

EMBRACING REFUGEES: A REVIVAL SOLUTION FOR SHRINKING AMERICAN CITIES

SILVIA M. RADULESCU*

ABSTRACT

This Note presents a case study of Utica, New York to argue that policies and practices that welcome and support refugees offer a synergistic solution to the capitalist-induced vulnerabilities of declining American cities. An influx of refugees can spearhead urban renewal and reinvestment in shrinking cities suffering from population loss, dying economies, derelict infrastructure, eroding tax bases, deficient social services, and crime. Reciprocally, shrinking cities can offer unique benefits for refugees if they adopt integration programs and supportive services like those in Utica. Part I is an overview of shrinking cities in the United States. Part II presents Utica, New York as a case study for the virtuous cycle other declining towns could experience if they embrace, instead of reject, refugees. Part III distills why this pairing could be the panacea for shrinking cities' suffering and refugees' needs. Finally, Part IV proposes policies and practices to expand and support refugee resettlement in shrinking cities and argues that initiatives should be implemented at the federal, state, and local levels in ways that unify communities rather than perpetuate existing divisions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	776
I. "SHRINKING CITIES"	777
II. UTICA, NEW YORK	778
A. <i>Industrialization's Impact</i>	778
B. <i>"The Town That Loves Refugees"</i>	780

* Silvia M. Radulescu, J.D. Candidate, Georgetown University Law Center, 2022; B.A. Government, Hamilton College, 2017. I thank Professor Sherally Munshi for her guidance and James Ehret and my family for their constant support. © 2022, Silvia M. Radulescu.

C.	<i>Refugees' Impact</i>	785
III.	REVIVING SHRINKING CITIES WITH THE HELP OF REFUGEES	786
A.	<i>Benefit to Shrinking Cities</i>	786
B.	<i>Benefit to Refugees</i>	788
IV.	POLICIES AND PRACTICES FOR IMPLEMENTATION	789
A.	<i>Federal Initiatives</i>	790
B.	<i>State Initiatives</i>	792
C.	<i>Local Initiatives</i>	793
V.	CONCLUSION	794

INTRODUCTION

Utica, New York has gained fame as “the town that loves refugees.”¹ During the twentieth century, Utica became a Rust Belt town that experienced economic downturn, industrial decline, and population loss. As the decline left homes and storefronts vacant, the city opened its doors to refugees. The modest influx of migrants helped alleviate labor shortages, shored up city budgets, and brought new vibrance to neighborhoods. The effects of refugee resettlement over the last four decades have been extraordinary, revamping Utica’s reputation, restoring the city’s dignity, and bringing a fractured community together in support of a humanitarian cause.

This Note argues that policies and practices that welcome and support refugees offer a synergistic solution to the capitalist-induced vulnerabilities of declining American cities. An influx of refugees can spearhead urban renewal and reinvestment in shrinking cities suffering from population loss, dying economies, derelict infrastructure, eroding tax bases, deficient social services, and crime. Reciprocally, shrinking cities can offer unique benefits for refugees if they adopt integration programs and supportive services like those in Utica.

Part I is an overview of shrinking cities in the United States. Part II presents Utica, New York as a case study for the virtuous cycle other declining towns could experience if they embrace, instead of reject, refugees. Part III distills why this pairing could be the panacea for shrinking cities’ suffering and refugees’ needs. Finally, Part IV proposes policies and practices to expand and support refugee resettlement in shrinking cities and argues that

1. See UNHCR, *The Town That Loves Refugees*, 138 REFUGEES MAG. 1 (2005), <https://perma.cc/G2PQ-64UY>.

initiatives should be implemented at the federal, state, and local levels in ways that unify communities rather than perpetuate existing divisions.

I. “SHRINKING CITIES”

“Shrinking cities” are urban territories that have experienced economic decline and notable population decrease.² This conceptual description applies to cities worldwide, but in the United States, shrinkage largely takes place in the Rust Belt—formerly industrial Northeastern and Midwestern cities whose manufacturing presence deteriorated by the 1970s.³ While causes of shrinking cities vary across countries and continents, scholars point to suburban expansion, urban deterioration without regional planning, economic restructuring, and deindustrialization as causes for shrinking cities in North America since the 1970s.⁴ Population loss alone does not condemn cities to economic decline; over a third of shrinking American cities are still economically successful because they attract talented and college-educated individuals.⁵ However, population loss can ignite a “feedback cycle of shrinkage,” resulting in decreased tax revenue from income or real estate. This reduced fiscal capacity then leads to fewer, or poorer, social services, resulting in even more population loss.⁶

The physical, social, and economic consequences of shrinkage can be devastating. Dramatic population loss in city centers creates vacancies, abandoned properties, and derelict sites⁷ and exacerbates social exclusion, poverty, homelessness, and crime.⁸ Economic deficiencies compound as unemployment rates rise and the tax base lowers. Detroit, Michigan, for example, has lost over 60 percent of its population since 1950⁹ because of racial segregation and white flight, suburbanization and highway construction, and relocation of the city’s automobile industry. As a result, the city’s property tax base has eroded, it has received less federal funding, crime rates abound, and the city has struggled to provide its residents with social

2. See Tim Rieniets, *Shrinking Cities: Causes and Effects of Urban Population Losses in the Twentieth Century*, 4 NATURE & CULTURE 231, 233–34 (2009).

3. See Karina Pallagst, *Shrinking Cities in the United States of America: Three Cases, Three Planning Stories*, FUTURE SHRINKING CITIES: PROBS., PATTERNS & STRATEGIES URB. TRANSFORMATION GLOB. CONTEXT (2009), <https://perma.cc/XS4A-NJ52>; Emily Anne Shrider, *Can Immigrants Save the Rust Belt? Struggling Cities, Immigration, and Revitalization* 29 (2017) (M.A. Dissertation, Ohio State University), <https://perma.cc/D3JL-YXN8>; Simona Schett, *An Analysis of Shrinking Cities*, UNIV. OF INNSBRUCK URBAN ECOLOGY 2 (2011/12), <https://perma.cc/52Q8-UYN3>.

4. See Campos-Sanchez, *Sustainable Environmental Strategies for Shrinking Cities Based on Processing Successful Case Studies Facing Decline Using a Decision-Support System*, INT’L J. ENVIRON. RES. PUB. HEALTH, at 2 (2019).

5. Richard Florida, *How Some Shrinking Cities Are Still Prospering*, BLOOMBERG CITY LAB (June 13, 2019, 3:09 PM), <https://perma.cc/S6FC-CMY6>.

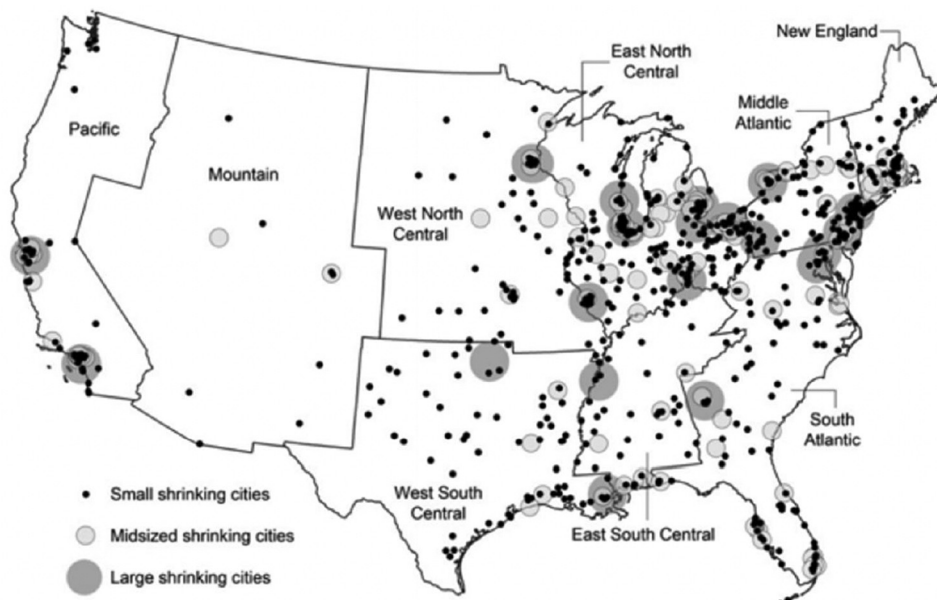
6. *Id.*

7. See Pallagst, *supra* note 3, at 82.

8. See *id.* at 82–83.

9. *Detroit’s Population Decline Should Prompt Property Tax Reforms*, CITIZENS RSCH. COUNCIL OF MICH. (Aug. 19, 2021), <https://perma.cc/B6KU-9KV3>.

services.¹⁰ Detroit is just one of the hundreds of shrinking cities suffering across the United States.



Annals of the American Association of Geographers

Figure 1: Shrinking Cities in the United States¹¹

II. UTICA, NEW YORK

A. *Industrialization's Impact*

Utica is a city in central New York whose regional history dates back as early as 4000 B.C.E., with occupation by the Mohawk, Onondaga, and Oneida tribes.¹² These native tribes were part of the Iroquois Confederacy until they were dispossessed by Anglo-American settlers who began arriving in 1773.¹³ Utica, incorporated as a village in 1798 and a city in 1832, was an important stop for settlers heading farther west and rapidly developed with the Erie Canal's arrival.¹⁴

Starting in the mid-1800s, Utica experienced a manufacturing boom. The Erie Canal, railroads, and the many waterways flowing through the region contributed to industrialization by transporting raw materials and finished

10. *Id.*

11. Florida, *supra* note 5.

12. ALEXANDER R. THOMAS, IN *GOHAM'S SHADOW: GLOBALIZATION AND COMMUNITY CHANGE IN CENTRAL NEW YORK* 15 (State University of New York Press, 2003).

13. *See id.* at 16; *History of Utica, New York*, U-S-HISTORY.COM, <https://perma.cc/XF22-LLZY> (last visited Feb. 24, 2022).

14. *See History of Utica, New York, supra* note 13.

goods and providing steam to run machinery.¹⁵ By 1900, Utica was the 66th largest city in the United States.¹⁶ Tens of thousands of immigrants—Italians, Poles, Germans, Irish, and Arabs—were drawn to Utica’s manufacturing boom.¹⁷ By World War I, the city’s textile industry employed over 20,000 Uticans, and the city boasted the two largest textile mills in the country.¹⁸ Several other industries, including cotton, furniture manufacturing, heavy machinery, cutlery, and lumber, also held a presence.¹⁹ In 1942, Griffiss Air Force Base opened nearby,²⁰ and soon after, General Electric constructed a 500,000 square foot plant to manufacture, assemble, and test electrical components for the defense and aerospace industries.²¹ Between 1943 and 1966, four major colleges opened in Utica.²² For three decades, the city sustained a population of more than 100,000.²³

Starting in the mid-twentieth century, however, Utica experienced an economic downturn. Like other Rust Belt cities, Utica’s downturn stemmed from industrial decline, population loss, and poverty. Offshoring and textile mill closure eliminated tens of thousands of jobs, and the decline of the textile industry led to the consequent deterioration of associated industries.²⁴ Job relocation, construction of three state arterial highways, and government-encouraged suburbanization drained the urban population.²⁵ Reactionary urban renewal projects, like the East Arterial Industrial Park, displaced many middle- and low-income residents.²⁶ Even major employers like General Electric and Lockheed Martin, who remained after textile’s mid-century exodus, left Utica in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁷ When the Pentagon closed Griffiss Air Base in 1995, it wiped out 5,000 jobs and 30 percent of the city’s economic base.²⁸ Within two generations, Utica lost 40 percent of its population,²⁹ and bumper stickers proclaimed: “Would the last person to leave Utica please turn out the lights.”³⁰

15. See Ross R. Pristera, *Urban Development and Revitalization Related to City and Regional Politics in Utica*, New York, at 6 (Aug. 2009) (MA thesis, Cornell University), <https://perma.cc/W82B-N2XX>; Tom Coyne, *Hidden History – Utica Textile Mills*, CNYHOMEPAGE (Jan. 3, 2019, 5:29 PM), <https://perma.cc/V2N7-S673>.

16. *Utica History*, UTICA: THE LAST REFUGE, <https://perma.cc/C7XQ-Y3WG>.

17. See *id.*; Bob Woods, *Despite Trump’s Draconian Policies, Refugees Continue Boosting New York’s Rust Belt Economy*, CNBC (July 10, 2018, 8:46 AM), <https://perma.cc/32M8-3XYZ>.

18. See UNHCR, *supra* note 1, at 7; Woods, *supra* note 17.

19. See Aung Budhh, *Fascinating Old Pictures of Utica, NY from the Early 20th Century*, BYGONELY, <https://perma.cc/4ZBR-C6N5>; *About*, UTICA CUTLERY COMPANY (2022), <https://perma.cc/U7HR-TY64>.

20. See *Griffiss Air Force Base*, AIR FORCE TECHNOLOGY, <https://perma.cc/MY3V-5SH6>.

21. See *Utica, New York*, LOCKHEED MARTIN, <https://perma.cc/9FCJ-64EF>.

22. See Pristera, *supra* note 15, at 24–25.

23. See UTICA: THE LAST REFUGE, *supra* note 16; Woods, *supra* note 17.

24. See Pristera, *supra* note 15, at 20.

25. See *id.* at 28–38.

26. See *id.* at 32.

27. See Woods, *supra* note 17.

28. See *id.*

29. See *id.*

30. UNHCR, *supra* note 1, at 8.

B. “The Town That Loves Refugees”

Similar to shrinking cities like Youngstown, Detroit, and St. Louis, Utica suffered population loss from manufacturing decline. However, unlike Rust Belt cities whose populations continue to decline today, Utica started slowing its population hemorrhage in the 1980s by welcoming and supporting refugees. The graphs below demonstrate that Utica’s population decline, while initially just as sharp as the other three cities, slowed after 1980 and did not fall as deeply.

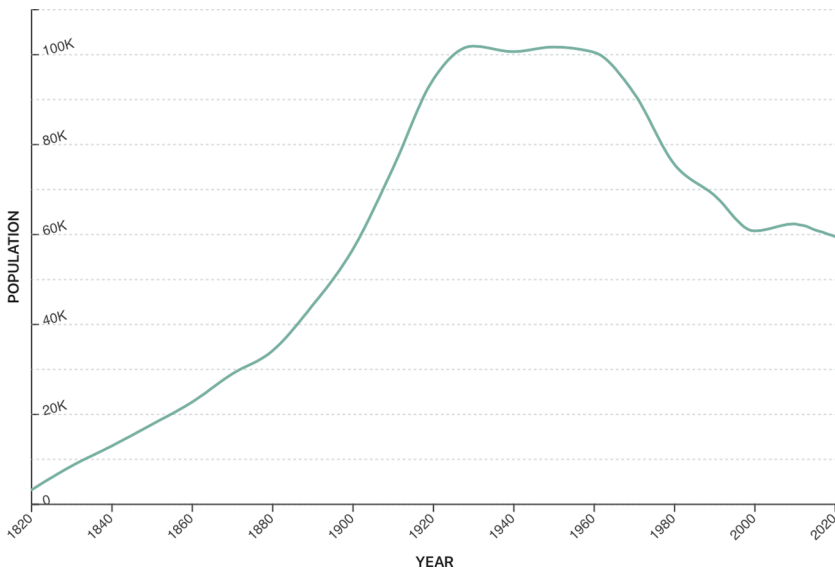


Figure 2: Utica, New York Population, 1820 – 2020³¹

31. *Utica, New York Population 2022*, WORLD POPULATION REV. (2021), <https://perma.cc/WH8B-UVEU>.

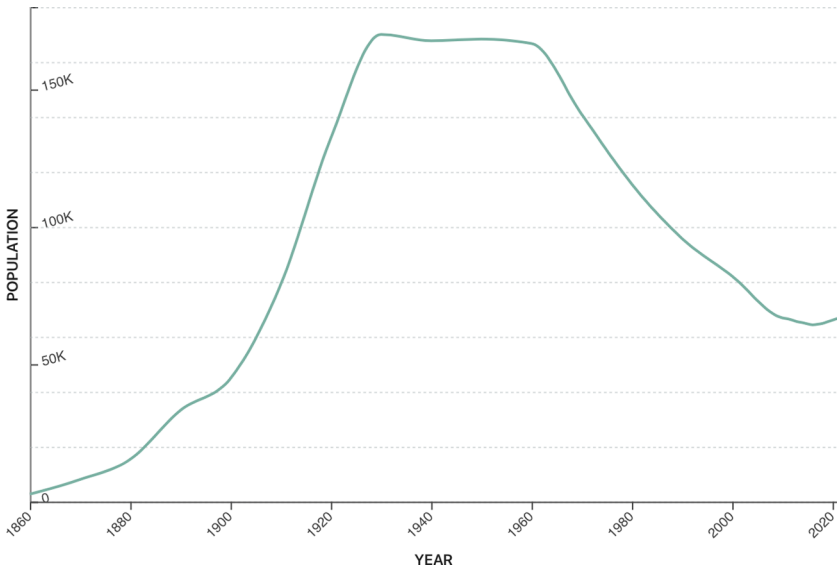


Figure 3: Youngstown, Ohio Population, 1960 – 2020³²

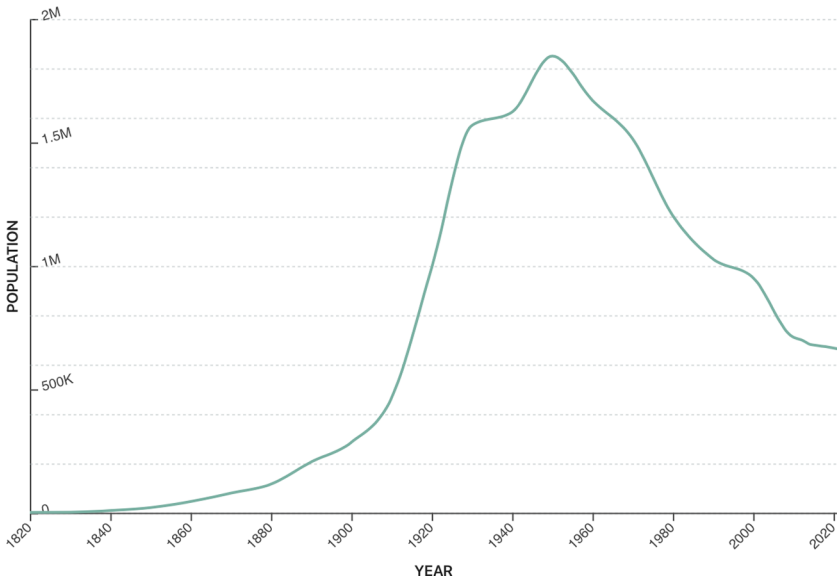


Figure 4: Detroit, Michigan Population, 1820 – 2022³³

32. *Youngstown, Ohio Population 2022*, WORLD POPULATION REV. (2021), <https://perma.cc/RK94-2JPF>.

33. *Detroit, Michigan Population 2022*, WORLD POPULATION REV. (2021), <https://perma.cc/8K4P-SZ6Y>.

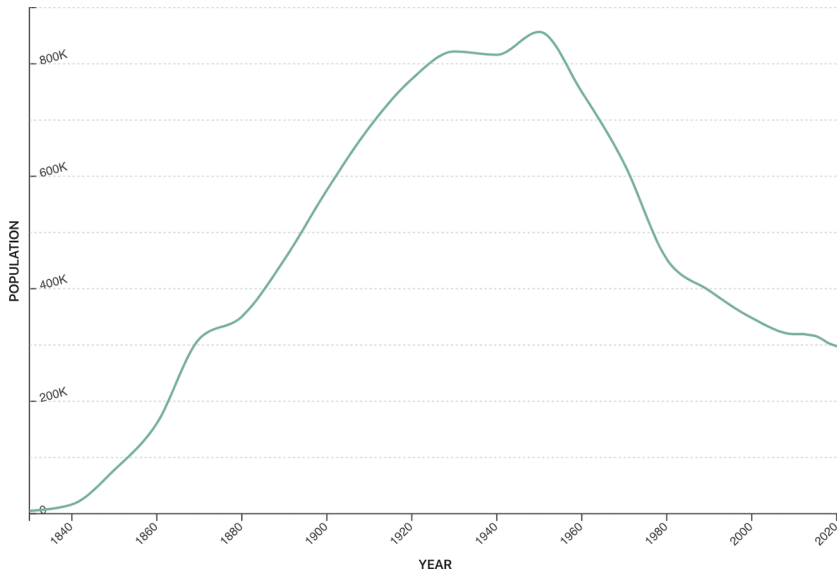


Figure 5: St. Louis, Missouri Population, 1830 – 2022³⁴

Over the past five decades, more than 16,500 refugees have resettled in Utica, with hundreds more secondary migrants joining them.³⁵ Today, over 20 percent of the city’s population are foreign-born,³⁶ and more than forty languages are spoken in city schools.³⁷ Utica has become an attractive location for refugees because of its various integration programs and supportive services. In 2005, the United Nations Refugee Agency dubbed Utica “The Town That Loves Refugees.”³⁸

Utica’s influx of refugees began in 1979 with the founding of the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees (“The Center”).³⁹ In response to the war in Vietnam and the 1980 Refugee Act,⁴⁰ a Utican named Roberta Douglas partnered with local clergy, the Superintendent of Utica Schools, the Oneida County Executive, and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service to help resettle Vietnamese and Cambodian children who had been fathered and abandoned by American soldiers.⁴¹ Throughout the 1980s, The

34. *St. Louis, Missouri Population 2022*, WORLD POPULATION REV. (2021), <https://perma.cc/CT83-KNH3>.

35. Anne C. Richard & Shelly Callahan, *Making Sense of U.S. Refugee Resettlement: Utica as a Model for the Nation*, 690 ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 176, 176 (2020).

36. *See id.*

37. *See* Leslie Brody, *Small Cities Fight for More School Aid From New York State*, WALL ST. J. (Jan. 20, 2015).

38. UNHCR, *supra* note 1, at 1.

39. *See* CLINT MCMANUS & NANCY SPREHN, CORNELL U. CMTY & REG’L DEV. INST., *UTICA: REFUGEES & REVITALIZATION* 4 (Mar. 2014), <https://perma.cc/5CGR-9Z2A>; *Our History*, CTR. (2022), <https://perma.cc/LB6Y-BP36>.

40. Refugee Act of 1980, Pub. L. No. 96-212, 94 Stat. 102 (1980).

41. *See* UNHCR, *supra* note 1, at 14–17; Susan Hartman, *A New Life for Refugees, and the City They Adopted*, N.Y. TIMES (Aug. 10, 2014), <https://perma.cc/3TYW-SBDA>; *Our History*, *supra* note 39.

Center grew, welcoming individuals from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Poland, and the Soviet Union.⁴² Major waves of refugee arrivals have since included Bosnian, Burmese, Somali Bantu, and Sudanese people.⁴³

Today, The Center assists refugees, immigrants, and those with limited English language proficiency throughout the integration process.⁴⁴ It helps with housing, employment, cultural orientation, and language skills and works with refugee services and the federal government to determine which refugee groups resettle in Utica.⁴⁵ The Center's staff performs case management duties, negotiates with landlords, and readies community partners—such as schools, employers, and healthcare centers—for refugee arrivals by advising them on how best to understand and assist the overwhelmed newcomers.⁴⁶

The Center in Utica is a unique program that houses many different ‘wraparound’ services such as employment counseling, citizenship and language services, and traffic safety programs . . . [t]he continued vitality of The Center helps to preserve the institutional knowledge and expertise of refugee resettlement in Utica and improves the likelihood that refugee resettlement will return to Utica in robust numbers in the future.⁴⁷

Another local organization, the Midtown Utica Community Center (“MUCC”), provides longer-term support and facilitates integration and maintenance of culture. MUCC was founded in 2014 in recognition that many refugees struggle with language obstacles, poverty, the consequences of trauma, and cultural misunderstandings for years after their resettlement.⁴⁸ MUCC offers educational and cultural programs, problem solves by connecting community members with other agencies and resources, and fosters community by hosting holiday meals, neighborhood meetings, job trainings, after-school drop-in hours, and inclusive ethnic celebrations.⁴⁹ Hundreds of families use the space on any given week.⁵⁰ In addition, MUCC works with local nonprofits, organizations, and schools to enhance opportunities for funding, community building, community service, and education.⁵¹

Project SHINE, a national service-learning program, draws students from surrounding colleges to act as English coaches to refugees and immigrants in the Utica area and help them prepare for citizenship exams.⁵² Before students

42. See *Our History*, *supra* note 39.

43. See R. Scott Smith, *The Case of a City Where 1 in 6 Residents Is a Refugee: Ecological Factors and Host Community Adaptation in Successful Resettlement*, 42 AM. J. CMTY. PSYCH. 328, at 328 (2008).

44. See *Our History*, *supra* note 39; *Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees*, IMMIGR. ADVOCS. NETWORK, <https://perma.cc/3MSL-RK7S>.

45. See Hartman, *supra* note 41.

46. See Richard & Callahan, *supra* note 35, at 181; UNHCR, *supra* note 1, at 17.

47. Richard & Callahan, *supra* note 35, at 182.

48. See *History*, MIDTOWN UTICA CMTY. CTR. (2020), <https://perma.cc/P3HA-TM9L>.

49. See *Mission*, MIDTOWN UTICA CMTY. CTR. (2020), <https://perma.cc/FG5K-KTKH>.

50. See *Overview*, MIDTOWN UTICA CMTY. CTR. (2020), <https://perma.cc/8TNB-LZK3>.

51. See *History*, MIDTOWN UTICA CMTY. CTR. (2020), <https://perma.cc/E96E-QYXK>.

52. See *Project SHINE*, HAMILTON COLL., <https://perma.cc/K5YQ-XCXU> (last visited Feb. 24, 2022).

can volunteer, they must undergo cultural competency training, receive tips on teaching multilingual students, and learn about Utica and its refugee and immigrant population.⁵³ Students work one-on-one or in small groups with young adult and adult learners at the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees, the Utica Academy of Science Charter School, and Oneida-Herkimer-Madison BOCES.⁵⁴

While Utica has strong programs that make resettlement easier and more welcoming for refugees, “The Town That Loves Refugees” has not made these gains without controversy. Bringing thousands of people from varying backgrounds and cultures into a cold, snowy town with a low tax base has posed challenges. For example, a wave of Bosnian arrivals in the 1990s triggered racial resentment and religious clashes, particularly with Utica’s Black and Hispanic communities.⁵⁵ Civic and business leaders had effusively praised the Bosnian refugees and credited them with revitalizing rundown neighborhoods.⁵⁶ But the vocal admiration made Black and Hispanic Uticans fear that refugees were pushing them out of their neighborhoods.⁵⁷ Residents also feared that white refugees received public and private assistance and employment opportunities at the expense of Black residents because of race.⁵⁸ Further, some Uticans complained that “the refugees expect others to accommodate their religious beliefs but show little tolerance for American traditions.”⁵⁹ In 1999, the elementary school’s annual Halloween parade was canceled—later, the school opted for separate celebrations—after Bosnian and Russian parents were offended by the seemingly “satanic” observance; this angered American parents who felt their children were being “deprived of innocent fun.”⁶⁰ More recently, the Utica City School District settled two lawsuits filed by the New York State Attorney General and the New York Civil Liberties Union, respectively. Both lawsuits accused the district of discriminatory enrollment practices, alleging that it illegally diverted immigrant students from regular high school classes into weaker, substandard alternative programs because of their advanced ages and shaky language skills.⁶¹ A consent decree required the district to create new enrollment policies and hire internal and external compliance monitors.⁶² And while difficulty adapting to Utica’s climate is not universal among refugees, some, like the Somali

53. *Id.*

54. *Id.*

55. See Marjorie Valbrun, *Bosnian Refugees Are Making a Home in Utica, New York—Hailed by City Fathers, Influx Also is Causing Conflict with Poor and Minorities*, WALL ST. J. (Mar. 8, 1999).

56. *See id.*

57. *See id.*

58. *See id.*

59. *Id.*

60. *Id.*

61. See David W. Chen, *Utica Settles State Claim Alleging Biased Enrollment for Refugee Students*, N.Y. TIMES (July 21, 2016), <https://perma.cc/9DR6-4EB2>; Benjamin Mueller, *Advocates Sue a New York School District, Claiming Weak Programs for Refugees*, N.Y. TIMES (Apr. 23, 2015), <https://perma.cc/JE6J-CAHC>.

62. See Chen, *supra* note 61.

Bantus who come from the Horn of Africa, have been overwhelmed by the cold and snowy weather.⁶³

Overall, however, Utica is a success story from both the city and refugee perspectives. Since Utica opened its doors in 1980, refugees have purchased and renovated hundreds of rundown houses; opened restaurants, food stores, and coffee shops; started construction firms; opened furniture stores, car dealerships, hairdressing salons, and neighborhood stores; and built mosques, temples, and churches.⁶⁴ Utica continues to draw in migrants from around the world because the city has developed robust programs that make resettlement easier and more welcoming for refugees.

C. *Refugees' Impact*

Refugees' contributions to the region are evident. "With only minor changes, churches that were on the verge of being torn down have been converted to mosques and other places of worship. Customers now flock to refugee-owned stores and restaurants, such as Europa Foods, Golden Burma Asian Market & Halal Foods, and SD Home Improvements."⁶⁵ Refugees and immigrants have been "an economic engine for the city, starting small businesses, buying and renovating down-at-the-heels houses and injecting a sense of vitality to forlorn city streets."⁶⁶

While refugees do use social and educational services, which potentially adds to local taxpayers' burden, they also contribute to the workforce and broaden the local tax base.⁶⁷ In a 2000 study, economist Paul Hagstrom found that costs of refugee resettlement are front-loaded and outweighed by positive benefits to the labor and real estate markets.⁶⁸ It only takes thirteen years for the cumulative net benefit of a single household to become positive and remain positive every year after.⁶⁹ Further, there is little evidence that refugees have hurt Uticans' employment opportunities.⁷⁰ "In the long-run, evidence suggests that efforts to resettle refugees in Utica, quite apart from any non-fiscal benefits or costs, is a net fiscal benefit to the community."⁷¹

Utica's refugee population has brought vibrance, diversity, and pride to a declining town that was a shell of its former glory. Refugee resettlement revamped Utica's reputation, restored the city's dignity, and brought a fractured community together to support a humanitarian cause. By sharing their stories and cultures, refugees introduced global perspectives to what had

63. See UNHCR, *supra* note 1, at 20–21; Hartman, *supra* note 41.

64. See Hartman, *supra* note 41; UNHCR, *supra* note 1, at 11.

65. Richard & Callahan, *supra* note 35, at 177.

66. Hartman, *supra* note 41.

67. See Paul Hagstrom, *The Fiscal Impact of Refugee Resettlement in the Mohawk Valley*, HAMILTON COLL., June 2000, at 2, <https://perma.cc/V9JL-SFQH>.

68. See *id.* at 2.

69. See *id.*

70. See *id.* at 3.

71. *Id.* at 2.

been an isolated, predominantly white population; their resilience has inspired and motivated many.⁷² In short, Utica's integrative programs and support services have helped global refugees start new lives, bringing to bear their strengths and motivations in extraordinary ways.

III. REVIVING SHRINKING CITIES WITH THE HELP OF REFUGEES

The Utica story is remarkable because it shows how an influx of refugees can help spearhead urban renewal and reinvestment in aging cities that suffered from the end of a factory-based economy.⁷³ Yet, Utica is not the only place that has demonstrably improved from an influx of refugees, nor is it the only Rust Belt city compatible with refugees' needs.

A. *Benefit to Shrinking Cities*

Given the problems shrinking American cities face—population loss, dying economies, derelict infrastructure, an eroding tax base, deficient social services, and crime—refugee resettlement could be the panacea for these cities' suffering. Research shows that refugees make significant contributions to their receiving communities as earners, taxpayers, and consumers;⁷⁴ they positively affect population recovery, economic revitalization, neighborhood renewal, and crime reduction.⁷⁵ Moreover, refugees' contributions and strengths stretch far beyond economic metrics; these newcomers also bring novel skillsets and knowledge.⁷⁶

Notably, while Detroit's population decline was much more drastic than Utica's, Detroit's rate of decline slowed in the past decade⁷⁷ when the city began emulating Utica's approach and welcoming refugees to the area.⁷⁸ Since then, more than 20,000 refugees have resettled in Metro Detroit, contributing around three million dollars to the local economy.⁷⁹ Utica and Detroit differ markedly in size, demographics, and history; for example, Black Uticans make up 15.5 percent of the population⁸⁰ compared to Black Detroiters' 78.33 percent.⁸¹ Nevertheless, the differences demonstrate that the Utica approach transcends regional or demographic characteristics of shrinking American cities.

72. See, e.g., Maureen A. Nolan, 'The Town That Loves Refugees,' HAMILTON MAG. (2017), <https://perma.cc/5WUD-SAE9>.

73. Richard & Callahan, *supra* note 35, at 177.

74. See *Refugee Resettlement in U.S. Cities*, NEW AM. ECON. RSCH. FUND (2018), <https://perma.cc/V8YP-3R8J>.

75. See Shrider, *supra* note 3, at 14–16.

76. See Maddey Bussmann, *The Benefits of Hosting Refugees*, BORGAN PROJECT (Feb. 6, 2021), <https://perma.cc/8L8P-NAVE>.

77. See *supra* Figures 2, 4.

78. See *USCRI Detroit*, U.S. COMM. FOR REFUGEES & IMMIGRANTS, <https://perma.cc/PMS2-BXKB>.

79. See Sarah Rahal, *Study: Refugees Contribute Over \$200M in Metro Detroit*, DETROIT NEWS (Oct. 17, 2017), <https://perma.cc/H7N7-XUJF/>.

80. *Utica, New York Population*, WORLD POPULATION REV. (2021), <https://perma.cc/4JFT-8TNL>.

81. *Detroit, Michigan Population*, WORLD POPULATION REV. (2021), <https://perma.cc/LAT2-DQ68>.

Some may worry that taking on refugees requires too much expenditure and federal aid. Yet, a national study in 2017 showed that “over the last 20 years, refugees paid back more in taxes than they took in benefits years earlier.”⁸² “In 2015 alone, refugee households earned more than \$77 billion in income, paid nearly \$21 billion in taxes and held more than \$56 billion in spending power, supporting countless local businesses from clothing shops to electronics stores to restaurants.”⁸³ While refugees do have temporary access to federal cash assistance and Medicaid when they arrive in the United States, that period typically lasts only eight months or less.⁸⁴ That initial, short-term assistance has proven to be a smart investment;⁸⁵ refugees rapidly grow their income in subsequent years, buying homes and starting businesses at higher rates than both U.S.-born and other immigrant populations.⁸⁶

Skeptics may respond that refugees compete with Americans for jobs, but the contrary is true. Because of their limited language ability, refugees often seek manual labor jobs rather than professional-level positions.⁸⁷ And while blue-collar workers in the United States struggle, it is because of powerful economic dynamics like globalization, shareholder primacy, and weak anti-trust enforcement—not competition from immigrants.⁸⁸

Still, others are concerned that terrorists would exploit our refugee program, disguising themselves as refugees to target the United States.⁸⁹ However, equating refugees with terrorists is misguided, given the strict and thorough vetting process and that “the odds a refugee would kill anyone are very small.”⁹⁰ Refugees are overwhelmingly law-abiding and hardworking after arrival, striving to avoid legal problems.⁹¹ Research indicates that nine out of ten communities that received the most refugees relative to their size became considerably safer—both in terms of violent crime and property crime rates.⁹²

It may also be challenging to square our obligation to Black and Hispanic communities living in shrinking cities. How do we justify an influx of refugees when we have not yet fixed systemic inequalities for existing residents and citizens? How do we prevent Black and Hispanic communities from

82. Richard & Callahan, *supra* note 35, at 179.

83. NEW AM. ECON., *supra* note 74.

84. See NEW AM. ECON., FROM STRUGGLE TO RESILIENCE: THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF REFUGEES IN AMERICA 24 (2017).

85. See *id.*

86. See NEW AM. ECON., *supra* note 74, at 10.

87. Hagstrom, *supra* note 67, at 3, 21–26; see also MCMANUS & SPREHN, *supra* note 39, at 5 (citing Hagstrom).

88. See Alexia Fernández Campbell, *The Problem with Only Letting in the ‘Good’ Immigrants*, ATLANTIC (Oct. 11, 2016), <https://perma.cc/K34V-3HGQ>.

89. See, e.g., Crisis of Confidence: Preventing Terrorist Infiltration Through U.S. Refugee and Visa Programs: Hearing Before the H. Comm. on Homeland Sec., 114th Cong. 1–4 (2016) (statement of Rep. Michael T. McCaul, Chairman, H. Comm. on Homeland Sec.).

90. Richard & Callahan, *supra* note 35, at 179; see also *Fact Sheet: U.S. Refugee Resettlement*, NAT’L IMMIGR. FORUM (Nov. 5, 2020), <https://perma.cc/P5Y6-8MAZ> (outlining screening process for refugees).

91. See Richard & Callahan, *supra* note 35, at 179.

92. See *Is There a Link Between Refugees and U.S. Crime Rates?*, NEW AM. ECON. RSCH. FUND (Feb. 7, 2017), <https://perma.cc/DPS6-B89X>.

being pushed out of their neighborhoods or overlooked for job opportunities? How do we ensure that investing in newcomers does not come at the expense of existing residents? Many shrinking American cities have large Black and Hispanic populations, so it is crucial to craft refugee resettlement or immigrant integration policies through a racial equity lens. Policies and practices must be designed to avoid displacing existing residents, and cities should acknowledge that the existing community bonds meaningfully contribute to mitigating both systemic barriers and devastating consequences of shrinkage. While the forces and perceptions that sometimes divide groups along cultural and ethnic lines can be deep and complex,⁹³ “there is nothing about the encounter between immigrants and longer-term [Black and Hispanic] residents that is inherently in conflict, and no need for the encounter to turn into a zero-sum proposition.”⁹⁴ Refugee programs at the federal, state, and local levels must take substantive steps to bring the communities together and increase cross-cultural communication and understanding⁹⁵ so that *all* residents can benefit from refugee resettlement in shrinking cities.

B. *Benefit to Refugees*

While shrinking cities alone are likely not a preferred destination for vulnerable populations, they can offer unique benefits for refugees if they adopt integration programs and supportive services such as those in Utica. Shrinking American cities are more affordable than major metropolitan areas like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, and their smaller population size can make integration less overwhelming and community building more accessible. The same could be said for rural areas, but shrinking cities have the advantage of existing infrastructure and physical accessibility. In short, shrinking American cities that welcome and support refugees can become part of a synergistic solution for the vulnerabilities faced by both cities and refugees.

Refugees are a unique type of immigrant because they have no say in where they are initially resettled and require more social support and services than economic migrants.⁹⁶ They do not voluntarily migrate, but are instead forced to leave their home countries due to circumstances beyond their control.⁹⁷ Often, fleeing leaves refugees with limited material possessions and separates them from family and other social networks.⁹⁸ After their forced departure, refugees are usually displaced for long periods, waiting in refugee camps or other vulnerable conditions until resettlement.⁹⁹

93. See ALAN MALLACH & STEVE TOBOCMAN, BUILDING INCLUSIVE CITIES: IMMIGRATION AND NEIGHBORHOOD CHANGE IN DETROIT GLOBAL DETROIT 10 (2021).

94. *Id.* at 9.

95. *See id.* at 10.

96. Shrider, *supra* note 3, at 5.

97. HAMUTAL BERNSTEIN & NICOLE DUBOIS, BRINGING EVIDENCE TO THE REFUGEE INTEGRATION DEBATE, URB. INST. 4 (2018).

98. *See id.*

99. *See id.*

Upon arrival, refugees face a host of struggles as they learn a new language, adapt to a new culture while preserving their own, and find stable employment.¹⁰⁰ In addition, refugees often struggle with post-traumatic stress from their experiences with war, death of family and friends, loss of home, property, and livelihood, and the chronic uncertainty and unpredictability of their new lives as displaced persons.¹⁰¹ For such vulnerable populations, community characteristics—like affordances for religious community,¹⁰² safe living environments, and perceived discrimination from others—are particularly likely to matter because community support has a tremendous impact on their lives.¹⁰³

Refugees' coping abilities often hinge on access to "material and social resources" and refugees' "embeddedness in a community that fosters optimism, hope, self-efficacy, and control of their daily lives."¹⁰⁴ Cognitive resources (e.g., believing in the efficacy of prayer), behavioral practices (e.g., participation in community rituals), and social and emotional support all shape refugees' well-being.¹⁰⁵ Having a network of friends of the same ethnic group is one of the strongest predictors of refugee well-being.¹⁰⁶ Thus, programs like The Center that assist with language barriers, cultural orientation, and employment are extraordinary resources. Organizations like MUCC that foster community and host inclusive ethnic celebrations can profoundly shape refugees' healing process and help them adapt to their new lives in the United States.

IV. POLICIES AND PRACTICES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The government is obligated to mitigate capitalist-induced vulnerabilities suffered by shrinking American cities because of its direct role in suburbanization and white flight.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, permitting the devastating consequences of shrinkage to continue is abhorrent and equates to an abandonment of vulnerable populations. Welcoming refugees can restore neighborhoods, populations, and economics, but shrinking American cities face substantial challenges in implementing immigrant-driven revitalization strategies and acting as receiving communities.¹⁰⁸ Thus, cities should not have to bear the responsibility alone. It is crucial to spearhead initiatives and establish positive reception of refugees at federal, state, and local levels. Decisionmakers

100. See Stephen Wu, Paul Hagstrom, Stephen Ellingson & Jaime Kucinskas, *Religion and Refugee Well-Being: The Importance of Inclusive Community*, 60 J. SCI. STUDY RELIGION 2, 293 (2021).

101. See *id.* at 293.

102. Interestingly, the ability to practice religion is an important determinant of happiness, even for refugees who do not declare themselves religious or do not attend religious services regularly. See *id.* at 305.

103. *Id.* at 291.

104. *Id.* at 294.

105. See *id.*

106. See *id.*

107. See, e.g., Kriston Capps, *How the Federal Government Built White Suburbia*, BLOOMBERG CITY LAB (Sept. 2, 2015, 11:36 AM), <https://perma.cc/6PFR-BEZL>.

108. See Shrider, *supra* note 3, at 26.

at all levels must be intentional about creating social cohesion among different racial and ethnic groups, and “[b]ecause immigrant-driven revitalization strategies depend on attracting immigrants, cities pursuing these strategies need to make policies that actively encourage immigration.”¹⁰⁹

A. Federal Initiatives

The federal government should expand refugee admission, both in terms of the number of refugees admitted and in its definition of “refugee.” Each year, the President determines how many refugees can be admitted into the United States in consultation with Congress.¹¹⁰ Until recently, the United States was the leading country, accepting more refugees than any other nation.¹¹¹ When Donald Trump took office, he cut the admissions ceiling to a historic low: 15,000 refugees.¹¹² President Biden has since raised it to 125,000, but the number of admitted refugees is still much lower than when the Refugee Act of 1980 was passed.¹¹³

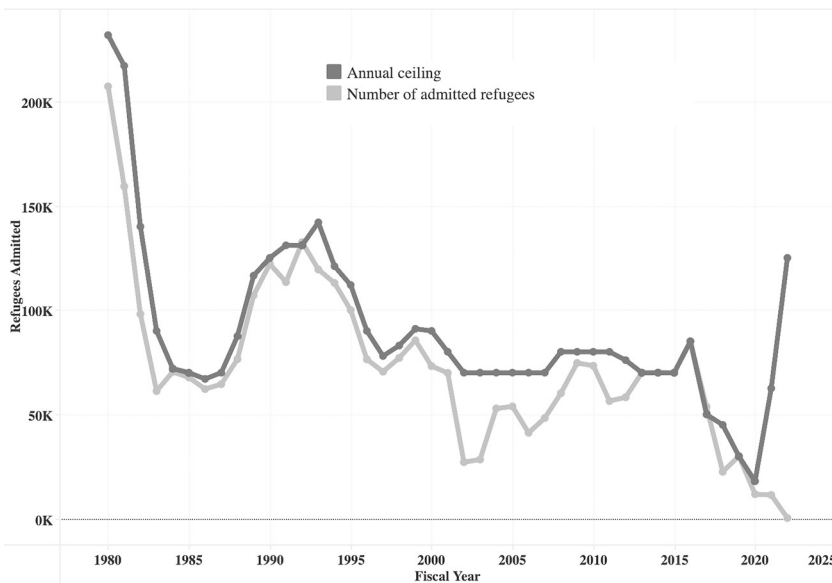


Figure 6: U.S. Refugee Admission & U.S. Refugee Resettlement Ceilings, 1980–2021¹¹⁴

109. Shrider, *supra* note 3, at 18–19.

110. See BERNSTEIN & DUBOIS, *supra* note 97, at 2; *An Overview of U.S. Refugee Law and Policy*, AM. IMMIGR. COUNCIL (Sept. 20, 2021), <https://perma.cc/9743-BPLW>.

111. See *An Overview of U.S. Refugee Law and Policy*, *supra* note 110.

112. See Camilo Montoya-Galvez, *Trump Administration Sets Refugee Cap at 15,000, a New Record Low*, CBS NEWS (Oct. 1, 2020, 7:43 PM), <https://perma.cc/6SV3-DNY8>.

113. *U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Number of Refugees Admitted, 1980 – Present*, MIGRATION POL’Y INST. (Oct. 2021), <https://perma.cc/MJ6E-C5GF>.

114. *Id.*

The President can easily raise the annual ceiling and influence the number of admitted refugees, but the challenge lies in shifting public rhetoric that criminalizes immigrants and casts them as a drain on the economy. This hostile national rhetoric is what pushed numbers so low under Donald Trump's regime. To overcome the fallacious hostility, information about immigrants' contributions must be injected into the mainstream and constantly reiterated. We must resituate the immigrant as a source of knowledge production and political vision, and we must do so habitually, not just in periods of international crisis.

Despite immigrants' and refugees' contributions, it is imperative to remember that they are not disposable; they are not a means to an end for our economic gain. Even aside from their remarkable contributions, we should expand refugee admission and supportive programs because it is the right thing to do. Human dignity is the linchpin of civilization, and we fulfill our commitment to upholding human dignity by helping and supporting fellow human beings who have been forcibly displaced. Further, the moral imperative to show hospitality to people in distress or fleeing danger should transcend the relatively modern¹¹⁵ invention of institutionalized exclusion: borders.

Currently, refugees must demonstrate that they have either been persecuted or fear persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or social membership.¹¹⁶ Yet this definition encompasses only a subset of the population of displaced individuals.¹¹⁷ It is hard to distinguish between flight compelled by political persecution and material suffering. It is even harder to ignore the increasing urgency of our shared human responsibility to protect people forcibly displaced by the effects of climate change. The federal government should brandish its formidable international influence and spearhead an expansion of the "refugee" definition¹¹⁸ established at the 1951 Refugee Convention. Moreover, with the growing climate crisis,¹¹⁹ we should start making room for more refugees, without expecting anything in return. Wholly aside from recognizing that refugees' resilience and strengths can contribute significantly to our country, we should recognize a responsibility to help prevent and mitigate the traumatic ordeals that force these individuals to flee their homes and often leave loved ones behind.

115. See, e.g., Nick Toutley, *Map: All of the World's Borders By Age*, VISUAL CAPITALIST (Jan. 12, 2018), <https://perma.cc/N9G2-PRQK>.

116. See *An Overview of U.S. Refugee Law and Policy*, *supra* note 110, at 2.

117. *Id.*

118. See U.N. HIGH COMM'R FOR REFUGEES, *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* 3 (Dec. 2010), <https://perma.cc/K2YT-4KXX>.

119. See, e.g., *Climate Change and Disaster Displacement*, UNHCR, <https://perma.cc/5S6B-AVJ9> (last visited Feb. 21, 2022) (declaring climate change displacement the "defining crisis of our time"); Jay Balagna, Aaron Clark-Ginsberg & Vanessa Parks, *To Help Climate Migrants We Must First Recognize Them*, HILL (Jan. 27, 2022, 4:00 PM), <https://perma.cc/XJV8-5MWC> (estimating extreme weather will displace between 200 million and 1 billion people by the middle of the century).

Federal funding to support refugee-embracing policies and programs should be increased and modified to ensure stability. The federal government has decentralized many social services, so cities' responsibility to support their citizens has grown, often without much federal financial assistance.¹²⁰ "This is particularly problematic for Rust Belt cities, which have limited tax bases due to their shrinking populations and struggling economies."¹²¹ Currently, federal funding is distributed based on the number of actual refugee arrivals rather than the annual cap.¹²² As a result, local agencies have a hard time planning because if resettlement numbers fall dramatically below target expectations (due to no fault of the agencies), the State Department does not fund the agencies.¹²³ The arrival-based funding policy protects the financial stability of national agencies yet "saddle[s] their local partners with the entire burden of risk in the event that arrivals [fall] short of the refugee ceiling and refugee placement plans."¹²⁴ An increase in and modification of funding should also be accompanied by initiatives that help coordinate sharing of information, resources, and institutional knowledge among states implementing refugee resettlement programs.

B. *State Initiatives*

States should help supplement and diversify funding streams for refugee resettlement by providing state funding. For example, in response to the federal government's retreat from refugee resettlement in 2017, New York established the New York State Enhanced Services to Refugees Program.¹²⁵ New York was the first state to provide state funding to support refugee integration,¹²⁶ but it should serve as a model for other states nationwide. More recently, the Oregon legislature approved \$18 million in funding for Afghan refugee resettlement.¹²⁷ States should be discouraged from conditioning the distribution of state funds on whether resettlement agencies also receive funds from the federal government, as the Michigan legislature did in its 2016 Bill to Amend the Social Welfare Act.¹²⁸ Michigan requires resettlement agencies to report whether or not they have received federal grants for refugee resettlement so that the state can determine "if there is a conflict of interest" with any state grants.¹²⁹ The goal should be to expand funding for refugee resettlement, not limit agencies' efforts.

120. Shrider, *supra* note 3, at 28.

121. *Id.*

122. See Silva Mathema & Sofia Carratala, *Rebuilding the U.S. Refugee Program for the 21st Century*, CTR. FOR AM. PROGRESS (Oct. 26, 2020), <https://perma.cc/GW5H-LCAY>.

123. *See id.* at 17.

124. *Id.* at 10.

125. *See* N.Y. FOR REFUGEES, *NEW YORK STATE ENHANCED SERVICES TO REFUGEES 1* (2021).

126. *Id.*

127. Alicia Rubin, *\$18 Million Approved for Afghan Resettlement in Oregon*, KDRV (Dec. 13, 2021, 7:55 PM), <https://perma.cc/D4PC-MCDD>.

128. H.R. 5529, 2016 Leg., Reg. Sess. (Mich. 2016).

129. *Id.*

Further, states should pass legislation promoting more hospitable environments for immigrants and refugees. Some states have already started passing this type of legislation. Illinois, for example, passed the Defenders for All Act, which now permits public defenders to represent immigrants facing deportation.¹³⁰ Unlike criminal defendants who have a Sixth Amendment right to an attorney, immigrants facing deportation do not have the right to a government-appointed attorney but are five to ten times more likely to avoid deportation if they have legal representation.¹³¹ While Illinois's policy is not tailored directly to refugees, it helps dismantle hostility toward and dehumanization of immigrants in the United States. On the other hand, Missouri's legislature has attempted to prohibit use of state funds to support refugee resettlement;¹³² eliminate funding for public schools, community-based organizations, resettlement-agencies, and nonprofits to teach English to immigrants and refugees;¹³³ and urged Congress to outright block refugees from being admitted into the United States.¹³⁴ None of these bills passed, but they emphatically conveyed the strong anti-refugee sentiment that handicaps local refugee resettlement efforts and distorts the national dialogue surrounding immigration.

C. *Local Initiatives*

The most important thing cities can do to attract refugees and retain them long after resettlement is to establish a positive and welcoming context of reception.¹³⁵ This context plays out in local policies, the local labor market, and community-building. Cities should create organizations—like The Center,¹³⁶ MUCC,¹³⁷ and Project SHINE¹³⁸—to support refugees in both the short-term and long-term. These programs, especially those that are educational or vocational based, should be open to non-refugee community members as well. Expanding resources to help all underserved citizens can help build community, foster social cohesion among existing residents and newcomers, and increase cross-cultural communication. Cities should also consider increasing municipal and public sector hiring of newcomers. Doing so would not only convey a welcoming and supportive message to all residents, but also give newcomers meaningful opportunities to become active in local governance and become familiar with resources and processes that affect change.

130. See Carlos Ballesteros, *Cook County Public Defenders Can Represent Immigrants Facing Deportation in Immigration Court Under New State Bill*, INJUSTICE WATCH (May 31, 2021), <https://perma.cc/E8EQ-VJND>.

131. *Id.*

132. H. Con. Res. 97, 98th Gen. Assemb., Reg. Sess. (Mo. 2016).

133. H.B. 2652, 98th Gen. Assemb., Reg. Sess. (Mo. 2016).

134. H. Con. Res. 117, 98th Gen. Assemb., Reg. Sess. (Mo. 2016).

135. See Shrider, *supra* note 3, at 40.

136. See *Our History*, *supra* note 39.

137. See *Overview*, MIDTOWN UTICA CMTY. CTR., <https://perma.cc/56UY-MGYB>.

138. See *Project SHINE*, HAMILTON COLL., <https://perma.cc/UWR7-PVZ6>.

Additionally, cities should strive to open dialogue amongst each other. Sharing institutional knowledge and resources can be extraordinarily effective and prevents duplicating efforts. For example, Utica should be forthcoming with other cities pursuing the refugee-based revival strategy about how it developed its educational curriculum, some of its greatest setbacks in the past four decades, and what trends it anticipates. Entire events could be dedicated to refugee-based revival strategies, such as at the annual United States Conference of Mayors,¹³⁹ or cities could contribute to a shared database of annual reports. Given the increasing diversity of refugees, cities could pool their resources for translation services. For example, they could develop translator programs that operate virtually, so translators can work across state lines and increase the pool of available language services.

Another welcoming approach that promotes retention is to expand voting rights to non-citizens, as New York City did recently.¹⁴⁰ Expanding voting rights gives groups and individuals more control over policies that impact their daily lives, increases pressure on elected officials to respond to community needs, and offers more dignity and respect. It sends the message that immigrants are valued just as much as other residents.

As seen with the case of Utica, local actions and networks are at the heart of successful refugee resettlement. In pursuing refugee-revitalization strategies, cities must craft policies and programs that actively welcome and embrace immigration. In doing so, it is essential that resources are provided to *all* underserved people and communities, not exclusively to refugees; resources should also be provided in ways that bring people together rather than perpetuate existing divisions.¹⁴¹

V. CONCLUSION

Policies and practices that welcome and support refugees can offer a synergistic solution to the capitalist-induced vulnerabilities of declining American cities. The case of Utica, New York, provides a model for how foreignness can operate as an agent of (re)founding.¹⁴² Had refugee resettlement not been part and parcel of the city's history for the past forty years, Utica would have been "far diminished and likely unrecognizable."¹⁴³ The myriad benefits of embracing refugees should inspire other shrinking American cities, and our responsibility to help fellow human beings who have been forcibly displaced should transcend any transactional outlook on resettlement.

139. *See generally About the Conference*, U.S. CONF. OF MAYORS, <https://perma.cc/647Q-R2R6>.

140. *See* Jeffery C. Mays & Annie Correal, *New York City Gives 800,000 Noncitizens Right to Vote in Local Elections*, N.Y. TIMES (Dec. 9, 2021), <https://perma.cc/U3RC-G4CE>.

141. MALLACH & TOBOCMAN, *supra* note 93, at 19.

142. *See* BONNIE HONIG, *DEMOCRACY AND THE FOREIGNER* 3 (2001).

143. Richard & Callahan, *supra* note 35, at 183.