

In Search of Opportunity and Community: The Secondary Migration of Refugees in the United States

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For decades, the United States has operated the largest refugee resettlement program in the world, admitting thousands of refugees each year and assigning them to pre-determined locations throughout the country. However, in recent years, the United States Refugee Admissions Program has faced increasing public scrutiny: first, when President Obama committed to double the number of refugees admissions in 2016, and last year, when President Trump signed a series of executive orders to reduce the scale and breadth of refugee admissions. In the context of these national debates around the size and composition of the refugee population, a number of governors have voiced opposition to refugee resettlement in their states, citing security or economic concerns (1–3). However, while policymakers can screen and select initial resettlement locations, there are no legal barriers prohibiting refugees from moving elsewhere in the United States after arrival. Refugees who enter the United States thus face an immediate decision once they arrive: should they stay in the community selected for them or should they move?

In principle, secondary migration permits refugees to select a location that is aligned with their preferences (4) and which could potentially lead to better employment, earnings, and integration outcomes (5). However, secondary migration can also generate a set of interrelated challenges for refugees and receiving communities. First, by opting out of the initial resettlement location, refugees may lose access to targeted social services designed to ease their transition to life in the United States (6, 7). Moreover, refugees' information on the relative merits of destinations may also be incomplete or inaccurate (8), which could lead to suboptimal migration decisions that hamper subsequent integration. Second, communities which receive secondary migrants may lack the federal funding, local service organizations, or language competencies necessary to cater to the needs of incoming refugees (6, 7, 9). Relatedly, a perceived lack of resources and capacity, or a flow of new arrivals beyond what was anticipated, may fuel local concerns surrounding the impact of refugees on public services or rapid demographic change (6).

Anticipating these challenges, policymakers included several clauses related to secondary migration in the 1980 Refugee Act. The law instructs federal agencies to collect and analyze data on secondary migration and to take it into account when selecting initial resettlement sites.¹ However, despite the continued importance of this policy issue (6, 9, 10), Congressional reports have indicated that the government currently lacks the data necessary to analyze migration patterns or target federal funds or services towards communities that receive secondary migrants (11, 12). The data held by the agency tasked with monitoring secondary migration, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), is highly aggregated and derived from state-by-state reporting of refugee enrollment within benefit programs (7, 13, 14). This introduces coverage bias because the data is limited to refugees who apply for specific state benefits (15). These data constraints are not just limited to secondary migration, as little is systematically known about refugee

¹ United States 1980: Refugee Act (a)(2)(C)(iii)(IV); (a)(3)

integration in the U.S. in general (12). In an effort to overcome these administrative data limitations, ORR has fielded non-representative surveys (16), while other researchers have used survey data to impute the refugee status of respondents (17, 18). However, these approaches are subject to non-response bias and imputation error, and do not permit a comprehensive assessment of refugee migration patterns or the individual and contextual factors that drive secondary migration decisions.

In this study, we provide the first comprehensive, individual-level analysis of the secondary migration patterns of refugees in the United States. Drawing on a novel administrative data linkage, we overcome the data challenges that have impeded prior research on immigrant locational choices, which has relied on aggregate administrative data (19, 20). U.S. immigration law requires that refugees apply for adjustment of status to become lawful permanent residents (LPR) after they have lived in the U.S. for 12 months (11). These applications include information on each refugees' current state of residence. Using unique identifiers, we linked refugee arrival records to data from the Computer Linked Application Information Management System (CLAIMS) and the Electronic Immigration System (ELIS) of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) which maintains information from applications for LPR status.

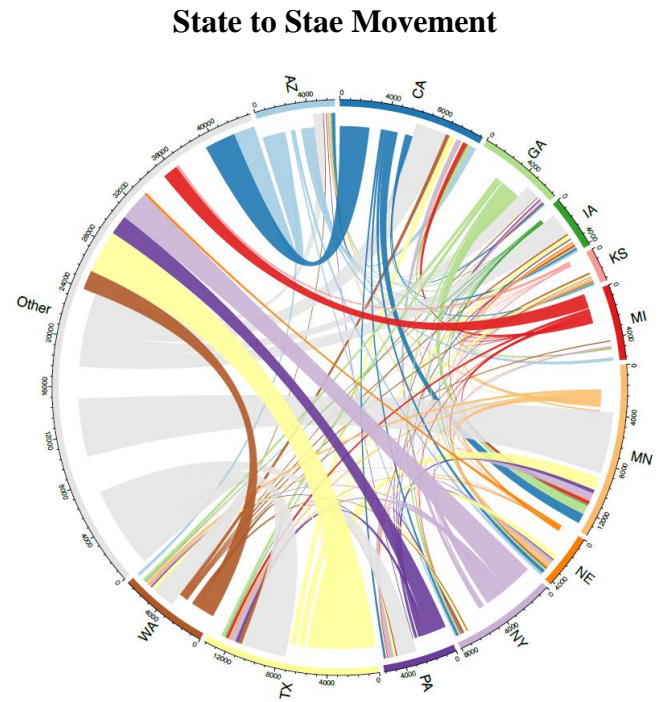
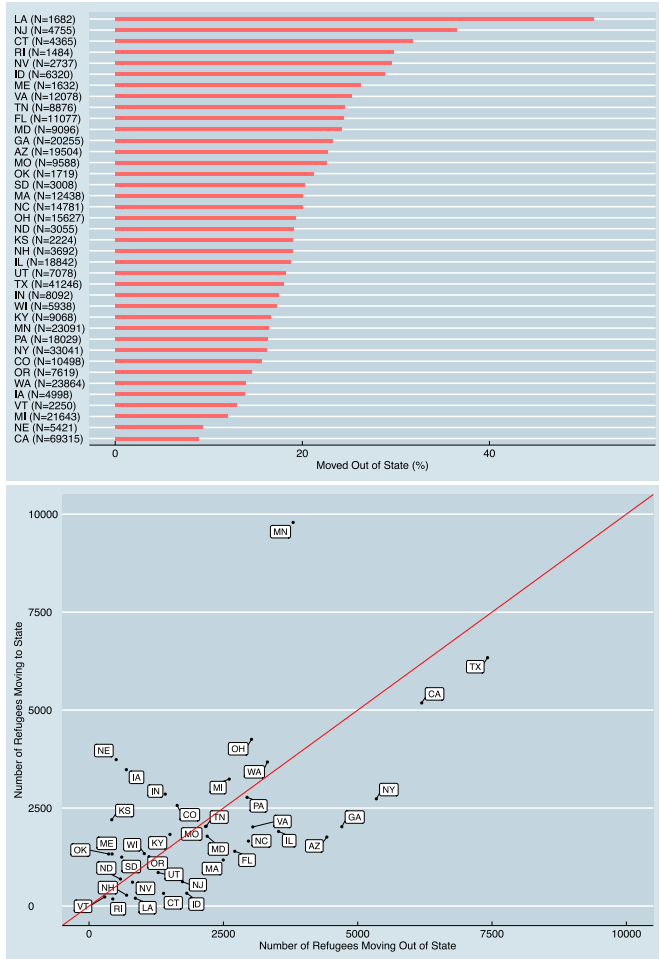
Our sample includes all refugees resettled in the United States between 2000 and 2015. We exclude refugees below the age of 18 at arrival under the assumption that these individuals are unlikely to make independent locational choices, as well as refugees without a matching LPR record (see SI for details). The final sample consists of approximately 480,000 individuals. The outcome variable is derived from the landing and LPR data, and indicates whether a refugee moved from their state of initial resettlement to another state by the time they have adjusted to LPR status after living in the U.S. for 12 months. Therefore this time horizon includes refugees who choose to move after the 8-month cash and health services benefits window expires (12). We focus on state-to-state migration to proxy consequential moves, as well as moves outside the initial service area.

We find that during the period under observation, 17.6% of refugees relocated from their initial state of resettlement by the time they applied for LPR status. This level of state-to-state mobility is significantly higher than available estimates for the population of non-citizens in the U.S. with approximately one year of residency, of which only 3.4% report moving to a new state within the last year.²

Panel A of Figure 1 demonstrates that there is significant heterogeneity in migration rates across the initial resettlement locations. More than 30% of refugees initially assigned to Louisiana, New Jersey, or Connecticut relocated, while less than 10% assigned to Nebraska or California left their arrival state. Destinations are regionally clustered: as seen in Panel B, Midwestern states, with the exception of Illinois, experienced the largest net gain in refugee population following secondary migration, with Minnesota receiving the largest inflows of refugees. Finally, as seen in Panel C, flows are widely dispersed across state pairs, indicating that migration patterns are national in scope rather than confined to bilateral flows between particular states.

² 2008-2012, ACS 5 year sample.

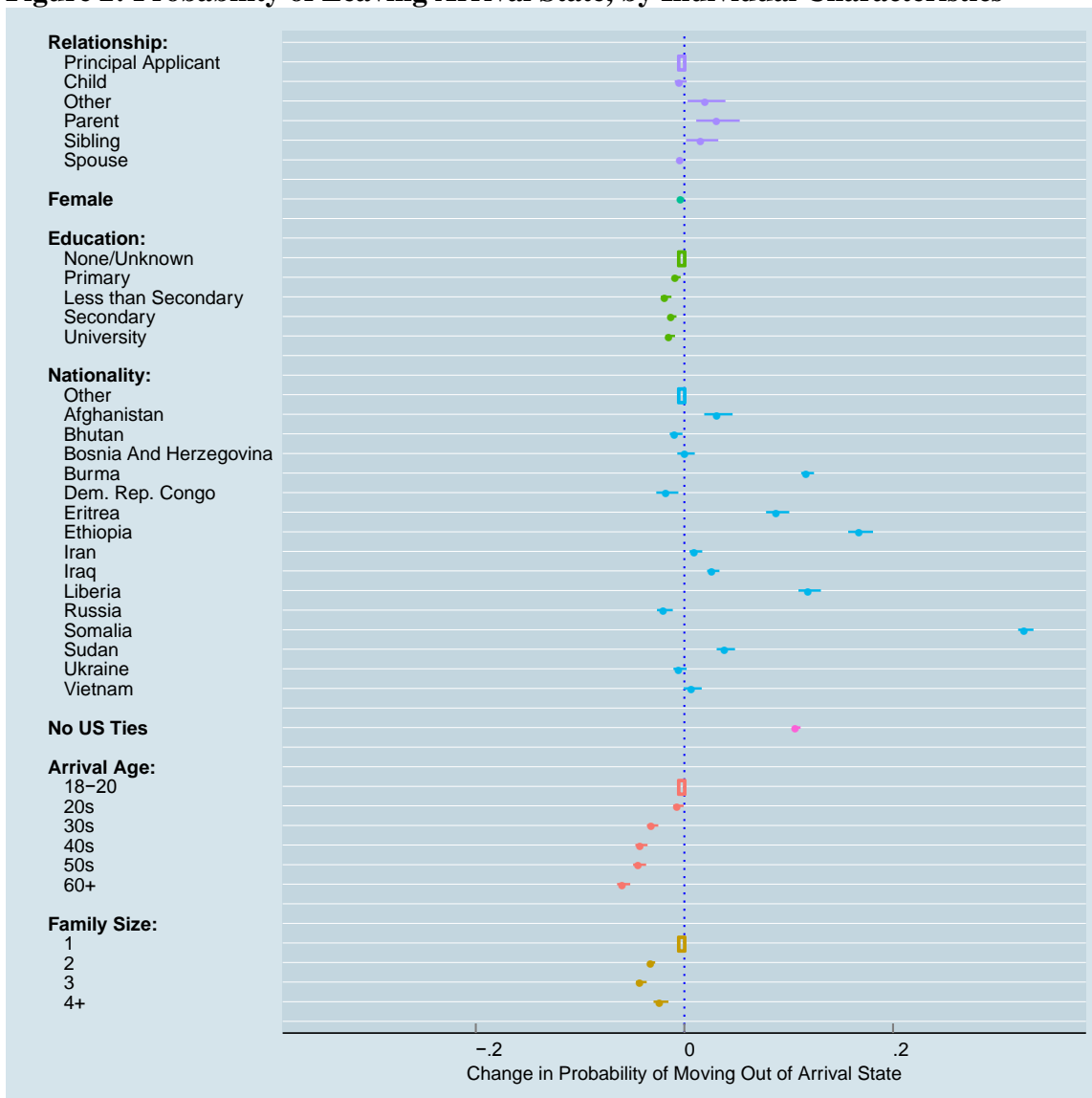
Figure 1: Secondary Migration of Refugees, 2000 - 2015



Panel A: Proportion of refugees originally assigned to a state for resettlement who left state before receiving LPR status (excluding states with fewer than 1,000 refugees resettled during this period). *Panel B:* Total number of refugees moving in/out of each state within post-arrival period. Points above (below) the diagonal represent states receiving a net increase (decrease) in refugees. *Panel C:* Refugee flows between states, using the intersection of the top 10 sending and receiving states. Flows with less than 50 total movers are omitted. See SI for analysis by refugee nationality.

We next examine how the probability of moving across state lines varies by refugee background characteristics. Figure 2 reports the effect estimates from a linear probability model that regresses outmigration on individual and arrival state characteristics (see SI for details). Individuals from Somalia and Ethiopia are most likely to move to a different state after arrival, while refugees from Bhutan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are the least likely to relocate. Younger refugees and those without families are also more likely to migrate, while gender or education at the time of arrival has little observable effect. Refugees without existing ties to family members or friends in the United States are 10 percentage points more likely to leave their state, relative to those with such ties. Given that the resettlement program mandates that the latter group are resettled in close proximity to their US tie, this gap is smaller than expected, reflecting high baseline rates of migration among refugees with US ties (12%).

Figure 2: Probability of Leaving Arrival State, by Individual Characteristics

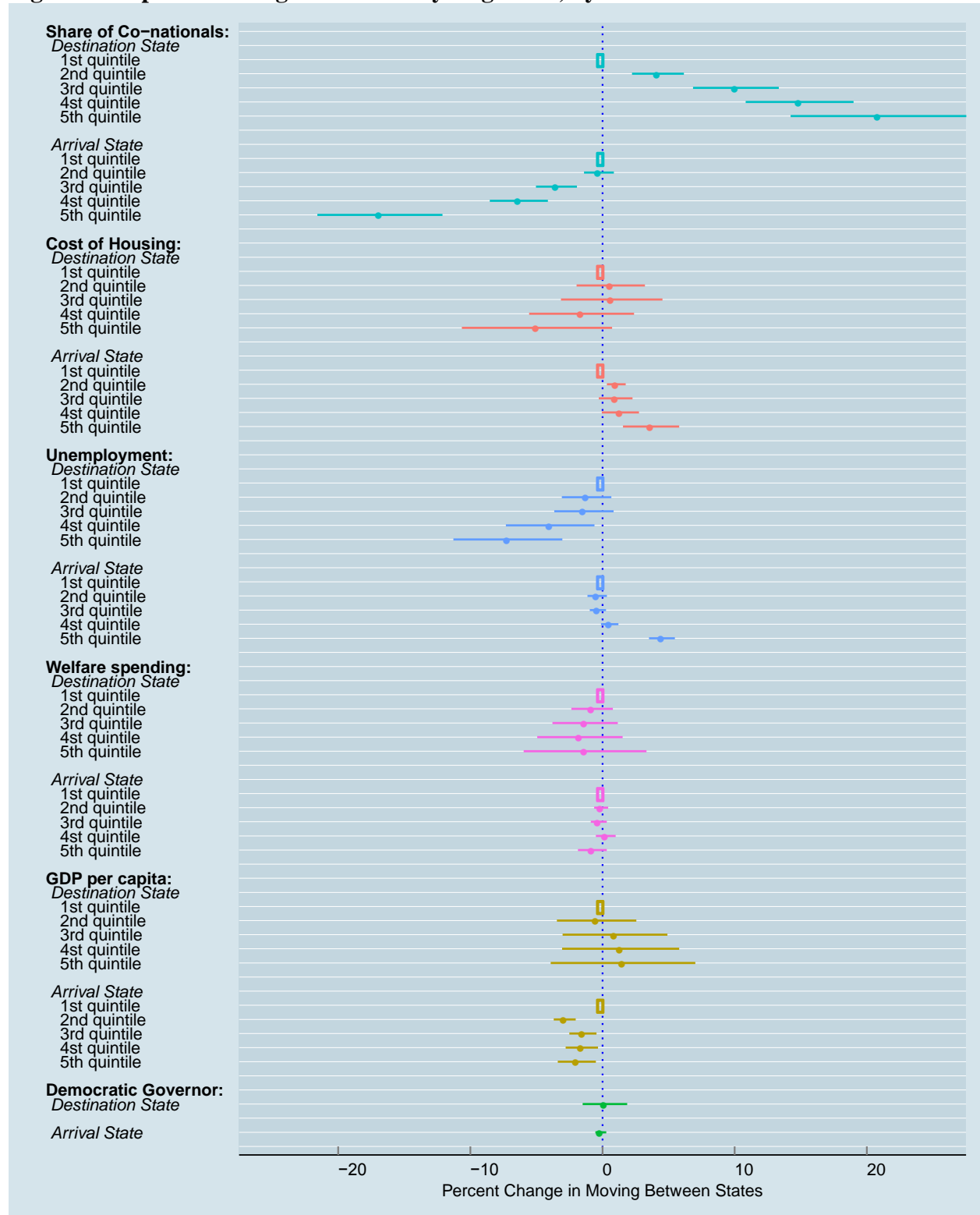


Coefficients from a linear probability model regressing whether a refugee left the arrival state on individual characteristics, with year and state fixed effects. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals. N=480,034 refugees. See SI for alternative specifications.

While the individual-level estimates provide insight into how patterns of secondary migration vary across refugees of different backgrounds, the data also permit an analysis of how refugee flows are affected by changes in local conditions. Accordingly, we aggregate annual moves, by nationality, between pairs of states, and fit a gravity model with state pair fixed effects (21, 22). The gravity model allows us to estimate how variation in conditions within arrival or destination states influence the level of secondary migration (measured on a log scale), while controlling for fixed characteristics of state pairs (see SI for details).

Figure 3 demonstrates that state characteristics condition the level of secondary migration. Contra expectations (19, 23–26), we find that the political orientation of the state’s governor and of the generosity of welfare expenditures do not predict secondary migration. However, we find symmetric effects for the share of co-ethnics: a decrease in co-ethnics within the arrival state, or an increase in a potential destination state, each trigger increased refugee flows. The results suggest a weaker, albeit similarly symmetric relationship for housing costs and labor market characteristics. High levels of unemployment or housing costs within the arrival state operate as push factors that encourage out-migration, while they dampen expected refugee flows in potential destinations.

Figure 3: Expected Change in Secondary Migration, by State Characteristics



Coefficients from a model regressing the log total secondary migration flows on separate predictors for the sending and destination state. Individual-level flows are aggregated to the state-year-origin level. Models include state pair and year fixed effects. Lines represent 95% confidence intervals. N= 191,302 state-to-state flows. Covariates are coarsened into five equally sized bins. See SI for information on covariates and alternate specifications.

These results demonstrate that while refugees are a highly mobile population, patterns of secondary migration are not haphazard and can be predicted by individual and contextual factors. In particular, refugees respond to the relative push and pull of local economic conditions and co-ethnic networks in both the arrival state and potential destination states. The former likely reflects the effort of refugees to find employment opportunities with minimal barriers to entry. The pull of co-ethnic networks is consistent with evidence that suggests that co-ethnic concentration may provide a softer landing to refugees, in the form of co-ethnic support networks and employment opportunities (24, 27).

The available evidence indicates that these factors significantly outweigh a common concern among state governments – namely, that refugees will be attracted by generous benefits. Unlike other immigrant classes, refugees are immediately eligible to receive welfare benefits upon arrival. Nevertheless, we find no evidence that refugees target states with generous welfare benefits or that refugees sort across states on the basis of partisanship (see SI for additional tests). Rather, our results suggest that refugees select destinations that maximize co-ethnic community and economic opportunity. As a result, attempts by state governments to cut refugee benefits in order to avoid inflows may harm refugees initially resettled in those locations without meaningfully altering migration patterns.

Although we find no evidence that secondary migration places burdens on states with generous benefit systems, our results suggest that over time, it may facilitate the creation of ethnic enclaves in destinations where co-nationals have previously settled. While available evidence suggests that these enclaves can ease integration in the short-term (27–29), they may diminish the chances of long-term integration and social mobility (30, 31). This tendency may also create challenges for local policymakers who face concerns from community members stemming from local demographic change.

Finally, these data and results hold direct policy implications. Linked administrative data on secondary migration would permit policymakers within the federal government to more accurately target funds towards communities that receive high proportions of secondary migrants. Similarly, the large degree of heterogeneity we document across background characteristics and arrival states suggests that initial placement policies could be further optimized to reduce rates of secondary migration among specific subpopulations of refugees (32). While refugees can be expected to continue to move to areas where they see opportunity and community, systematically leveraging data on prior migration patterns would enable policymakers to anticipate likely moves and select a set of initial destinations which would maximize the likelihood of successful adaptation to life within the United States.

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