



# Refugees in Vermont: mobility and acculturation in a new immigrant destination



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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the idea of mobility for recent refugees who have resettled in a non-traditional immigrant destination in the northeastern U.S. It is based on a multi-year qualitative study of travel behavior, preferences, and needs amongst these new arrivals in a small city in the state of Vermont. As a result of their experiences of both forced displacement from their home as well as stasis within camp settings and the refugee determination process, refugees are an example of what some have called “a dialectic of movement/moorings” (Urry, 2003: 125), both on the move and trapped in place. Their resettlement in the U.S., as this paper illustrates, may represent a further extension of this dialectic—placed by government agents in new immigrant reception areas not of their own choosing, forced to commute long distances and into unfamiliar environments for work and limited in their abilities to access healthcare, education and employment (amongst other services) due to a range of transportation barriers. I argue in this paper that refugee mobilities in a new settlement site are about more than inconvenience: barriers to movement may constitute obstacles to acculturation, integration, self-empowerment, and community building.

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## 1. Introduction: Refugees and new destinations

The ‘mobilities turn’ in the social sciences in recent years has significantly challenged our understanding of a wide range of flows—capital, labor, commodities, people, and ideas (Urry, 2007; Sheller and Urry, 2006; Adey, 2006). The complex and circuitous routes of travel, migration, and a wide variety of networks at different scales, intensities, and sites have renewed a strong interest in the meanings and implication of movement and stillness alike, in a number of different disciplines (Urry, 2012; Cresswell, 2010, 2012; Jensen, 2011). What does it mean to be mobile? How do we understand and analyze these disparate flows? What is the relationship between mobility and immobility? What is at stake politically and theoretically in such movements and migrations? In this paper I examine such questions in light of the experiences of refugees recently resettled in Burlington, Vermont, a small city that is representative of a growing trend in immigration to new destinations in the United States. The central concerns that animate this research are to understand: (a) whether refugees’ travel behavior and preferences are distinct from those of the broader

population, and (b) what impacts mobility and immobility might have on the acculturation and integration process.

In particular, I focus on refugees’ ability to access a range of opportunities and needs that either enable or limit their participation and integration into new societies. I argue that the mobility of refugees in Vermont is about much more than convenience and utility—being able to travel to jobs, healthcare, and educational opportunities leads to better quality of life outcomes, a sense of independence and agency, and a more established presence within their new communities. Conversely, limitations on movement and mobility may have profound effects on refugees’ notions of community, integration, and perhaps even citizenship itself. These effects may also be felt in the broader population, but they may be more pressing for refugees given their somewhat more tenuous place in their new homes.

The example used to explore this dynamic is that of refugees in Burlington, Vermont, a federally designated resettlement site for refugees since the late 1980s. The choice of both the subject and the site may not appear obvious for a discussion of migration and mobility at first blush. Refugees, after all, make up but a small fraction of immigrant flows within North America (Teixeira et al., 2011), and Vermont—a mostly rural and overwhelmingly white state—remains low on the list of immigrant destinations (Bose, 2013). Yet the travel behavior, needs, and desires of refugees in

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such a location illuminate the complex ways in which we might understand what Papastergiadis (2000) has termed the “turbulence of migration”—the displacement of populations, their resettlement through various forms of globalization, their experience of mobility in a new location, and their reconstitution of identity and redefining of place.

Similarly, while Vermont may continue to receive a far smaller number of newcomers than states like California or Texas, it is representative of a growing trend of immigrants and refugees settling beyond the so-called ‘gateway cities’ of the U.S., such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles (Massey, 2008). The presence of newcomers in non-traditional destinations—in rural regions, in the southern and midwestern United States, and in suburban enclaves—has been a focus of considerable recent geographic research (Nelson and Nelson, 2011; Singer et al., 2008; Smith and Furuseth, 2006). Much of this work focuses on labor as well as professional class migrants—both legal and undocumented—who constitute the majority of such flows. Refugees make up a much smaller proportion of the newcomers in non-traditional sites, often numbering in the hundreds rather than the thousands. Yet the trend of movement to such destinations is steady and on the rise—for example, while 8300 refugees were placed in the metropolitan New York City area between 2000 and 2010, about 2000 were placed in the metropolitan area of Burlington, Vermont (Refugee Processing Center, 2013). Similar patterns are discernible in Chicago (9000) and Los Angeles (2600) versus towns with a population similar to Burlington, such as Utica, NY (4300), Bowling Green, KY (2700), or Twin Falls, ID (1900), a trend repeated across the U.S. during the same period between large versus small cities (Refugee Processing Center, 2013). This paper, therefore, focuses on the example of refugees in Burlington, Vermont, as a way of exploring the particular experiences of mobility for newcomers in these types of destinations. Examining the transportation challenges for refugees in such a location helps to expand the literature on immigrants and travel behavior—which, like the study of migration as a whole in the U.S., has tended to focus on labor, familial, and economic migrants—and more broadly on mobility itself by interrogating the specifics of the refugee experience. The experiences of refugees settled in a small city in the U.S. are not the same as those of labor migrants in agricultural areas in the Midwest, immigrants working in manufacturing in gateway cities like New York or Chicago, or professional class immigrants in Silicon valley. Over sixty thousand refugees are accepted each year by the U.S., increasingly, as noted above, in new destinations similar to Burlington, VT. It is important, therefore, to understand the specific implications that barriers to mobility might have for refugee populations in such places.

The findings in this paper are based on a multi-year, community based qualitative study conducted with recently resettled refugees in Burlington, Vermont, and the social service providers who support their transition to their new home. They provide particular insight into the nature and the number of challenges facing refugees in Vermont, especially in light of the particularities of the state – the low levels of population density and urbanization, the lack of historical immigration, the predominantly homogenous and white population, the cold-weather climate, and the economic and cultural background of refugees. The findings suggest that for refugee families and individuals for whom transportation is less of a challenge – because they live closer to their travel destinations or to transit options, or due to their access to a car – their acclimation to a new environment is potentially much smoother. Indeed, those for whom transportation is less of an obstacle have considerable advantages over those who do not live either in close proximity to the work, stores, services, and schools that they need to reach or have access to modes of transport that render such distances manageable. Access to viable transportation options, both public

and private, is clearly lacking for refugees in Vermont, and this gap acts as a significant barrier to the adaptation of refugees to their new homes. Furthermore, limited transportation options can, in substantial ways, restrict the autonomy and independence of refugees, leaving them dependent on the services and schedules of others. This, in turn, can adversely affect their ability to seek and secure gainful employment, receive necessary medical care, and access other goods and services vital to both basic survival and social advancement.

The paper begins with a review of two related sets of relevant literature: the first on mobility and, more specifically, immigrant mobility, and the second on accessibility, with a particular focus on equity and spatial mismatch. The paper then introduces the study site, presents the methodological framework, and describes the process of data collection. The next section presents some of the results of the study, highlighting three aspects of the acculturation and resettlement experience in the Vermont case that have been especially affected by constraints on mobility: employment, education, and healthcare. I conclude by suggesting that the implication of such limitations is a lessening of opportunity for the refugees in their transition to new lives. Finally, I argue that a more expansive notion of refugee mobility – one that recognizes that access to better, more reliable, and more independent travel options can improve integration – is a crucial component for policymakers to consider if improving resettlement outcomes is their goal.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Migrants and mobility

The study of mobility in a multiplicity of forms has been an important theoretical exploration in a range of disciplines in recent years. Cresswell (2010), in the first of a series of reviews of the concept distinguishes between the more established field of transport geography—dominated broadly by approaches in social sciences and engineering—and the more emergent literature on mobilities that draws as much from the humanities as it does geography or sociology. Indeed, he describes mobility as a “geographical fact that lies at the centre of constellations of power, the creation of identities and the microgeographies of everyday life” (Cresswell, 2010: 551). Jensen (2011) similarly argues that mobilities research is important not for its descriptive capabilities but for the potential of such work to make critical interventions in the contemporary crises of modernity by engaging directly with the question of power. A flat notion of mobility – where all subjects have undifferentiated access and power – is at odds with the realities of the world in which we live. Indeed, Urry (2012: 27) suggests that what he calls “network capital”—the ability to unfold one’s life through highly interconnected, networked societies—“points to the real and potential social relations that mobilities afford.” Conversely, the lack of such capital can lead to disparate experiences of mobility and profound consequences—as seen, he suggests, in a case such as Hurricane Katrina in terms of who could and who could not escape the effects of the storm.

One of the key contributions of mobilities research is then a focus on the construction of meaning rather than a mapping of movement—Cresswell (2010) urges, for example that in building a bridge between mobilities research and transport geography, the focus should be not only on travel times alone but what those travel times signify. Some researchers have shown, for example, that the embodied experience of mobility and being a passenger tells us much more than documenting their trajectories or explaining their socio-political contexts alone (Bissell et al., 2011; Jain, 2011). For example, Budd’s (2011) analysis of first-hand accounts of airship travel in the early years of the 20th century help to

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