



# Refugees' Experience Prior to Resettlement Predicts Early Socioeconomic Integration in the U.S.

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This brief describes the relationship between employment and formal educational experiences of refugees<sup>1</sup> prior to resettling in the U.S., and their socioeconomic situation within their first five years in the country.

## KEY POINTS

- Before coming to the U.S., four in ten refugees had at least a high school degree from a foreign country, most were working, and most did not speak English well or at all.
- Within five years after resettling in the U.S., most refugees reported good health, two thirds were employed, and most had improved their ability to speak English.
- Refugees with higher education before resettling are more likely to be employed, earn higher hourly wages, and have greater ability to speak English, relative to refugees with less education.
- Relative to refugees who were not working prior to resettlement, those who were working are more likely to be in the labor force and be employed. Prior working status does not relate to higher wages or English ability.
- Refugees who reported speaking English at a higher proficiency level rather than lower prior to arriving have higher wages, better English ability after resettlement, and better health, than those who spoke English poorly or not at all. English ability prior to resettlement does not predict labor force participation.
- Policies and programs supporting refugee resettlement can – and many do – consider how experience prior to arrival may influence their early integration. Flexibility to tailor services based on pre-resettlement experience, and more detailed data collection on pre-resettlement experiences, may be beneficial.

## INTRODUCTION

The U.S. refugee admissions program successfully resettles refugees from around the world into the American economy and society. A number of federal, state, and non-profit programs support refugees upon their arrival, providing English-language training, job training and assistance, housing, and other support. [Recent research from ASPE](#) has demonstrated that, over time, refugees provide a net positive fiscal impact on the U.S. government (Ghertner et al. 2024).

Compared to the overall U.S. population, refugees experience more economic insecurity in the U.S. (e.g., Robbins & Ghertner 2023). Such differences between refugees and other populations, and differences

<sup>1</sup> The Office of Refugee Resettlement serves many populations, including refugees, asylees, Cuban/Haitian entrants, Special Immigrant Visa holders, Amerasians, and Victims of Trafficking. In this brief, we examine populations with refugee status only.

between refugee subgroups, may be due to refugees' country of origin, culture, and personal experiences prior to resettlement. As a humanitarian program, the U.S. refugee admissions program does not select refugees based on any criteria related to the ability to integrate in the U.S. or be successful economically, such as English ability or education level. As such, the level of preparedness for success in the U.S. economy varies among refugees upon their arrival. Their experiences prior to arrival likely play an important role in how easily they can find employment, establish a business, or otherwise be economically self-sufficient and mobile. Though there is not prior research on how pre-resettlement education and work are related to post-resettlement labor market outcomes among refugees, it is well-established that immigrants, broadly, with more education and work experience prior to migration have higher wages post-migration than immigrants with lower levels of education and prior work (e.g., Ferrer et al. 2006; Ferrer & Riddell 2008).

This study uses the Annual Survey of Refugees (ASR) to examine how pre-resettlement education, employment, and English proficiency, predict measures of early resettlement, including employment, wages, English proficiency, and health status. Importantly, our analysis focuses on formal education at public and private institutions, and does not include education through religious or community organizations or other informal education. We use four years of the ASR data – 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022. Importantly, while the ASR is the most comprehensive national survey of refugees, it only includes limited questions on pre-resettlement experiences of refugees. Additionally, it does not include any information about the health status or access to health care prior to resettling in the United States.

## DATA AND METHODS

The ASR is a nationally-representative, cross-sectional survey of refugees arriving in U.S. the five years prior to survey administration who are ages 16 or older at the time of the survey. Sponsored by the Office of Refugee Resettlement, it covers a number of topics related to refugee well-being and participation in public benefits programs. Throughout this paper, we refer to the refugees in the ASR as “recently arrived refugees”, indicating those arriving within the past five years.

Starting in 2019, the survey includes several items on refugee experiences before resettling in the U.S. This study uses these three questions: educational attainment, self-identified English proficiency, and work experience prior to resettling. We compare those experiences to four measures on post-resettlement experience: employment status, hourly wages, English proficiency, and health status. As the ASR is cross-sectional, these questions are asked retrospectively at the time of survey administration. As a consequence, they may be subject to recall bias, which should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

We use the ASR from 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 for all measures except for health status, which does not appear in the 2019 survey. Our total sample size for most analyses is 6,038. The ASR is translated into 20 languages and administered by staff trained in cultural awareness. There may be important differences in linguistic and cultural interpretation of survey questions, particularly related to health and education.

All results in this paper are from bivariate analyses. This paper focuses on describing the relationships between pre-resettlement and post-resettlement. We do not establish a causal connection with pre-resettlement experiences – a number of factors confound the relationship between what refugees experienced prior to coming to the U.S. and how they fare in their first years. For example, refugees with college education coming to the U.S. are more likely to speak English, both of which predict economic success in the U.S. Refugees from certain countries, or emerging from certain conflicts, may be more or less prepared to find economic success in the U.S. To account for some of the potential confounding among different experiences, we conducted statistical regression analyses for all our key measures. In general, the regression estimates (not reported in this brief) were qualitatively similar to the bivariate results that we report. All analyses were conducted incorporating the complex survey design of the ASR, including weights and stratification. Results were assessed for statistical significance using the standard criteria of  $p < 0.05$ . Where relevant, 95 percent confidence intervals are shown.

## RESULTS

### Before coming to the U.S....

- **About four in ten refugees had at least a high school degree from a foreign country.**
- **Most did not speak English well or at all.**
- **Most were working.**

Table 1 shows estimates of the three pre-resettlement measures used in this study. Among refugees arriving since 2014, about 43 percent attained a high school degree or above from a foreign country prior to resettling. Just under 20 percent had no schooling. Most refugees arrived with limited English ability – half spoke no English, and a third did not speak English well. Nearly 60 percent of refugees were working prior to arriving in the U.S. Among refugees who reported not working prior to resettlement, we do not know if they were looking for work or were out of the labor force.

There is a strong relationship between pre-resettlement educational attainment and English ability, with refugees with college and high school degrees most likely to speak English well or very well. Educational attainment and English ability were not associated with working prior to arrival.

### Within five years after resettling in the U.S...

- **Most refugees had good health or better.**
- **Most improved their ability to speak English.**
- **Two-thirds of refugees age 16 or older were employed.**

Table 2 shows estimates of four post-resettlement outcomes. About one third of recently arrived refugees reported their health as “very good” or “excellent.” Refugees’ ability to speak English was generally greater after resettlement – prior to resettling, less than 20 percent spoke English well, while afterwards, over 40 percent did.

When looking at work patterns, 75.3 percent of recently arrived refugees were in the labor force—whether employed or unemployed—with two-thirds employed. For analyses of labor force outcomes, we exclude refugees who were not looking for work

**Table 1. Pre-Resettlement Measures for Recently Arrived Refugees, 2019-2022**

	Percent	95% CI
<i>Schooling completed</i>		
College or more	12.6	(11.4, 13.8)
High school	30.2	(28.4, 32.0)
Less than high school	29.5	(27.7, 31.2)
No schooling	19.3	(17.6, 21.0)
Other (religious, tech)	8.4	(7.2, 9.5)
<i>Speaks English...</i>		
Very well	2.8	(2.1, 3.4)
Well	13.9	(12.7, 15.2)
Not well	33.6	(31.7, 35.4)
Not at all	49.7	(47.6, 51.9)
<i>Work status</i>		
Working	59.9	(57.5, 62.2)
Not working	40.1	(38.1, 42.1)

95% confidence intervals shown in parentheses.

Source: Annual Survey of Refugees, 2019-2022. N=6,038.

**Table 2. Post-Resettlement Measures for Recently Arrived Refugees, 2019-2022**

	Percent	95% CI
<i>Personal health is...</i>		
Excellent	14.7	(13.1, 16.3)
Very good	18.8	(17.0, 20.5)
Good	32.0	(29.8, 34.1)
Fair	26.2	(24.2, 28.2)
Poor	8.4	(7.2, 9.5)
<i>Speaks English...</i>		
Very well	9.8	(8.7, 11.0)
Well	32.3	(30.5, 34.2)
Not well	39.9	(38.0, 41.9)
Not at all	17.9	(16.4, 19.3)
<i>Employment status*</i>		
In labor force	75.3	(71.9, 78.7)
<i>Employed</i>	67.1	(64.7, 69.6)
<i>Unemployed</i>	8.2	(7.2, 9.5)
Not in labor force	24.7	(23.0, 26.3)
<i>Hourly wage†</i>		
Average	\$13.62	(\$13.45, \$13.79)

95% confidence intervals shown in parentheses.

\*Employment status excludes refugees who were currently out of the labor force due to attending school.

†Hourly wage is in 2022 U.S. dollars and among those employed post-resettlement. Values trimmed to include middle 95%, ranging from \$7.07 to \$25.93.

Source: Annual Survey of Refugees, 2019-2022. N=6,038.

Personal health question not asked in 2019, N=4,532.

because they were currently attending school. Among those working, their average hourly wage was \$13.62.

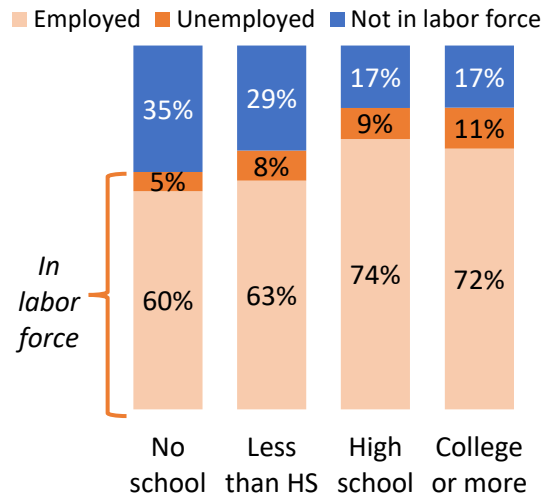
*Refugees with higher education prior to resettling have...*

- **Greater likelihood of participating in the labor force and to be employed.**
- **Higher hourly wages.**
- **Improved ability to speak English.**
- **No difference in health status.**

Recently arrived refugees with higher educational attainment prior to resettling generally had better employment and English ability outcomes than those with lower education. There was no difference in health outcomes based on refugees’ pre-resettlement education. When interpreting these results, it is important to consider differences in education systems among refugees based on country of origin. In particular, the “less than high school” and “high school” categories likely vary in significance across refugees in the ASR.

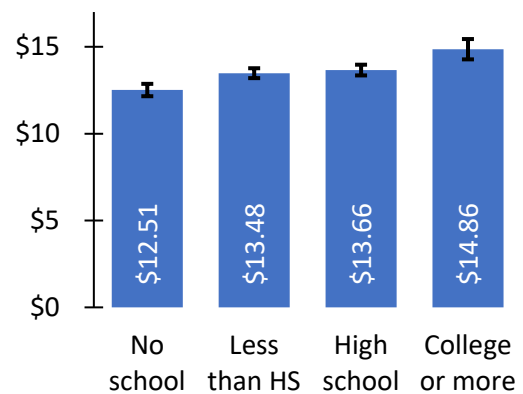
Figure 1 shows the relationship between pre-resettlement educational attainment and post-resettlement labor force participation and employment. Refugees with a college or high school degree had higher employment and labor force participation rates than those with lower pre-resettlement educational levels. Among those with a college degree, 72 percent were employed, and among those with a high school degree, 74 percent were employed. This compares to 63 percent and 60 percent for those without a high school degree and those with no schooling, respectively. More than eight in ten refugees with a high school degree or more were in the labor force, either working or looking for work. This compares to about seven in ten refugees without a high school degree.

**Figure 1. Post-Resettlement Labor Force Participation by Pre-Resettlement Education Attainment, 2019-2022**



Labor force participation excludes refugees who were currently out of the labor force due to attending school. Source: Annual Survey of Refugees, 2019-2022. N=5,857.

**Figure 2. Average Post-Resettlement Hourly Wage Among Employed by Pre-Resettlement Education Level, 2019-2022**



95% confidence intervals shown in black. Amounts in 2022 U.S. dollars among those employed post-resettlement. Source: Annual Survey of Refugees, 2019-2022. N=3,992.

Among recently arrived refugees that were employed, those with higher pre-resettlement education on average had higher wages than those with less education. As seen in Figure 2, refugees arriving with a college degree on average earned \$14.86 dollars per hour, higher than all other educational levels. Refugees arriving with no schooling earned the lowest, at \$12.51 dollars. Differences between those with high school degrees and less than high school were not statistically significant nor meaningful.

Refugees arriving with higher educational levels spoke English better in the five years after resettlement than those with lower education. As seen in Figure 3, 32 percent of refugees arriving with a college degree spoke English very well, and 14 percent of those with a high school degree spoke English very well. This is compared to less than five percent of refugees without a high school degree or with no schooling.

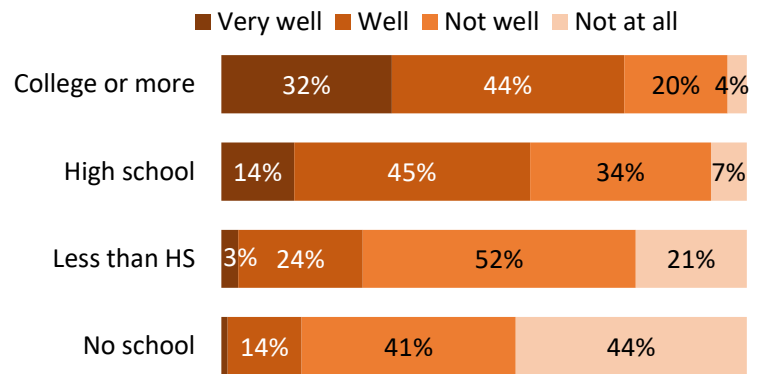
### Refugees who were working prior to resettling have...

- **Greater likelihood of participating in the labor force and to be employed.**
- **Similar hourly wages.**
- **Similar English-speaking ability.**
- **Slightly worse health status.**

Recently arrived refugees who were working before resettling in the U.S. had better employment than those not working before resettling. However, they experienced worse self-reported health. There was no statistically significant difference in the hourly wages or in ability to speak English between refugees who were or were not working prior to resettlement.

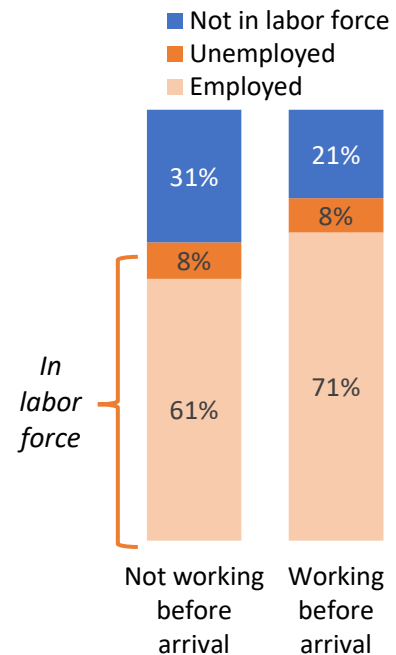
Figure 4 shows labor force participation rates after resettlement for recently arrived refugees, based on the work status prior to arrival. Nearly 80 percent of refugees who were working before arriving were in the labor force, and 71 percent were employed. In contrast, among refugees who were not working before arrival, about 70 percent were in

**Figure 3. Post-Resettlement Ability to Speak English by Pre-Resettlement Education Level, 2019-2022**



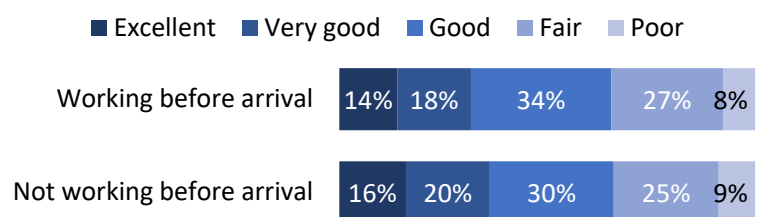
Source: Annual Survey of Refugees, 2019-2022. N=6,038.

**Figure 4. Post-Resettlement Labor Force Participation by Pre-Resettlement Working Status, 2019-2022**



Source: Annual Survey of Refugees, 2019-2022. N=6,038.

**Figure 5. Post-Resettlement Health Status by Pre-Resettlement Working Status, 2020-2022**



Source: Annual Survey of Refugees, 2020-2022. N=4,532.

the labor force and 61 percent were employed.

Figure 5 compares self-reported health status after resettlement, between recently arrived refugees who did and did not work prior to arrival. Refugees that did not work were more likely to say that had “Excellent” or “Very good” health compared to those that did work before arriving in the U.S.

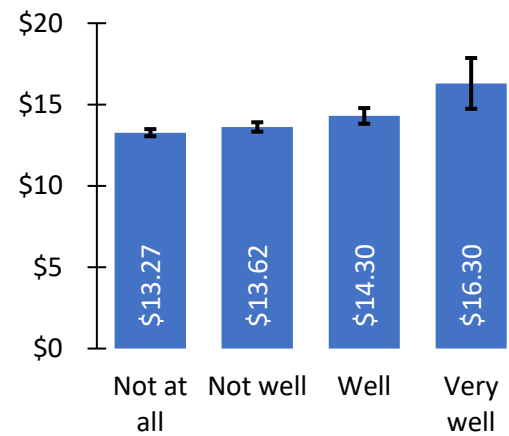
### Refugees who spoke English well before arriving have...

- **No difference in the likelihood of participating in the labor force.**
- **Higher hourly wages.**
- **Higher ability to speak English.**
- **Better health outcomes.**

Compared to recently arrived refugees who spoke English at a lower proficiency level, those who spoke English at a higher level before arriving in the U.S. had higher hourly wages, better health outcomes, and continued to have better English-speaking ability. On these measures, refugees that spoke English very well had the best outcomes – this group also represents a very small portion of the refugee population. There was no statistically significant difference in labor force participation or employment rates based on prior English ability. Less than three percent of refugees could speak English very well when they resettled in the U.S. Though small, this population is likely substantially different from other refugees – in fact, about half were college educated, much higher than refugees with less English ability. The ASR is limited in what it can tell us about this population, but they may have had experience living in an English-speaking country, have pre-existing strong ties to the U.S., or have more relevant work experience.

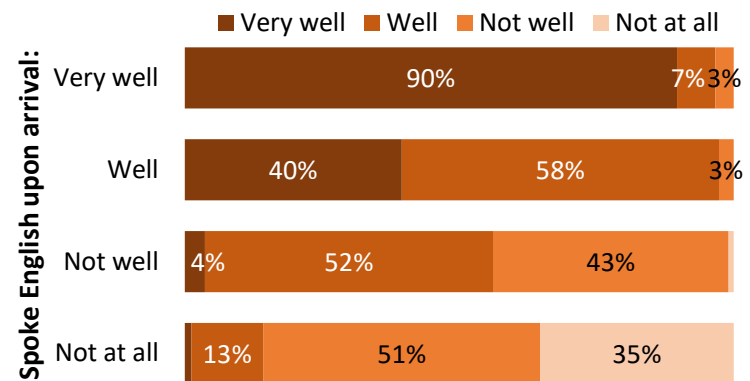
Figure 6 compares hourly wages among employed refugees, based on their ability to speak English before arriving in the U.S. In general, refugees who spoke English better upon arrival have higher hourly wages within their first years in the U.S. In particular, refugees who spoke English very well have the highest average hourly wage, at \$16.30. Refugees speaking English well had average wage at \$14.30 per hour, though it was not statistically significant from refugees speaking English not well (at \$13.62 per hour).

**Figure 6. Average Post-Resettlement Hourly Wage Among Employed by Pre-Resettlement English-Speaking Ability, 2019-2022**



95% confidence intervals shown in black. Amounts in 2022 U.S. dollars among those employed post-resettlement. Source: Annual Survey of Refugees, 2019-2022. N=3,992.

**Figure 7. Post-Resettlement English-Speaking Ability by Pre-Resettlement English-Speaking Ability, 2019-2022**



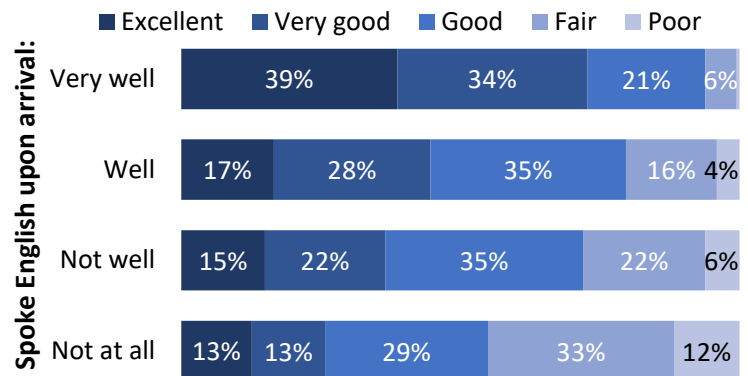
Note: English speaking ability was self-reported, and pre-resettlement ability was asked retrospectively at the time of the survey. Source: Annual Survey of Refugees, 2019-2022. N=6,038.



Figure 7 compares English-speaking ability after resettlement based on ability before arrival. In general, refugees at all English-speaking abilities prior to arriving improved their English ability. Not surprising, refugees who spoke English well or very well were much more likely to speak English very well after resettlement, compared to those arriving with less English ability.

Figure 8 examines recently arrived refugee self-reported health status based on refugees' ability to speak English before arrival. The small group of recently arrived refugees that spoke English very well have the best health across all groups. Among refugees that spoke English well before coming to the U.S., 45 percent had at least very good health, compared to 37 percent for refugees who spoke English not well. Refugees arriving with no English ability had the worst self-reported health, with 45 percent saying they had fair or poor health.

**Figure 8. Post-Resettlement Health Status by Pre-Resettlement English-Speaking Ability, 2020-2022**



Source: Annual Survey of Refugees, 2020-2022. N=4,532.

## DISCUSSION

This study of refugees finds that experiences prior to resettling predict measures of socioeconomic status within the first five years in the U.S. While not comprehensive measures of integration, they are suggestive of the economic integration of refugees in the U.S. In general, many, though not the majority, arrive with a high school degree or above from a foreign country. Most were working, and most didn't speak English well or at all. Within the first five years, most refugees reported having good health, two-thirds were employed, and most had improved their ability to speak English. These results suggest that within a short time period, most refugees are on track to integrate into the U.S., particularly important given that the U.S. does not select refugees based on their ability to be successful after resettlement.

When looking deeper into these overall numbers, we find great variation in these integration measures, likely in large part explained by refugee education and employment experiences prior to resettling. Understanding how pre-resettlement experiences influence refugee outcomes can help all partners in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program support refugee success in the American economy and society. This is particularly important as the refugee population changes over time, bringing different experiences to the U.S. This is the first study to use nationally representative data in the U.S. that explores pre-resettlement factors.

As we would expect, refugees that have higher educational attainment before arriving find greater early success on economic measures. They are more likely to be working, have higher wages, and speak English better. However, education systems vary widely around the world, and attaining a specific level of education may have different meanings based on refugees' country of origin. We therefore suggest interpreting results about education more generally, such as comparing those who report no schooling to those with more education, or comparing those with a college degree to those with less schooling. We also find that refugees that were working before arriving are more likely to be working within their first years in the U.S., and refugees that spoke English before arriving earned higher wages.

Our findings are mostly consistent with Lee and Jung (2024), which utilizes the 2019 ASR to study the pre-resettlement determinants of having any work experience in the U.S. post-resettlement—whether employed or not at the time of the survey. As in our study, they find that higher educational attainment and working pre-resettlement is associated with a higher likelihood of working in the U.S. However, they

do not find a relationship with pre-resettlement English proficiency and working post-resettlement (Lee and Jung 2024). Our study incorporates three additional years of the ASR, including the years of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, and examines participation in the labor force at the time of the survey, rather than having ever worked in the U.S. post-resettlement. These differences may explain the varying results for pre-resettlement English proficiency.

These findings suggest that policies and programs designed to support refugee resettlement should take into consideration the pre-resettlement experience of refugees. This information could help the design of approaches and interventions tailored to needs of refugees with different backgrounds. From a research and data perspective, more systematic data collection on pre-resettlement experience should be considered, beyond the items that are currently collected in the ASR. A wide range of experiences likely influence how well and how quickly refugees integrate. These could include experiences in refugee camps and in intermediary countries, adverse experiences that could impact behavioral health, cultural context, and more detailed information on employment and educational histories, to name a few.

While many of our findings about employment and English are expected, refugee health status is a complicated measure. We find that higher educated refugees did not have better overall health, refugees that worked prior to resettling had worse health, and refugees that spoke English better had better health. These findings should be interpreted with caution because we measure health status as a single self-reported question (“Would you say that in general your physical health is...”). Health is a complicated concept – entire surveys are designed to measure the various aspects of health. Self-reported health is also very subjective, and likely influenced by both linguistic and cultural interpretation. While not definitive, we report this measure in this study because, to our knowledge, no nationally representative information exists on refugee health and this measure can lay the groundwork for the knowledge base on this topic. We caution against using this information for any policy or programmatic action.

Many factors influence the socioeconomic integration of refugees in the U.S. This study focused on a few measures of pre-resettlement experiences. Other factors likely include the local context in which they are resettled. For example, the presence of other refugees from the same or similar cultures, or the strength of the network of service providers, likely influence resettlement outcomes. National and state policies towards refugees, and general and local economic conditions also likely play a role. Future research should examine the extent to which pre-resettlement experiences interact with these other factors. In addition, the relationship between pre-resettlement experience and post-resettlement outcomes may differ by other refugee characteristics, such as refugee age, gender, and country of origin.



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### SUGGESTED CITATION

Ghertner, Robin and Meredith Dost. "Refugees' Experience Prior to Resettlement Predicts Early Socioeconomic Integration in the U.S." Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, December 2024.

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