A Qualitative Analysis of Refugee Resettlement in Charlotte, North Carolina: Socio-Economic Mobility and Segregation as Social Determinants of Health and Wellbeing

By Hayden Bates

Background:
- The current rates of displacement as the highest on record.
- The US State Department arranges travel plans for refugees and assigns individuals to one of the nine resettlement agencies.
- Refugees experience higher rates of illness than the US population in general. There are high levels of exposure to violence including trauma and mental health problems.

Case Study: Charlotte, North Carolina
- North Carolina receives an average of 2,000 refugees per year.
- North Carolina has been regarded favorably in terms of average wage, health benefits, placement in employment, retention in work and dependence on aid.
- Between 70-80% of refugees are employed in their first 3 months and over 90% retained their employment for the next year.
- On average, 700 refugees are resettled to Charlotte yearly.
- Both CRRA and CCDC receive a federal grants to cover basic services for refugees during their initial resettlement period.

Objectives
- Trends in refugee resettlement in North Carolina are not well documented.
- After transcribing interviews, data was analyzed thematically.

Methods
- This exploratory research was based upon eight contacts for stakeholders and 11 refugees living in Charlotte.
- Observational work was conducted among Syrians, Montagnard, Iraqi, Bhutanese, Eritrean and Somali refugees.
- Formal, recorded interviews with Syrian, Montagnard, and Iraqi refugees.
- After transcribing interviews, data was analyzed thematically.

Major Themes:

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Social Determinants of Health / Social Ecological Model of Research
- Health inequities derive from the inequitable distribution of the social determinants of health, such as access to educational opportunities, healthcare, or safe employment.
- Models of stress emphasize the cumulative effects of stress on physiological systems, identifying the "wear and tear" on organisms exposed to adverse life circumstances.

Inequities: Relative Deprivation
- Living in relative poverty can exclude individuals from quality housing, education, transportation and participation in the broader community; this exclusion can have far reaching health effects.
- The average status of members of society is important as it affects normative consumption patterns and essential functions of living.

Ethnic Enclaves and Social Capital
- Refugees in Charlotte are often resettled within communities with similar racial and linguistic background.
- Ethnic enclaves "are in some way culturally and geographically distinct, providing a sense of identity and resources to support communal relations."
- "Bounded solidarity" is especially strong among immigrants whose return is blocked, such as refugees.
- Unfortunately, the development these separated communities can be the product of economic and political manipulation.

Community Dynamics: Social Support and Social Cohesion
- Social isolation is associated with increased chances of premature death, increased depression, and higher risks of chronic disease.
- Social networks provision of social support is essential for both emotional and practical resources.

Cross-Cultural Interactions

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| Service Provider | Emphasized refugee service providers' role facilitating spaces for cross-cultural interactions. "We are trying to create an environment...where they (refugees) can meet people with similar common interests, without necessarily having the same common language or culture."
| Service Provider | The working conditions in the chicken processing plant, where employees were working in freezers and chopping chickens, and clothing distribution centers were described by a service provider as "terrible and absolutely horrible." |

Socio-Economic Mobility
- Broad factors affect mobility including size and dispersion of local middle class, indices for social capital, quality of education, racial and economic segregation and income inequality.
- Service providers stated the following, "The main goal of our organization is to facilitate programs and friendships that help refugees become self-sufficient.

Suburbanization of Poverty
- Since the 1990's there has been a dramatic shift in the geography of poverty, with a greater increase in poverty in the suburbs than in central cities.
- As economic inequality has risen, so has economic segregation.
- These suburban neighborhoods are marked by poor housing, poor schools, minimal social services, high crime, and limited job opportunities.
- This trend in Charlotte of increased gentrification and limited low-income housing also applies to refugee resettlement.

Suburbanization of Poverty and Spatial Access
- The changing geography of poverty

Employment
- As described by the World Health Organization, "health suffers when people have little opportunity to use their skills and low decision-making authority."
- Refugee Resettlement Agencies often place refugees in positions at Tyson's Chicken Factory and clothing distribution centers.
- Service providers acknowledged the challenge that refugee agencies face in securing places of employment within 90 days.

Map of Charlotte

Interview

Quotation:

Refugees
- "I am trying to find a job here. I applied to the (local) Walmart, and I applied to Starbucks and Wells Fargo. They told me that I could apply but only part time."
- "Emphasizing the high cost of living and low wages, a refugee stated, "Everybody here is good. Every refugee is good. The difficulty is one thing, it is looking for a job. You know...sometimes the income is less than the expenses."

Refugees
- "In addition to the grueling work itself, they are also sometimes dealing with trauma, culture shock, cultural adjustments, and language barriers."