews conducted with refugees, asylees, service providers, and community leaders in Portland, Maine, assessing the value of community support for refugees compared with asylum seekers.

## CHAPTER 4

### INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

It became clear through these interviews that the different immigration statuses of asylum seekers and refugees meant these newcomers would experience the process of establishing themselves in Maine in different ways. Immigration status affected how Maine became the resettlement site of asylum seekers and refugees: either by choice or by assignment, though the presence of family or friends increased the likelihood that both groups would resettle in Maine. Status also affected ways asylum seekers and refugees supported themselves financially, since refugees can access federal benefits while asylum seekers can only access state and municipally funded General Assistance, and relied on a fair amount of community support. However, both asylees and refugees shared a number of experiences, especially in dealing with the language barrier, finding employment and becoming recredentialed, and integrating into the community. This analysis will first contrast the main issues that asylees and refugees recounted having dealt with upon arrival in Maine, and then will address some commonalities in their experiences, including an analysis of the role ethnic communities have played in adjusting to life in Maine.

#### **Asylum Cases and Work Authorization: Challenges Faced by Asylum Seekers**

Once in the United States, asylum seekers face a number of challenges in getting established and supporting themselves. Refugees experience similar challenges; however,

they are able to receive the support of CCMRIS. Three of the main challenges that asylees interviewed for this study recalled were the process of applying for asylum, the desire to work but not being able to because of having to wait for work authorization, and the pervasive feeling of uncertainty caused by these two unknowns.

Interviewees noted that applying for asylum, a complex process, was compounded for some by a lack of access to legal assistance and the language barrier. One asylee noted that when asylum seekers arrive, “they don’t even know how to apply for asylum. Legal expertise is only found at ILAP, which is very overburdened, they can only serve a certain number of asylum seekers.” Another stated that without knowledge of English, asylum seekers “rely on what people tell you. In the community you might hear different things, some accurate, some not accurate and you might be lost in the process and spend more time making your case.” The lack of legal assistance and knowledge of English has consequences: it is more likely that asylum seekers’ cases would be denied. Additionally, the backlog of asylum cases has grown over the years. An asylee who arrived in 2000 waited seven months for his asylum case to be heard and approved. Some asylees now estimate that those who have recently applied for asylum have received hearing dates five or six years in the future. In addition to waiting a long time for a hearing date, let alone a decision on their asylum case, asylum seekers also needed to wait several months before being authorized to work.

All asylee interviewees discussed the work authorization waiting time as a challenge that made them frustrated. Waiting for authorization to work seemed to result in a feeling of being “stuck” for asylees. Asylees indicated a limited number of options for supporting themselves until they receive their work authorization. General Assistance



(GA) was one option and influenced some people's decision to move to Maine, as did the presence of family or friends living in Maine. When Governor LePage considered cutting GA for asylum seekers, asylees and asylum seekers protested because there was a lack of other options to support them. An asylee and a staff member with The Opportunity Alliance, a Southern Maine non-profit that administers certain welfare programs, asserted that the end of GA would lead to an increase of homelessness. An asylee said that even if asylum seekers did not want to be forced to rely upon GA, there were no other options. With regards to the work authorization wait time, several asylees proposed shortening it to one or three months. Several asylees expressed frustration with not being able to be self-sufficient and relying on others for support. One asylee wanted the wait time for work authorization reduced, so that she could "start being flexible and contribute to the community."

Waiting for work authorization and for a decision to be made on their asylum cases, along with moving to a new place, caused some asylees to feel a pervading sense of uncertainty. Interviewees described how little they were prepared for life in Maine: "when you arrive, you have no idea what life is like." While waiting for a decision on their cases, asylum seekers do not know if they will be able to remain in the country where they are rebuilding their lives. An interviewee described this feeling this way: "One of the biggest challenges is the uncertainty, the feeling of 'Am I here or not here?' or 'Can I stay?' You don't have papers, you can't leave the country, you can't plan ahead because you don't know what lies ahead." Several interviewees highlighted this feeling of uncertainty, more than the concrete challenges of finding housing or supporting themselves, suggesting that perhaps this mental challenge was the greatest they faced.

## **The Language Barrier and Devalued Credentials: Challenges Faced by Asylees and Refugees**

Despite the influence immigration status plays in shaping the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees upon arrival in the United States, these newcomers also share many experiences, including the challenge of learning English, finding self-actualizing employment after having their credentials devalued, and negotiating their relationship with the receiving community. In addition to learning English and taking steps to improve their opportunities in the job market, many interviewees expressed that establishing a relationship of understanding between newcomers and the receiving community is integral to the process of integration. The level of integration into the host community, according to the literature reviewed for this project, can affect how successful newcomers can be.

The language barrier was a concern that each of the asylees and refugees interviewed highlighted, although many of them either had some or high English skills before arriving in Maine. They recognized the challenges that confronted not only asylum seekers and refugees, but all immigrants arriving from non-English-speaking countries.

An asylee commented,

For me I would say it's the biggest challenge any immigrant can face coming to America, not being able to speak the language. The language barrier is really daunting. You can get the assistance, which makes you a client to any service provider. With that you can integrate yourself, maybe so you can process your work permit. But you are a liability for any employer, because you don't speak the language. And as days go and many people come, the capacity of language-learning institutions is dwindling. There's not enough capacity to have everyone in the classes and stuff like that.

Many newcomers considered lack of English a main obstacle for asylees and refugees gaining employment that utilized their skills and expertise, as well as devalued credentials.

The search for employment was another source of frustration for both asylum seekers and refugees. Many asylee and refugee interviewees' credentials had been devalued and they found that their skills and experience were often not recognized in the United States. Devalued credentials were a major issue for refugees and asylees. For instance, though many interviewees had university degrees or had held professional jobs in their home countries, they needed to pursue higher education in the United States to be able to work in similar positions. One asylee who held an office job in Rwanda found work in a fish processing plant in Portland though he had never done manufacturing work before. The adjustment was difficult for him to make, though he said he adapted. A refugee from Iraq explained the issue this way:

I think our main problem we faced, me and my wife, was how to transfer our experience into finding a job. I and my wife—my wife is a teacher—and I am a journalist, and we could not translate our experience into a job. I was trying to get into the interpreting business, and although I have a BA in English literature, I had twelve years using the English language to communicate, nobody accepted me until I took a course here.

Another refugee recounted that in the United States, her and her husband's degrees were not recognized and her husband's first job was minimum wage because it was the only position he could find.

In some instances the language barrier prevents immigrants from accessing jobs because not knowing the language is a liability. In other instances, some people believe

structural racism comes into play. Alain Nahimana, an immigrant rights and racial justice advocate with the Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition and the Maine People’s Alliance, attributes the persistent hiring of immigrants in low-wage positions as an example of structural racism: “If you have a person with a bachelor's degree from Africa and that person doesn’t speak English, and you want to help that person get a job in a hotel, that’s racism, thinking those jobs should be held by immigrants.” Because devalued credentials are a noted problem that many foreigners face in the United States, people are working to determine better and more efficient ways to transfer skills and experience to the U.S. context. The New Mainers Resource Center, a program within Portland Adult Education, is involved with this research.

### **Negotiating a Relationship with the Receiving Community**

Asylum seekers and refugees also shared similar experiences in the process of negotiating their relationship within the host community. Many asylees and refugees said they found the host community welcoming and generous, but noted that some long-term Mainers were opposed to their presence. The division within the state over the General Assistance controversy accentuated the elements of resistance. One interviewee commented that “From what I see, most Americans usually welcome others. Maybe there were some people who were against that population, but in general, I think most Americans feel good about immigrants coming to Maine and they are usually nice to them.” However, Mr. Nahimana noted that, because of the General Assistance controversy “Maine is divided” between liberal Southern Maine, specifically Portland,

and the rest of the state. Former Portland Mayor Michael Brennan described the General Assistance controversy as a very difficult time (Brennan, personal communication, 2016). He was surprised both by the amount of support among Portland residents for the Portland Community Support Fund, but also by the number of people who opposed it. He attributed some of the opposition to an element of racism, because most of the people affected were people of color.

On the other hand, interviewees recounted that opposition to their presence within the community was often overcome by support for their presence. Mr. Nahimana pointed out that the General Assistance controversy sparked an outpouring of support for asylum seekers and immigrants in general: “You have people who have never come out and supported immigration now doing it. And we have champions in the Democratic Party, we have champions in the Republican Party.” A refugee involved with the Many and One rally in Lewiston described a similar situation in response to former Lewiston Mayor Raymond’s negative comments directed at Somali newcomers. She recounts a celebration the Many and One rally held in a gym where so many people attended they could not even fit in the event space. She has been involved in a number of advocacy and immigrant rights organizations and feels very positive about the direction the state is going in terms of integration and welcoming newcomers. However, Mr. Nahimana looks forward to the day when support for new immigrants moves beyond the community saying “we support people” to taking on more concrete actions to address and improve integration.

Many opponents to resettling refugees in Maine or offering GA to asylum seekers blame these newcomers for causing economic strain to the state. Thus, several asylee and

refugee interviewees focused on highlighting their merits for the host community and ways the immigrant community gives back in order to counter this narrative. Some asylee interviewees presented GA as a public investment in the skills, economic activity, and tax revenue that asylum seekers eventually contribute to Portland and Maine. One asylee said, “Helping asylum seekers is an investment. They invest in us because in time we will serve the city, serve the country. It’s important that the city continue helping asylum seekers.” Another declared: “I am paying back right now, because I am working full time, and I pay my taxes. That is one of the ways to pay back for what they did to me. And I am really grateful because they keep doing that, they keep fighting to keep helping newcomers.” An asylee who noted the financial challenges of providing GA to asylum seekers also pointed to the demographic challenge that Maine faces, and proposed that immigrants are the way to build the workforce.

Another way asylees and refugees contribute to their community, proposed some interviewees, is through volunteer work and activism. One interviewee said that one of the greatest ways refugees and asylum seekers contribute to their community is through volunteer work they might pursue before they are able to work. Indeed, several people interviewed were involved with community organizing and advocacy. Another interviewee involved with several volunteer organizations said she “felt the need to give back to the community that gave [her] so much.” Perhaps this insight, offered by an asylee, best summarizes how many asylees and refugees hope the receiving community will see them:

What some immigrants have been trying to show, to legislators, members of Congress, members of the Senate, or other stakeholders, we are trying to show them that we are a work force, we are not just here to be panhandlers. We are here

for a reason, most of us have left our country for political reasons, and we want to start a new life, and be called Mainers, so they have to give us that chance of becoming citizens, of becoming Mainers, or other places those immigrants can go. We want those people to show us that we are home, that Maine is our new home.

Becoming Mainers—that is, integrating into the receiving community—was important for many interviewees. Many interviewees highlighted the importance of newcomers and the receiving community coming to a cross-cultural understanding. An asylee stated:

So, asylees and refugees, we need to sit at the same table with the receiving community so we can learn about each other. Before building the community together they need first to sit together and learn about each other. I have seen, it is the key. When you have that interaction, you know the needs of the refugee or other community. The other community will also know American culture, what is inside. And learning each other we will build relationship together and so, those kinds of relationships, you can accomplish anything you need.

Increasing interaction between newcomers and members of the receiving community was seen by some interviewees as crucial for improving English language skills, working through cross-cultural misunderstandings, and facilitating integration. Bethany Edmonds, the coordinator of the American Friends program run by CCMRIS, a program that matches refugees with volunteers from the receiving community who assist the refugees in getting accustomed to the day-to-day aspects of life in Maine, said many refugees found the program beneficial. She noted that many refugee families say they feel that they and their American Friends are “part of one another’s families” by the close of the six-month program. Some interviewees also emphasized that the project of forming a cross-cultural understanding was a two-way process, involving intentional actions on the part of both newcomers and the receiving community. The asylee interviewee above

continued to propose that, while the host community has an important role in supporting newcomers, newcomers also need to be flexible and adapt to the culture of their new home. She suggested that newcomers select the positive values from their home culture to conserve, but leave behind other values or cultural traits not compatible with the receiving culture.

Refugees and asylees were concerned with countering negative perceptions of immigrants within the state, and with establishing a cross-cultural understanding with the receiving community. One interviewee described his attempt to be an “ambassador” to his new country and the various social circles and organizations he is involved with. He wanted to represent his people in a positive way to the host community, which may have little exposure to people from his culture. All asylees and refugees seemed to view “integration”—a somewhat vague term—as the ultimate goal for newcomers. Integration would be achieved through learning English, adapting to life in Maine, achieving financial independence through employment, and pursuing greater opportunities. It would be attained in part through interacting with the receiving community. However, many interviewees also highlighted the importance of the support they received from their own ethnic communities and social networks.

### **The Role of “Immigrant Communities” and Ethnic Community Associations**

Family, friends, ethnic community organizations, and cross-cultural immigrant groups affected how asylees and refugees interviewed for this project undertook the process of starting a new life in Maine. These social networks provided a several benefits



to refugees and asylees, including information about service providers and housing, translation and interpretation, temporary shelter and help with moving, transportation, some financial assistance, and emotional support. Because refugees have access to the resettlement and case management services of CCMRIS, refugees and asylees relied on their social networks to different degrees and for different forms of assistance. For instance, many asylees discussed seeking information about service providers and housing from their ethnic community organizations. Though these services are covered by CCMRIS for refugees, CCMRIS services have their own set of limitations. However, both refugees and asylees valued their ethnic community organizations which have been formed by a number of immigrant groups in Maine, including the Rwanda Community Association of Maine, the Burundi Community Association, the Congolese Community of Maine, the Iraqi Community Association, the South Sudanese Community Association, and others. These organizations provide a nexus for the dissemination of information for newcomers and a base for cultural education for children. However, as discussed before, “immigrant communities” are not monolithic entities with universal values and opinions; just as with any social organization, there may be conflicts within groups and downsides to group membership. This section will address the variety of benefits ethnic community associations in Portland provide, how they are used by asylum seekers and refugees, and some issues with community organizations that interviewees discussed.

Several asylees, in discussing the role of community support in their lives, underscored the importance of community for providing information about service providers and housing, especially for those other asylum seekers who spoke little to no

English when they arrived in Maine. An interviewee said that communities of asylum seekers are growing in Maine and that it has become easier for recent arrivals to make connections with people who have been in Maine longer, and find out where to go for legal aid (ILAP) or GA, for example. Another said that there is a Whatsapp group (a smartphone messaging app) that some Rwandans use to keep each other updated on information about housing and offer help with moving into a new place to live. Another avenue for meeting other newcomers is religious gatherings. Two asylees said they met other people from their home countries at churches, and one found a place to live through connections made at church. Damas Rugaba, president of the Rwanda Community Association, said the members of the organization assist recently arrived asylum seekers from Rwanda with a variety of needs, such as finding housing, providing them with belongings such as clothes, helping enroll the children in school, and bringing people to medical check-ups.

While refugees do not necessarily need the assistance of the community in finding housing because CCMRIS caseworkers assist with this, one refugee interviewee noted that adapting to life in Maine was easier if one had contacts there from home. Indeed, resettlement agencies often resettle refugees where their family lives, if they have family within the United States. This refugee noted that, while his first choice of resettlement was Washington, D.C., he was resettled in Maine where his brother had been resettled previously. He said “it was much easier because he was there, laid the groundwork, he had figured things out, and made the transition much easier.” His brother provided him with temporary housing, as many asylees do for recently arrived asylum seekers. However, when CCMRIS cannot find housing for refugees upon arrival, they are housed

in hotels with the funds from the Refugee Reception and Placement Grant. Refugees are kept out of the stressful conditions of living in a shelter; however, this interviewee noted that living in hotels resulted in setbacks for refugees because their initial grant money, normally intended for security deposits and furniture, was spent on hotel rooms. A couple interviewees noted the current shortage of housing in Portland right now, leading newcomers to search for housing in other towns, especially Westbrook, Lewiston, Biddeford and Saco. Both refugees and asylees stressed the importance of having a living space of one's own after arriving from stressful living conditions abroad.

While asylees seemed to rely on their community for information more than refugees, both asylees and refugees noted many cases where co-ethnic community members provided temporary housing to new arrivals, especially relatives or friends. An asylee from Burundi said that Burundians in Portland will offer to host "one or two kids" or a whole family while that family is looking for another place to stay. He said this was so that families, especially children, did not have to stay in a homeless shelter. A asylee from Rwanda, who knew no one in Maine when she arrived, told the story of how when she arrived at the bus station in Portland, she heard a woman speaking her language. So she approached the woman, explained her situation, and asked if the woman would let her stay at her house until she found a place to live. The woman agreed.

Ethnic community associations also provided emotional support to members of the community and members of these organizations helped new arrivals avoid trial-and-error by sharing what they had learned. An asylee recounted that "In the evenings when you're bored and desperate and far from your own family, you appreciate it when someone invites you to their house for Christmas so you don't have to be alone for

Christmas, New Year's, you really appreciate having someone around." An asylee who had lived in Maine a relatively long time expressed his desire to help new arrivals adjust to life in Maine and take the steps to gain a good career: "I try to see how I can help my community not have to go through what I did, to not take so much time. When you come here, you have no idea what to expect. You are hit with the reality that it is not easy to do what you did at home. I want to help people to transfer their skill set." Community associations are also a medium for maintaining culture, which can be a source of strength for newcomers.

Ethnic community associations also provide a forum from which asylees and refugees could practice their culture, which according to literature reviewed for this study, may make an immigrant more resilient. For instance, an interviewee described how the Rwanda Community Association puts on a couple of parties each year for the community to celebrate, reflect, and discuss issues its members may have. Ali Al Mshakheel of Iraq was in the process of establishing an Iraqi Community Association of Maine that was supported by many other Iraqis. This community association, instead of focusing on service provision, would be a group where Iraqis could celebrate their culture. Another goal of the community association would be building understanding between Iraqi Mainers and non-Iraqi Mainers.

Cultural education for children was seen as valuable by some asylees and refugees to keep the community connected and to build bridges between newcomers and the receiving community. Ethnic community associations were one venue for cultural education. Mr. Rugaba of the Rwanda Community Association described a program run by the association called "School Kids" that organizes "leadership projects, summer

campus, trips to universities like UMaine, MIT, and UMass,” and cultural education programs on Saturdays that teach language and dance. About forty to forty-five children participate every year. Mr. Rugaba shared his hope that the younger children would look up to the older ones and that they would all go on to college. Another member of the association seconded the benefits of the college visits. Mr. Al Mshakheel shared the belief with Mr. Rugaba in investing in the children of newcomers. He asserted that “planting the seed of understanding” in children was one of the best ways to build bridges between newcomers and the receiving community. He works on this mission through his position with the Portland Public Schools’ Multicultural/Multilingual Center, which provides programming to groups of children of diverse backgrounds. Co-ethnic community networks offered a host of benefits to members; however, some interviewees allowed that belonging to a community can also bring additional pressures and limitations.

While community membership provides benefits such as information about housing, and sometimes a place to stay for a while, resources within the community, or time, to provide assistance can be limited. One asylee pointed to this saying that “If someone comes to someone, he has no choice but to help.” He suggested that the current system of community associations assisting new arrivals was somewhat unorganized, due to the demands people feel from their own jobs and personal lives. He expressed the hope that in the future, various community associations, whose members face similar challenges, could unite to combine resources and provide more help, while spreading the responsibility throughout the broader community.

Additionally, in belonging to a co-ethnic community, members can feel tempted to only spend time with other members of that community, hindering the integration process. According to one asylee, “people develop a kind of ghetto life, like you need to hang out with people from Burundi all the time.” He asserted that “[y]ou need to be able to open yourself up to others. One of the most important things is when you get mingled in the mainstream communities and practice your English, you learn more about where you are and the people in your community.” In this sense, membership in a large co-ethnic community with strong ties among the members can hamper one’s ability to “learn the system” by spending time with members of the receiving community.

While many asylees and refugees become involved with community networks and associations and benefit from them, others avoid these social circles because of the dividing nature of the conflicts in their home countries. An asylee from Rwanda pointed this out: “because of what happened in the country, they don’t want to connect again with other Rwandans.” The scars from the ethnic conflict in Rwanda may deter some asylum seekers from that country from seeking out other Rwandans. A refugee, who belongs to a religious minority that was persecuted in Iran, and was originally resettled with her family in a large Iranian community in California, did not enjoy immersion in this Iranian community. Having been persecuted for her religion in Iran, she did not desire to be surrounded by Iranians once in the United States. She also felt that the community isolated her, and she did not care for the competition for material goods among members of the community. These examples serve as a reminder that “immigrant communities,” broadly defined, are made up of individuals with varied experiences and opinions, and

that historical context can shape how refugees and asylees from certain countries will relate to their fellow countrymen once in the United States.

### **Suggestions for Improving Opportunity and Integration**

Many refugees and asylees thought it was important that newcomers and the receiving community interact more in order to understand each other's customs and situations. This would make it easier for newcomers and members of the receiving community to work together to improve living conditions and economic opportunities for newcomers. However, in moving beyond building understanding between newcomers and the receiving community, several interviewees said that the city of Portland and organizations that work with immigrants should focus on making an intentional, holistic "integration" policy at the local level. Some interviewees expressed that the local level was the level of government where it was most likely that policy-making could occur. According to interviewees, immigrants would be involved with the development of such a policy. Such a policy would entail more collaboration between all organizations that work with immigrants, would be better funded, incorporating funding from private foundations, and would include data collection to represent the actual situation of asylum seekers and refugees.

Holding positions as community leaders and immigrant rights advocates, many interviewees believed developing an intentional integration policy at the local level to address the concerns of immigrants was necessary, and that immigrants would need to be involved in making this policy. According to Mr. Rugaba, president of the Rwanda

Community Association, “we need to think about integration, and how to involve immigrants in the process, because they are the process.” Another asylee also agreed that immigrants need to be a part of forming policy: “One of the things I usually try to advocate for is to have a voice to represent immigrants, to sit at that table, to advocate for immigrants. We need . . . to be part of the solution, have a talk and make our voice heard.”

Mr. Nahimana is a vocal proponent of such an inclusive policy and according to him, “institutionalized diversity” was a key aspect of it. Institutionalized diversity is when organizations make a concerted effort to hire people from different backgrounds and promote them to leadership positions, to counteract institutionalized discrimination that keeps many people of color from accessing better opportunities. His idea was for the city to make an office of Immigrant Integration, Diversity, and Inclusion. He expressed frustration that organizations working with immigrants were making decisions about them without consulting them, and provided the example of the Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition (MIRC) before he became the organization’s first coordinator. At the time the coalition was made up primarily of organizations headed by white people. Since Mr. Nahimana became coordinator, MIRC has grown to include many different ethnic immigrant community organizations and the coalition institutionalized that of the seven board members, three must be immigrants. This process would also change what Mr. Nahimana refers to as the condescending relationship between service providers and immigrants. Breaking barriers for immigrants to access better positions and leadership positions is important for improving opportunity, and ought to be part of any policy relating to immigrant integration.



Several interviewees also hoped that such a policy would approach integration in a holistic way, meaning it would address all concerns immigrants face, such as English proficiency, employment and job trainings, and economic advancement, in an orchestrated fashion. Services for refugees, asylum seekers, and asylees provided by the city of Portland, CCMRIS, and a host of other community development organizations are fairly comprehensive. However, interviewees stressed that they could be improved. For instance, former Portland Mayor Brennan believed that the city “doesn’t have the infrastructure for integration. There are still language and cultural barriers that people face and housing challenges. The GA issue really put a setback on my goals of moving forward with developing programs to work on integration.” Additionally, several interviewees allowed that there was a lack of communication between organizations that work with immigrants, and that this lack of communication and collaboration was confusing for new arrivals. Mr. Rugaba said that sometimes newcomers are frustrated because they “don’t know who is who, and how they can reach existing resources.” He wondered how organizations could work together better. Amy Holland of the World Affairs Council of Maine also voiced the opinion that there were so many organizations working with immigrants in some capacity that it seemed as though some of their missions overlapped and that perhaps they ought to join forces and share resources.

Adequate funding for government and non-governmental organizations working for immigrants was another concern. Mr. Rugaba pointed out that ILAP is constrained financially from serving all the asylum seekers who need representation. One solution proposed by interviewees was for these organizations to pursue funding from independent foundations; indeed some interviewees were in the process of seeking

funding from foundations. Mr. Rugaba also highlighted an initiative started by the New Mainers' Resource Center that would provide asylum seekers with loans for hiring attorneys. Bethany Edmunds of CCMRIS recounted that though the organization is 90 percent federally funded, it is "reliant on the fluctuations in federal funding." This creates "a constant battle for funding, which makes it so we can never plan ahead or plan for the big picture. We are always looking to expand funding sources so we are not so reliant on the federal government."

Hand in hand with increased and more diverse funding sources is improved data collection on the situations of newcomers in Maine. CCMRIS, the City of Portland, and ILAP all collect data about their clients, but there is no comprehensive data collection of all newcomers in the city. This data on the demographics and financial situations of refugees, asylum seekers, and asylees over time, and how they access benefits like GA, would inform policy surrounding immigrants and make it more effective (Rugaba, personal communication, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

The immigration status of refugees and asylum seekers appeared to affect their economic adaptation strategies and the various challenges they faced upon arrival. For instance, asylum seekers needed to apply for asylum and wait for work authorization, which led many to feel frustrated and stuck. Immigration status also affected what benefits refugees and asylum seekers could access, which may also have shaped how refugees and asylum seekers relied upon their communities for assistance, and to what

degree. For some asylum seekers, immigrant communities were a valuable source of information about service providers and also a way to access temporary housing. For both refugees and asylees, community organizations could be an important forum for celebrating culture.

While the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees interviewed for this study varied because of their immigration status, asylees and refugees described a number of shared experiences related to the process of adapting to life in Maine and trying to establish themselves. These shared experiences included the challenges of learning English and finding work despite their credentials being devalued. Many interviewees described how valuable it was to have someone within the receiving community, whether it was a family member who arrived earlier, the case managers of CCMRIS, or another immigrant from the same ethnic community, to help them “learn the ropes” of life in Maine. Another shared experience was the process of negotiating a relationship with the receiving community. While many refugees and asylees interviewed for this project thought that Portland was a welcoming community, they highlighted the need for increased communication between newcomers and the receiving community, which would bring about a greater cross-cultural understanding for both groups. However, many argued, immigrants should also play a key role in developing an intentional, holistic, integration policy regarding refugees, asylees, and all immigrants in the city. Such a policy would address the concerns of newcomers in a choreographed way, and would better enable newcomers to improve their economic opportunities.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD

As the case of refugee and asylum seeker resettlement in Maine illustrates, even this remote corner of the United States is affected by the global migration of displaced persons. This case exemplifies how the federal government's failure to reform the refugee and asylum system can strain cities where refugees and asylum seekers resettle. Refugees and asylum seekers do not resettle in "our government, they move into our communities," and our communities must develop ways to incorporate the newcomers under our county's faulty immigration policy (Eby, Iverson, & Kekic, 2011: 596). The refugee resettlement program is federally funded, but there is no equivalent for asylum seekers, who face many of the same challenges as refugees. If providing federal welfare benefits to asylum seekers while they await a decision on their asylum application is not an option, there are still ways to reform federal immigration policy to make the adjudication process more rapid, fair, and cost-efficient, benefitting both asylum seekers and the states and cities where they resettle. But because it may not be reasonable to expect federal immigration policy reform in the near future, Maine cities that receive many refugees and asylum seekers should establish their own policies and programs to facilitate integration and improve opportunity for these newcomers. These programs should build bridges between newcomers and members of the receiving community to promote cross-cultural understanding; mentoring programs are one option. CCMRIS organizes mentoring programs for refugees, but asylum seekers could also benefit from similar programs. If public funding for programs like this does not exist, private sector

organizations may create such programs with funding from independent foundations and the help of volunteers. This section will review the main findings from this research and explore possible asylum policy reforms at the national and local levels.

The organization Human Rights First offers key recommendations for reforming the U.S. asylum system. One reform would be the allocation of sufficient funding to the Department of Justice Executive Office for Immigration Review (DOJ/EOIR), so the department could review asylum cases in a timely and fair manner. This would mainly entail the hiring of additional asylum immigration officers and immigration court staff, but would also support representation for those most in need of it, including children and the mentally disabled. Eighty-four percent of detained immigrants have no legal representation, and these non-represented cases are far more difficult for the asylum applicants and the judges (Human Rights First, n.d.).

Another key reform would be the decreased use of detention of asylum seekers and other immigrants. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency detains over 400,000 immigrants, many of them asylum seekers, at an annual cost of \$2 billion, affecting both the detained immigrants and U.S. taxpayers. Human Rights First recommends that the Department of Homeland Security only use detention when it is necessary and use other, less costly, alternatives to detention whenever possible. Additionally, the right to a prompt court review of their detention is often violated for asylum seekers (Human Rights First, n.d.). Furthermore, the detention of asylum seekers “may have lasting effects on individuals and on their ability to adjust to and integrate in the host society,” especially since asylum seekers may have experienced trauma or torture (UNHCR, 2007). Detention is costly for taxpayers and may be costly for asylum

seekers' mental health and integration potential into American society, if and when their claims are approved. It is also largely unnecessary; in 2004, the percentage of asylum seekers who did not appear for their court cases was only 5.7 percent (Frelick, 2005).

There have been few reforms to the current U.S. refugee program since its inception in 1980. One reform was the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013 which took into account some recommendations of asylum seeker advocates (Nezer, 2014: 123, 126). However, other legislation, such as the Refugee Protection Act of 2013, which would have decreased the detention of asylum seekers and introduced other important reforms, did not pass (Nezer, 2014: 133). Additionally, Human Rights Watch's recommendation that the work authorization waiting period for asylum applicants be eliminated, is not yet on the table (Human Rights Watch, 2013). While federal immigration reform is essential, several interviewees emphasized the importance for Maine and its cities to develop policies and programs to address the issues of refugee and asylum seeker integration.

In the context of Maine, the passage of L.D. 369 highlighted the state's ability to develop a progressive policy regarding asylum seekers. However, Mr. Nahimana pointed out that the passage of this new law was achieved reactively, rather than proactively. Only when Governor LePage challenged asylum seekers' access to GA did the Maine Legislature act to make policy specifically addressing the concerns of asylum seekers. Despite this, immigrant rights activists are working to push an immigrant integration agenda within the city of Portland.

Thousands of refugees have resettled in Maine throughout the years, and at least a thousand asylum seekers have resettled in Maine as well. While many long-term Maine

residents have welcomed newcomers, many have resisted their resettlement here. In the case of Lewiston, opposition to newcomers was sparked by the rapid migration of Somalis to the city. Long-term Lewiston residents felt that the new Somali migrants put pressure on the city's scarce resources. Additionally, some opposition to the Somalis in Lewiston may have entailed racial and religious prejudice, given the white-majority ethnic makeup of the state and the recent post 9/11 context of their migration (Langellier, 2006: 97). In other instances, politicians—Mayor Macdonald and Governor LePage—have stirred up nativist sentiment to spur their ultimately successful reelection campaigns, pointing to the continued presence of anti-immigrant attitudes within Maine.

The Maine case of refugee and asylum seeker resettlement provides interesting examples from which to compare how refugees and asylum seekers use social capital to support themselves and become established. Social capital is especially associated with immigrant communities because many newcomers need the support of their social networks to survive in the unfamiliar circumstances of their host country. As Zhou, Portes, and Sensenbrenner postulated, the challenging circumstances of adapting to a new environment may cause the members of immigrant communities to unite and support each other more. However, community solidarity may be weakened if many members of the community have strong ties to people within the receiving community, or if the leveling pressures (systemic lack of opportunity or persistent discrimination) are too strong. These forces may be at work in Maine: there is some discrimination against newcomers in Maine, and there are also many ties between newcomers and members of the receiving community facilitated by volunteer organizations, service providers, and

through the school system, with its diverse student population. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine to what extent these social forces benefit or constrain newcomers.

Through this study it became evident the ways in which newcomers attempted to counter or overcome the negative perceptions of themselves that some members of the receiving community held. They attempted to change the negative narrative surrounding newcomers by emphasizing the human capital that refugees and asylees contribute to the economy of a state facing a growing workforce shortage. One way interviewees did so was to highlight the education and qualifications that many refugees and asylees brought to the United States. One asylee noted that many asylum seekers arriving in Maine had the social positioning—a well-paying job, perhaps a high level of education—in their home countries that allowed them to access a visa and purchase a ticket to come to the United States. Once becoming established in Maine, many asylees and refugees pursue higher education or additional degrees in an effort to re-credential themselves. Many refugees and asylees also feel the desire to give back to their host communities and work with resettlement or advocacy organizations, contribute to the community through volunteer work, or play a role in supporting new arrivals.

The tensions that exist between newcomers and members of the receiving community have caused strife for both groups and emphasize the need for more bridges between people to build cross-cultural understanding. When newcomers and members of the receiving community come together to learn about each other, they can break down stereotypes and institutionalized discrimination that limits opportunity for newcomers. Additionally, when the receiving community is involved in helping newcomers integrate, through faith-based groups, sponsorship, or other volunteering, they may be more



invested in the success of the newcomers. These types of relationships are a way for newcomers to practice English, learn about the customs of their new home, and build more ties of support. As one refugee commented, we can become “wrapped up in the complexity of the issue,” of addressing the concerns of newcomers, however, “we shouldn’t forget the day-to-day things.” A friendly community, with cross-cultural understanding and opportunity for refugees can make integration more successful. Perhaps the programs of CCMRIS that bridge the gaps between refugees and the receiving community—for instance, the American Friends program, and the professional mentoring program—can serve as a guide for similar programs that could be implemented within asylum seeker and asylee communities.

Just as each new refugee arrival in Maine who wishes is matched with an American Friend or a mentor, a program should be established in Maine cities that matches each recently arrived asylum seeker with a mentor from the receiving community to help them through the adjustment process. This may already occur on an informal basis, but a formal program would help more recent arrivals be matched with mentors. The existence of many NGOs that work with newcomers—Coastal Enterprises Inc.’s Start Smart business development program for refugees and immigrants, Community Financial Literacy, Learning Works and Portland Literacy Volunteers for example—are evidence of the support for newcomers embedded within immigrant communities and the receiving community, as is the popularity of CCMRIS’s American Friends program. The American Friends program often has a waiting list for prospective volunteers, who may wait at least a month to be matched with a refugee. Meanwhile, many asylum seekers, who share many of the experiences as refugees, lack access to

CCMRIS's programs that serve refugees. Though funding for programming is limited, the work of CCMRIS and NGOs is supplemented with the help of many volunteers, which shows that Mainers are ready to help out. Perhaps ethnic immigrant community associations could provide the forum from which to organize such mentoring or other bridge-building programs. This would enable newcomers to create programs that address what they really need.

Though refugees and asylum seekers continue to face many challenges when they arrive in the United States, especially in such a remote and distinct location such as Maine, resourceful newcomers and their allies in the receiving community are working tirelessly to develop innovative ways to help other newcomers integrate to life here and pursue ever-increasing opportunities.

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Appendix: Institutional Review Board Approval and Application

**APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH WITH HUMAN SUBJECTS**

**Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, 114 Alumni Hall, 581-1498**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Grace Kiffney

**EMAIL:** grace.kiffney@maine.edu

**TELEPHONE:** (207) 232-4244

**CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):**

**FACULTY SPONSOR (Required if PI is a student):** Robert W. Glover, Ph.D.

**TITLE OF PROJECT:** The Economic Experiences of Refugees versus Asylum Seekers in Portland, Maine

**START DATE:** 01/04/2016

**PI DEPARTMENT:** Anthropology (International Affairs)

**MAILING ADDRESS:** 119 Park St. Orono, ME 04473

**FUNDING AGENCY (if any):** Jones Thesis Fellowship

**STATUS OF PI:**

**FACULTY/STAFF/GRADUATE/UNDERGRADUATE** Undergraduate student

1. **If PI is a student, is this research to be performed:**

- X for an honors thesis/senior thesis/capstone? for a master's thesis?**
- for a doctoral dissertation? for a course project?**
- other (specify)**

2. **Does this application modify a previously approved project? No. If yes, please give assigned number (if known) of previously approved project:**

3. **Is an expedited review requested? Yes.**

Submitting the application indicates the principal investigator's agreement to abide by the responsibilities outlined in [Section I.E. of the Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects.](#)

Faculty Sponsors are responsible for oversight of research conducted by their students. The Faculty Sponsor ensures that he/she has read the application and that the conduct of such research will be in accordance with the University of Maine's Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. **REMINDER:** if the principal investigator is an undergraduate student, the Faculty Sponsor **MUST** submit the application to the IRB.

**Email complete application to Gayle Jones (gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu)**

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*\*\* **FOR IRB USE ONLY** Application # 2015-11-25 Date received 11/24/2015

Review (F/E): E

Expedited Category: I.I.3.g.

**ACTION TAKEN:**



- |                          |  |  |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <b>Judged Exempt; category</b>                   | <b>Modifications required?</b>   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <b>Accepted (date)</b>                           | <b>Approved as submitted. Date of next review: by</b>  |
|                          | <b>Degree of Risk:</b>                           |  |
|                          | <b>X</b>   | <b>Approved pending modifications, 12/7/15. Date of next review: by 12/06/2016 Degree of Risk:</b> |
|                          |  | <b>minimal</b>   |
|                          | <b>Modifications accepted (date): 12/21/2015</b> |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <b>Not approved (see attached</b>                |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <b>statement) Judged not research</b>            |  |
|                          | <b>with human subjects</b>                       |  |

**FINAL APPROVAL TO BEGIN  
12/21/2015**

## 1. Summary Proposal

Unlike refugees, who arrive in the US with a set of comprehensive federal benefits, asylum seekers often arrive with nothing, and the moral obligation to support them falls on municipalities and states with tight budgets. Despite the long-term benefits of immigration, such as a young, talented workforce and the richness of cultural diversity, many long-term Mainers do not want public benefits spent on asylum seekers because of budget constraints. Because of these financial tensions, the state is polarized on the issue of whether to extend General Assistance (GA) benefits to asylum seekers, putting this vulnerable group into a more vulnerable position. The mainstream media and politicians tend to lump asylum seekers and refugees into the same category, though the economic, legal, etc. realities they face are quite distinct. Additionally, asylum seekers are often characterized as an economic burden to Portland and Maine, with little attention paid to the ways this group may support itself through community support systems. Through this thesis I hope to answer the question: What different economic challenges and successes have asylum seekers experienced compared with the experiences of refugees?

There is a general lack of awareness of the differences between the terms “refugee” and “asylum seeker,” though these groups of immigrants arrive with differing legal statuses and therefore are eligible for different benefits. Refugees are designated as such by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and have undergone an extensive application process, interviewing with UN refugee camp staff and with the Dept. of Homeland Security. Refugees are sponsored by the US government to travel to the US, and are eligible for Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA), Food Stamps, and Refugee Medical Assistance (RMA) (CCMRIS, n.d.). An asylum seeker is someone who has fled their home country for fear of persecution, usually on a tourist, student, or business visa, and applies for asylum upon arrival in the new country. If an asylum seeker is granted asylum, they are eligible to receive some but not all benefits that a refugee may receive. While the application is pending, benefits are limited.

Maine, especially Portland, has seen a dramatic increase in the number of asylum seekers arriving here (Miller, 2014). They have chosen Maine because they can receive GA and because there are many recently established Central African communities of other asylum seekers (Miller, 2014). Asylum seekers have not yet received refugee status and therefore are not permitted to receive federal public support. They are also not able to receive a work permit until 150 days after arriving (Fishell, 2015). Since adjudication of their claims usually occurs long after (2 years or more) the 180 days within which it is mandated to occur, these people are left in a tenuous legal status and have little means to support themselves (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008).

The amount spent on GA, which is split between municipalities and the state, increases significantly each year, and the state is unhappy diverting so much money to Portland. In 2014, Portland provided \$3 million in GA funds to asylum seekers compared with \$1.8 million in 2013 (Miller, 2014). In an effort to tighten up the state budget, Gov. Lepage led a movement to eliminate spending GA funds on asylum seekers. Finances have the power to divide people and cause hostility, especially in regards to who “really” deserves public benefits.

However, because the amount of public benefits to asylum seekers is limited, members of those communities likely rely on social capital to get on their feet. Social

capital is the ties built on trust and reciprocity between people of a community. These ties can provide financial and emotional support to members of the community (Allen, 2007). A main focus of previous research is how social capital can help recent immigrants, including refugees, find jobs. However, asylum seekers are in a unique position in which they legally cannot work for five months after arriving in the US. Refugee communities in Maine have been known to provide a strong support networks, for instance, members of the Somali community in Maine often offer beds and rides to other visiting Somalis (Huisman et. al., 2011). There is less information on the more recently arrived Central African communities, which make up over 90 percent of asylum seekers in Maine (Miller, 2014).

My research methodology will be qualitative, conducting a focus group session and a series of interviews, as well as a questionnaire, with leaders from refugee communities and leaders from asylee communities in Portland. This focus group and interviews will be recorded and will likely be held in a conference room at the Portland Public Library or other public conference room. The refugees and asylees will be from many different countries because their background will have affected their varying experiences here. The representatives from asylum communities will be people who have had their applications for asylum approved. Now having lived in the US for a number of years, refugee and asylee leaders will be able to retrospectively assess and compare their experiences. I am already in contact with members of these communities through family friends and my church, and will reach out to more people through snowball sampling. I also plan to interview staff of Catholic Charities Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services (CCMRIS), the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP), and United Way, to get a sense of their perspective of the challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers. In establishing the context for this issue, I will be interviewing municipal and state policymakers and governmental agency workers.

In conclusion, there are many challenges with the asylum system internationally, nationally and how it is implemented in Maine. Locally, the issue hinges on the economic difficulties asylum applicants face while they wait for their cases to be heard. Portland and Maine face the challenge of wanting to welcome new immigrants while facing limited resources to help support them while they get established. This issue is worsened by the confusion surrounding the difference between refugees and asylum seekers, and the narrow narrative in the media of new immigrants depleting welfare. Therefore, it is important to ask members of the refugee and asylee communities how their immigration status has affected their financial successes and difficulties in order to find potential recommendations for the program in Portland and Maine.

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## 2. Personnel

**Principal Investigator (PI):** Grace Kiffney

Department: Anthropology & Honors College, Program: International Affairs

Email: [grace.kiffney@maine.edu](mailto:grace.kiffney@maine.edu)

I have completed the CITI human subject training and participated in an ECO 381 (Sustainable Development Principles and Policies) class survey project of first-year students.

**Faculty Sponsor:** Robert W. Glover, Ph.D.

Department: Political Science & Honors College.

Email: [robert.glover@maine.edu](mailto:robert.glover@maine.edu)

Dr. Robert has doctoral level training in quantitative and qualitative methodologies in the social sciences, and extensive experience working with human subjects in the course of his own scholarly research. In addition, he has overseen both undergraduate capstone experiences and thesis research involving human subject research in the past.

## 3. Participant Recruitment

This research will be in the form of a focus group, individual interviews, and a questionnaire. The focus group will be held with leaders from refugee communities. I will conduct individual interviews with leaders from asylee communities, because of their hesitancy to discuss the asylum application process. I will only interview asylees who have had their asylum cases approved and have legal status. Alternatively, if scheduling a focus group proves too logistically challenging, I will conduct individual interviews with refugee participants. No one will participate in both a focus group and individual interviews. I will provide paper copies of the questionnaire to be completed at the

beginning of the focus group and interviews with refugees and asylees; the questionnaire will be confidential and I will not ask for names on the questionnaire. However, I include “What is your name?” as a question for the focus groups, as a basic introduction and so that participants may refer to other participants’ comments, and so I may take note of who makes which comments. I will contact refugee and asylee leaders through my own personal contacts with members of these communities and those of my committee member Ken Farber, a board member for the non-profit organization, the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project (ILAP). Additionally, I will interview staff members at ILAP, Catholic Charities Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services, United Way, and/or local politician and governmental agency workers, such as Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) staff, who are involved in policymaking on this issue or providing direct service to asylee and refugee communities. I will reach out to as many people as possible, with the goal of being able to hold a focus group of a 8-10 refugees, interview 3-4 asylees, and interview 3-4 service providers or local policy makers.

I will include people regardless of sex, ethnicity, state of health, or any other reason. I will limit participation to adults over the age of 18, due to the difficulty in obtaining consent by parents or legal guardians.

See Appendix A for a sample solicitation email for focus group and interviews.

#### **4. Informed Consent**

For the focus groups and interviews, signed consent will be gained for all research subjects participating (see attached script). We will give a synopsis of the project and its purpose. In addition, we will explain to participants their rights and protections as a research subject. This material will be communicated orally and through a consent form, in which participants will also receive their rights and the contact information for the PI of the study, the faculty sponsor, and the Institutional Review Board at the University of Maine, should they have any additional questions at a later time.

See consent materials for interviews/focus groups in Appendix E at the close of this proposal.

#### **5. Confidentiality**

The project involves the use of focus groups, surveys, and interviews. Participants in focus groups will be advised that we cannot guarantee the confidentiality of their responses prior to the commencement of the session. Participants will also be advised that they should not share the personal responses of other participants outside the focus group setting.

The focus groups and interviews will be recorded. The PI will retain the audio recordings of these sessions as well as any transcripts and notes from these interviews for a period of three years after the termination of the study, so until May 2019. These materials will

remain in a locked, secure location. Any electronic files which could potentially disclose personal information will be stored on a secure, password-protected hard drive.

## **6. Risks to Participants**

Besides time and inconvenience, there is the risk that some interview questions may bring troubling memories to the participants and cause them to feel uncomfortable.

The study will pose minimal risk to the participants. The PI will stress that the participant does not need to answer any questions that make them feel uncomfortable or that they do not want to answer. The PI will also stress that any participant may choose to leave the room or the study if/when they feel the need.

## **7. Benefits**

There are likely no direct benefits to research participants. However, this study will glean some insight into how the economic experiences and success of refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Portland, Maine differ, and some of the challenges associated with accepting asylum seekers into Maine and the implementation of the asylum system here. This research will also provide some policy recommendations to the city and state for how to accept and assist new asylum seekers.

## **8. Compensation**

Participants from refugee and asylee communities will receive \$40 for participation in the study. If participants withdraw from the study before the focus group or interviews are complete, they will still receive \$40. This research is being supported in part by a research fellowship in the Honors College and compensation for refugee and asylee research participants will be drawn from my budget for the fellowship.

**APPENDIX A: EMAIL SOLICITATION**  
**Email Solicitation Materials for Focus Group with Refugees**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Grace Kiffney and I am an undergraduate student studying International Affairs at the University of Maine in Orono. This year I am conducting research for my thesis, which will address the economic experiences of asylum seekers compared with refugees in Portland, Maine. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of how the economic experiences and success of refugees and asylum seekers arriving here differ, and some of the challenges facing the asylum system in Maine. This research may provide some policy suggestions to the city and state for how to better receive and assist new asylum seekers. My faculty advisor for this project is Dr. Rob Glover, professor of Political Science at the University of Maine.

As part of the research, I'll be conducting a focus group with members of local refugee communities. This focus group will last about one hour and I will ask the group questions about your and other group members' economic experiences since moving to Portland, your opinions on Portland's response to incoming asylees and refugees, and you will have the opportunity to give any recommendations you might have. There will also be a confidential questionnaire to fill out individually.

This event will be held at (location TBD) on \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_. This event will be recorded, and your insights and feedback used in my thesis. There will be about 8-10 participants. For your participation, you would receive \$40.

I'd like to invite you to participate in the focus group. I think your participation would provide valuable information to address this important question. If you think you would be interested in participating, please contact me at your earliest convenience so I can tell you more about the study, inform you about your rights and protections as a participant, and answer any questions you might have.

Best,

Grace Kiffney  
Phone: (207) 232-4244  
Email: [grace.kiffney@maine.edu](mailto:grace.kiffney@maine.edu)

Rob Glover  
Dept. of Political Science  
Phone: (207) 581-1880  
Email: [robert.glover@maine.edu](mailto:robert.glover@maine.edu)

## **Email Solicitation Materials for Interviews with Asylees**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Grace Kiffney and I am an undergraduate student studying International Affairs at the University of Maine in Orono. This year I am conducting research for my thesis, which will address the economic experiences of asylum seekers compared with refugees in Portland, Maine. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of how the economic experiences and success of refugees and asylum seekers arriving here differ, and some of the challenges facing the asylum system in Maine. This research may provide some policy suggestions to the city and state for how to better receive and assist new asylum seekers. My faculty advisor for this project is Dr. Rob Glover, professor of Political Science at the University of Maine.

As part of the research, I'll be conducting individual interviews with members of local asylee communities. These interviews will last about one hour and I will ask you various questions about your economic experiences since moving to Portland, your opinions on Portland's response to incoming asylees and refugees, and you will have the opportunity to give any recommendations you might have. There will also be a confidential questionnaire to fill out individually.

This interview will be held at (location TBD) at a time convenient for you. This interview will be recorded, with your consent, and your insights and feedback used in my thesis. For your participation, you would receive \$40.

I'd like to invite you to participate in an interview. I think your participation would provide valuable information to address this important question. If you think you would be interested in participating, please contact me at your earliest convenience so I can tell you more about the study, inform you about your rights and protections as a participant, and answer any questions you might have.

Best,

Grace Kiffney  
Phone: (207) 232-4244  
Email: [grace.kiffney@maine.edu](mailto:grace.kiffney@maine.edu)

Rob Glover  
Dept. of Political Science  
Phone: (207) 581-1880  
Email: [robert.glover@maine.edu](mailto:robert.glover@maine.edu)



## **Email Solicitation Materials for Interviews with Service Providers and Policymakers/Government Agency Workers**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Grace Kiffney and I am an undergraduate student studying International Affairs at the University of Maine in Orono. This year I am conducting research for my thesis, which will address the economic experiences of asylum seekers compared with refugees in Portland, Maine. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of how the economic experiences and success of refugees and asylum seekers arriving here differ, and some of the challenges facing the asylum system in Maine. This research may provide some policy suggestions to the city and state for how to better receive and assist new asylum seekers. My faculty advisor for this project is Dr. Rob Glover, professor of Political Science at the University of Maine.

As part of the research, I'll be conducting individual interviews with service providers to these communities and local policy makers. These interviews will last about one hour and I will ask you various questions about your experience working with asylum seekers and refugees, your opinions on Portland's response to these groups, and you will have the opportunity to give any recommendations you might have.

This interview will be held at (location TBD) at a time convenient for you. This interview will be recorded with your consent, and your insights and feedback used in my thesis.

I'd like to invite you to participate in an interview. I think your participation would provide valuable information to address this important question. If you think you would be interested in participating, please contact me at your earliest convenience so I can tell you more about the study, inform you about your rights and protections as a participant, and answer any questions you might have.

Best,

Grace Kiffney  
Phone: (207) 232-4244  
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Rob Glover  
Dept. of Political Science  
Phone: (207) 581-1880  
Email: [robert.glover@maine.edu](mailto:robert.glover@maine.edu)

## **APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

### **Questions for Refugees**

1. What is your name and what country are you from?
2. Did you choose to come to Portland?
3. What types of assistance were available when you arrived here?
4. What are some of the challenges you faced, or other people you know faced, in supporting yourself when you recently arrived in Portland?
5. Is a sense of community important to you?
6. What forms of government assistance were available to you when you arrived?
7. What do you think about Portland's response to aiding refugees and asylum seekers?
8. What would be most helpful to new refugees and/or asylum seekers arriving in Portland?
9. How do you perceive public opinion towards refugees and asylum seekers in Portland and Maine?
10. Did the public debate over general assistance adequately reflect the perspectives of refugees and asylum seekers?
11. Do you feel that the current debate over Syrian refugees will have impacts on how we deal with general assistance for asylum seekers and refugees in Portland?
12. What are some problems that you see face the refugee system in the US?
13. In Maine?
14. What are some solutions you see to address any lack of funding or support for refugees?
15. Are there aspects of this issue that you feel we haven't discussed yet? Do you have strategy recommendations that haven't been mentioned?

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **Questions for Asylees**

1. Did you choose to come to Portland?
2. What types of assistance were available when you arrived here?
3. What are some of the challenges you faced, or other people you know faced, in supporting yourself when you recently arrived in Portland?
4. Is a sense of community important to you?
5. What forms of government assistance were available to you when you arrived?
6. What do you think about Portland's response to aiding refugees and asylum seekers?
7. What would be most helpful to new refugees and/or asylum seekers arriving in Portland?
8. Do you think the city of Portland spends too much, in General Assistance and other benefits, on asylum seekers?
9. What is your opinion on Governor Lepage's call to end reimbursement to municipalities who provided GA to asylum seekers, and the public's response to that call?
10. What is your opinion on the legal decision reached that the DHHS does not need to reimburse Portland for GA money spent on those who do not qualify (have not yet applied for asylum)?
11. How do you perceive public opinion towards refugees and asylum seekers in Portland and Maine?
12. Did the public debate over general assistance adequately reflect the perspectives of refugees and asylum seekers?
13. Do you feel that the current debate over Syrian refugees will have impacts on how we deal with general assistance for asylum seekers and refugees in Portland?
14. In your opinion, what are some feasible limitations to set on who the city provides benefits to?
15. What are some federal or state solutions you see to address the lack of funding to support asylum applicants?
16. Are there aspects of this issue that you feel we haven't discussed yet? Do you have strategy recommendations that haven't been mentioned?

## **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### **Questions for Service Providers, Policy-makers/Government Agency Workers**

1. In what capacity do you work with refugees and/or asylum seekers?
2. What do you think about Portland's response to aiding refugees and asylum seekers?
3. What would be most helpful to new refugees and/or asylum seekers arriving in Portland?
4. How do you perceive asylum seekers and refugees?
5. Do you think the city of Portland spends too much, in General Assistance and other benefits, on asylum seekers?
6. What is your opinion on Governor Lepage's call to end reimbursement to municipalities who provided GA to asylum seekers, and the public's response to that call?
7. What is your opinion on the legal decision reached that the DHHS does not need to reimburse Portland for GA money spent on those who do not qualify (have not yet applied for asylum)?
8. In your opinion, what are some feasible limitations to set on who the city provides benefits too?
9. What are some federal or state solutions you see to address the lack of funding to support asylum applicants?
10. Are there aspects of this issue that you feel we haven't discussed yet? Do you have strategy recommendations that haven't been mentioned?

## **APPENDIX D: INDEPENDENT QUESTIONNAIRE FOR REFUGEE AND ASYLEE PARTICIPANTS**

The focus group and interview participants will be given this questionnaire to complete individually, so more sensitive questions will not be discussed.

This questionnaire is meant to gain a better understanding of your experiences arriving in the US. If you do not want to answer any question, you may leave it blank.

1. What is your gender?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Other
  - d. Prefer not to answer
  
2. What is your age?
  - a. Under 18 years
  - b. 18 to 24 years
  - c. 25 to 34 years
  - d. 35 to 44 years
  - e. 45 to 54 years
  - f. 55 to 64 years
  - g. 65 or older
  - h. Prefer not to answer
  
3. What is your country of origin?
  
4. What is your religion?
  - a. Christian
  - b. Buddhism
  - c. Hinduism
  - d. Judaism (Jewish)
  - e. Islam (Muslim)
  - f. Sikhism
  - g. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
  - h. Prefer not to answer
  
5. Who did you arrive in the US with? (Check all that apply)
  - Alone
  - Spouse or significant other
  - Children
  - Other family
  - Other
  - Prefer not to answer
  
6. What level of education did you attain in your home country?

- a. Less than high school
  - b. High school graduate (includes equivalency)
  - c. Some college, no degree
  - d. Associate's degree
  - e. Bachelor's degree
  - f. Ph.D.
  - g. Graduate or professional degree
  - h. Prefer not to answer
7. If you attended postsecondary school, what field did you study?
8. In your home country, in what field did you work?
9. What were your English skills upon arriving in the US?
- a. None
  - b. Basic
  - c. Intermediate
  - d. Fluent
  - e. Prefer not to answer
10. What was your financial status in your home country?
- a. Very poor
  - b. Poor
  - c. Lower middle income level
  - d. Middle income level
  - e. Higher middle income level
  - f. Rich
  - g. Very rich
  - h. Prefer not to answer
11. What was your financial status when you arrived in the US?
- a. Very poor
  - b. Poor
  - c. Lower middle income level
  - d. Middle income level
  - e. Higher middle income level
  - f. Rich
  - g. Very rich
  - h. Prefer not to answer
12. Have you utilized General Assistance benefits?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Prefer not to answer
13. If yes, how long did you utilize General Assistance?

- a. 0-6 months
- b. 7-12 months
- c. 1-2 years
- d. More than 2 years
- e. Prefer not to answer.

14. Did you utilize Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, also known as food stamps?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Prefer not to answer

15. If yes, how long did you utilize Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, also known as food stamps?

- a. 0-6 months
- b. 7-12 months
- c. 1-2 years
- d. More than 2 years
- e. Prefer not to answer.

## **APPENDIX E: CONSENT MATERIALS**

### **Consent Materials—Focus Group Consent for Participation in a Research Study**

**Principal Investigator:** Grace Kiffney

**Faculty Sponsor:** Robert W. Glover, Ph.D.

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted by Grace Kiffney, an undergraduate student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maine. The faculty advisor of this project is Robert Glover, a faculty member of the Department of Political Science. The purpose of the research is to learn about the economic experiences of refugees and asylum seekers since arriving in Portland. We hope to learn from these experiences to perhaps propose improvements to the way the city assists asylum seekers. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

#### **What Will You Be Asked to Do?**

If you decide to participate in this 8-10 person focus group, you will be asked to discuss your experiences since arriving in Portland, particularly any economic difficulties or successes you have faced. The focus group will take an hour of your time and will be audio recorded. You will be asked questions such as “What are some of the challenges you faced, or other people you know faced, in supporting yourself when you recently arrived in Portland?” and “What do you think about Portland’s response to aiding refugees and asylum seekers?” You will also be asked to answer a brief questionnaire, which will take about five minutes. You will be asked questions such as “What level of education did you attain in your home country?” and “What was your financial status when you arrived in the US?”

#### **Risks**

- There is the possibility that you may become uncomfortable answering some questions. You may choose to not answer any questions that you do not want to, and you may choose to leave the focus group when and if you wish.
- If you become distressed and would like to talk with someone, Portland Refugee Services is a resource, at (207) 775-7915.

#### **Benefits**

- While this study will probably not benefit you directly, this research may help us learn more about refugees’ and asylum seekers’ experiences to perhaps identify ways the process of financial assistance to and among asylum seekers could be improved.

#### **Confidentiality**

Your identity will not be attributed to your statements in the write-up of the research. However, due to the group format, I cannot guarantee that others will keep responses



confidential. These focus group sessions will be recorded. Data, such as the audio recordings of the focus groups, transcripts and notes, will be kept in a locked, secure location, stored on a password protected hard drive. All data will be destroyed three years after the end of the study, so in May 2019.

**Compensation**

You will receive \$40 for participating in this study. If you withdraw from the study before it is complete, you will still receive \$40.

**Voluntary**

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at (207) 232-4244 (or email: [grace.kiffney@maine.edu](mailto:grace.kiffney@maine.edu)). You may also reach the faculty advisor on this study, Rob Glover, at (207) 581-1880 (or email: [robert.glover@maine.edu](mailto:robert.glover@maine.edu)). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Jones, Assistant to the University of Maine’s Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, at 581-1498 (or email: [gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu](mailto:gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu)).

Your signature below indicates that you have read the above information and agree to participate. You will receive a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Consent Materials—Interview Consent for Participation in a Research Study— Asylees**

**Principal Investigator:** Grace Kiffney  
**Faculty Sponsor:** Robert W. Glover, Ph.D.

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted by Grace Kiffney, an undergraduate student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maine. The faculty advisor of this project is Robert Glover, a faculty member of the Department of Political Science. The purpose of the research is to learn about the economic experiences of refugees and asylum seekers since arriving in Portland. We hope to learn from these experiences to perhaps propose improvements to the way the city assists asylum seekers. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

### **What Will You Be Asked to Do?**

If you decide to participate in this individual interview, you will be asked to discuss your experiences since arriving in Portland, particularly any economic difficulties or successes you have faced. This interview will take an hour of your time and will be audio recorded. You will be asked questions such as “What are some of the challenges you faced, or other people you know faced, in supporting yourself when you recently arrived in Portland?” and “What do you think about Portland’s response to aiding refugees and asylum seekers?” You will also be asked to answer a brief questionnaire, which will take about five minutes. You will be asked questions such as “What level of education did you attain in your home country?” and “What was your financial status when you arrived in the US?”

### **Risks**

- There is the possibility that you may become uncomfortable answering some questions. You may choose to not answer any questions that you do not want to, and you may choose to leave the interview when and if you wish.
- If you become distressed and would like to talk with someone, Portland Refugee Services is a resource, at (207) 775-7915.

### **Benefits**

- While this study will probably not benefit you directly, this research may help us learn more about refugees’ and asylum seekers’ experiences to perhaps identify ways the process of financial assistance to and among asylum seekers could be improved.

### **Confidentiality**

Your identity will not be attributed to your statements in the write-up of the research. This interview will be recorded. Data, such as the audio recording of this interview,

transcripts and notes, will be kept in a locked, secure location, stored on a password protected hard drive. All data will be destroyed three years after the end of the study, so in May 2019.

**Compensation**

You will receive \$40 for participating in this study. If you withdraw from the study before it is complete, you will still receive \$40.

**Voluntary**

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at (207) 232-4244 (or email: [grace.kiffney@maine.edu](mailto:grace.kiffney@maine.edu)). You may also reach the faculty advisor on this study, Rob Glover, at (207) 581-1880 (or email: [robert.glover@maine.edu](mailto:robert.glover@maine.edu)). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Jones, Assistant to the University of Maine’s Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, at 581-1498 (or email: [gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu](mailto:gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu)).

Your signature below indicates that you have read the above information and agree to participate. You will receive a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Consent Materials—Interview Consent for Participation in a Research Study— Service Providers, Policy-makers/Government Agency Workers**

**Principal Investigator:** Grace Kiffney  
**Faculty Sponsor:** Robert W. Glover, Ph.D.

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted by Grace Kiffney, an undergraduate student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maine. The faculty advisor of this project is Robert Glover, a faculty member of the Department of Political Science. The purpose of the research is to learn about the economic experiences of refugees and asylum seekers since arriving in Portland. We hope to learn from these experiences to perhaps propose improvements to the way the city assists asylum seekers.

### **What Will You Be Asked to Do?**

If you decide to participate in this individual interview, you will be asked to discuss your experiences working with asylees and/or refugees and your opinions on Portland's and Maine's response to these groups. The interview will take an hour of your time and will be audio recorded. You will be asked questions such as "What do you think about Portland's response to aiding refugees and asylum seekers?" or "What are some federal or state solutions you see to address the lack of funding to support asylum applicants?"

### **Risks**

- There is the possibility that you may become uncomfortable answering some questions. You may choose to not answer any questions that you do not want to, and you may choose to leave the interview when and if you wish.

### **Benefits**

- While this study will probably not benefit you directly, this research may help us learn more about refugees' and asylum seekers' experiences to perhaps identify ways the process of financial assistance to and among asylum seekers could be improved.

### **Confidentiality**

Your identity will not be attributed to your statements in the write-up of the research, unless you want a viewpoint or statement attributed to you. This interview will be recorded. Data, such as the audio recording of this interview, transcripts and notes, will be kept in a locked, secure location, stored on a password protected hard drive. All data will be destroyed three years after the end of the study, so in May 2019.

## **Voluntary**

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

## **Contact Information**

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at (207) 232-4244 (or email: [grace.kiffney@maine.edu](mailto:grace.kiffney@maine.edu)). You may also reach the faculty advisor on this study, Rob Glover, at (207) 581-1880 (or email: [robert.glover@maine.edu](mailto:robert.glover@maine.edu)). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Jones, Assistant to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, at 581-1498 (or email: [gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu](mailto:gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu)).

Your signature below indicates that you have read the above information and agree to participate. You will receive a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **AMENDMENT TO THE CONSENT FORM, APPROVED FEBRUARY 19, 2016**

### **Consent Materials—Interview Consent for Participation in a Research Study— Asylees and Refugees involved with Advocacy and/or Community Leadership**

**Principal Investigator:** Grace Kiffney

**Faculty Sponsor:** Robert W. Glover, Ph.D.

You are invited to participate in a research project conducted by Grace Kiffney, an undergraduate student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Maine. The faculty advisor of this project is Robert Glover, a faculty member of the Department of Political Science. The purpose of the research is to learn about the economic experiences of refugees and asylum seekers since arriving in Portland. We hope to learn from these experiences to perhaps propose improvements to the way the city assists asylum seekers. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

#### **What Will You Be Asked to Do?**

If you decide to participate in this individual interview, you will be asked to discuss your experiences since arriving in Portland, particularly any economic difficulties or successes you have faced. This interview will take an hour of your time and will be audio recorded. You will be asked questions such as “What are some of the challenges you faced, or other people you know faced, in supporting yourself when you recently arrived in Portland?” and “What do you think about Portland’s response to aiding refugees and asylum seekers?” You will also be asked to answer a brief questionnaire, which will take about five minutes. You will be asked questions such as “What level of education did you attain in your home country?” and “What was your financial status when you arrived in the US?”

#### **Risks**

- There is the possibility that you may become uncomfortable answering some questions. You may choose to not answer any questions that you do not want to, and you may choose to leave the interview when and if you wish.
- If you become distressed and would like to talk with someone, Portland Refugee Services is a resource, at (207) 775-7915.

#### **Benefits**

- While this study will probably not benefit you directly, this research may help us learn more about refugees’ and asylum seekers’ experiences to perhaps identify ways the process of financial assistance to and among asylum seekers could be improved.

#### **Confidentiality**

Your identity will not be attributed to your statements in the write-up of the research, unless you consent to having a viewpoint or statement attributed to you. This interview

will be recorded. Data, such as the audio recording of this interview, transcripts and notes, will be kept in a locked, secure location, stored on a password protected hard drive. All data will be destroyed three years after the end of the study, so in May 2019.

**Compensation**

You will receive \$40 for participating in this study. If you withdraw from the study before it is complete, you will still receive \$40.

**Voluntary**

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at (207) 232-4244 (or email: [grace.kiffney@maine.edu](mailto:grace.kiffney@maine.edu)). You may also reach the faculty advisor on this study, Rob Glover, at (207) 581-1880 (or email: [robert.glover@maine.edu](mailto:robert.glover@maine.edu)). If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Jones, Assistant to the University of Maine’s Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, at 581-1498 (or email: [gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu](mailto:gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu)).

Your signature below indicates that you have read the above information and agree to participate. You will receive a copy of this form.

Do you consent to have your name attributed to your viewpoints/statements?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_\_\_ No

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Author's Biography

Grace Kiffney was born in Baltimore, Maryland, but has spent most of her life in Portland, Maine. She graduated from Deering High School in 2011. At the University of Maine she studied International Affairs, with a concentration in Anthropology and a minor in Spanish. She is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and received the Jones Honors Thesis Fellowship. She has worked for the Green Campus Initiative for three years, and is also a member of the Maine Outing Club. She hopes to work in immigrant advocacy. In her free time, Grace loves hiking, knitting hats, and playing soccer.