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Experts: Refugees in Boise, elsewhere settle fast, help communities

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Within six years of arriving in Boise, Iraqi refugee Salam Bunyan — forced from his Baghdad home for working alongside the U.S. military — successfully realized his version of the American dream by opening his own restaurant.

It was the culmination of 17 years of culinary experience earned in Iraq, a Jordan refugee camp and Boise itself, and he named the Middle Eastern eatery The Goodness Land.

His business was one of the more than a dozen that burned in a Labor Day weekend fire at the Boise International Market. Nonetheless, he's positive about leaping into entrepreneurship over the past year.

"Business is very good," Bunyan said. "I have big support in the community."

Bunyan's story is emblematic of the give-and-take many seeking asylum in the United States experience. Though the safety and financial support provided by their new home grants refugees the opportunity to build new lives, the communities in which they are resettled often find themselves reaping the economic benefits that come with an expanded tax base, supplemented workforce and greater diversity of businesses.

"Refugees over time tend to contribute to growth and economic vitality in any community, and we certainly feel that in Boise," said Patty Haller, assistant director of the Idaho Office for Refugees. "Most Boiseans see refugees in our community as a very positive influence."

The national debate over admitting Syrian refugees is being heard in Idaho, too, with dueling rallies and political efforts to slow or halt resettlement. But many economists and refugee advocates across the nation fear that public officials are missing a salient point: Although refugees require cash assistance to get them on their feet, their rapid integration into the workplace and atypical upward mobility have been shown to boost GDP growth and employment rates for the places that offer them legal residence.

"Even though initially they get public support, in most cases they lose that and rely quickly on work," said Randy Capps, director of research for U.S. programs at the Migration Policy Institute. "It's a strength of the U.S. system and of the economy."

CONTRIBUTIONS

Through rapid integration into the workforce, refugees begin contributing to the economy faster than any other class of immigrant. About 80 percent of refugees find a job within their first few months in the country, said Noah Gottschalk, senior policy adviser for Oxfam.

This is mostly thanks to the refugee resettlement agencies handling their cases, which make it a point to find each new arrival employment within 90 days.

“Because of their assistance in that process, they’re very quickly able to become productive members of society contributing back into the economy,” Gottschalk said.

The paychecks earned in these first months of employment mean a portion of their salary is paid in taxes, contributing to the tax base that helped get refugees on their feet.

Zeze Rwasama, director of the College of Southern Idaho’s Refugee Center, cites an example of a refugee who found work at a local dairy plant. Although the agency spent \$2,600 to help resettle him, the man’s annual salary of \$26,000 meant he paid \$4,800 in taxes in that first year alone.

“Looking at how much money we spend resettling a refugee and how much they pay into the tax fund, it’s not comparable,” Rwasama said. “If refugees weren’t self-sufficient, that would be a problem, but that’s not what’s happening.”

According to a study by Chmura Economics & Analytics that focused on Cleveland, Ohio, refugee service organizations spent \$4.8 million resettling refugees in that region in 2012. That number was overshadowed by the economic impact those same refugees were calculated to have on the area — about \$48 million.

RELATIVE PROSPERITY

This positive impact is likely due to the fact that once they’re financially stable, refugees enjoy a level of prosperity unmatched by that of other immigrant classes.

In a 2004 study, Kalena Cortes, then a postdoctoral fellow at Princeton University, found that over the course of a decade, refugees had earned 20 percent more, worked 4 percent more hours and improved their English skills by 11 percent more than their economic migrant counterparts.

This discrepancy is likely the result of a refugee’s unique life experiences, said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst for the Cato Institute in Washington. Having been denied every other option available to them, he said, those who seek asylum are often more than ready to throw themselves headlong into opportunities.

“Refugees are more likely to work, more likely to work more hours and more likely to see poverty reduction than similarly skilled Americans,” Nowrasteh said. “They’re more upwardly mobile than other immigrants or natives.”

THE SYRIAN ADVANTAGE

Syrian refugees might be even better equipped to make that investment than others, data show. Hailing from a country with relatively high education rates, Syrians are more likely than other immigrants to have high school, college and graduate degrees, Capps said.

“Prior to the war, Syria had high levels of education, which shows in the population of Syrian immigrants residing in the U.S. now,” Capps said. “We don’t expect the profile of a Syrian refugee to be any different.”

Forty percent of Syrian immigrants hold a college degree, while 30 percent of immigrants overall do, Capps said.

Forty-nine percent of Syrian immigrants hold professional jobs, while foreign-born Americans overall hold 38 percent.

LOOKING OVERSEAS

For proof, experts invite Americans to look elsewhere. Although the United States has accepted only a trickle of Syrian refugees — less than 2,000 so far, too small a percentage of the population to draw conclusions at home — European countries who have welcomed higher numbers have already seen economic impacts.

The European Commission’s fall economic forecasts, for example, calculate that the 3 million refugee arrivals expected before the end of 2016 will produce increases in annual GDP growth ranging from 0.2 to 0.5 percent, while also serving to “translate into additional employment.”

This research is perhaps illustrated best in Turkey, where over 1.8 million Syrians have been resettled already. As a result, the World Bank has revealed the creation of new, higher-wage jobs that allowed for the “occasional upgrading of Turkish workers.”

“What’s happening in Turkey ... is key to fleshing out what’s going to happen in the United States,” Nowrasteh said. “The wages of many mid- and high-skilled Turkish workers were pushed up because the Syrians occupied the jobs at the bottom of the labor market.”

BACK TO BOISE

Despite losing his restaurant at the Boise International Market, Bunyan is optimistic, saving money and looking for a new location.

He credits his ability to do so to the local community.

“Every day, people call me and tell me they want to do anything they can to help,” Bunyan said. “I don’t see anyone who doesn’t help me.”