

Taking in refugees is good for America

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We all intuitively understand that if your friend loses his house in a hurricane, the right thing to do is to invite him to stay with you. But what if 10 of your friends lose their houses? You might call on your other friends to help with the cost of hotel rooms. And if you don't actually know the unfortunate souls who lost it all? You might still lend a hand through the many private charities that assist those in distress.

The same philosophy should apply today, as the American people decide whether to accept a portion of the estimated 4.2 million Syrian refugees currently trying to escape their civil war-torn nation. And yet resistance to the idea is strong.

In 2015, the United States admitted 70,000 refugees combined from countries such as Iraq, Iran, China and Indonesia. For 2016, President Barack Obama proposed increasing the ceiling to 85,000 — higher than at any time since he took office, but many fewer than the 207,116 refugees — mostly from Asia — that we welcomed into the country in 1980.

Obama also requested that 10,000 refugees from Syria be accepted — a number that barely begins to address the humanitarian needs of the millions displaced by war. It also pales in comparison to the 1.1 million Syrian refugees who have found a home in Lebanon and the 815,000 allowed to resettle in Turkey. Unfortunately, with the rise of radical Islamism and recent terrorist attacks in countries such as France and the United States, many Americans (and American presidential candidates) are concerned about the national security implications of allowing in any refugees from that region.

Protecting U.S. citizens is obviously a priority, and the government has a responsibility to vet refugees before letting them settle here. But this isn't as easy as it sounds, because reliable background checks may be hard to obtain and people who have fled their homes may have a difficult time providing verifiable proof of their identities.

Those difficulties shouldn't be deal breakers, however. Arguably, no act of terrorism has been committed in the last 40 years by refugees in the United States (though a tiny number of refugees have been arrested on terrorism-related charges, and depending on the precise definition of refugees used, the Boston Marathon bombing or other incidents may count). And the long wait time and high cost of entering the country as a refugee make that an extremely inefficient way for terrorists to get in.

Meanwhile, countries that refuse entry to refugees — forcing them to reside in terrible living conditions in camps near the theater of conflict — may inadvertently be facilitating recruitment

by extremist groups. A 2013 study in the journal *International Interactions* shows that when large numbers of refugees are placed in countries that have historically had tensions with their country of origin, it increases the risk of terrorism. Georgetown University's Anne Speckhard, who studies terrorist psychology, said: "Experience from many conflict zones teaches us that the longer these refugees are left to languish in despair in camps, the more prone they become to radicalization." In other words, there are serious security downsides to not accepting refugees.

Resettlement in the United States is only the first step in the process, of course; assimilation is also important. Thankfully, past efforts on this front have met with positive results. "Refugees adapt quickly to the U.S. economy, complement existing workers and settle rapidly into their new homes," argued Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration specialist at the Cato Institute.

Because refugees cannot return to their homeland as many economic migrants do, Nowrasteh explained, they tend to make serious long-term commitments to learning English and other relevant skills. The data confirm this point: A paper by Kalena E. Cortes, published in *The Review of Economics and Statistics* in May 2004, looked at how implicit differences in the time horizons of refugees and economic immigrants affected subsequent human capital investments. She found that a decade after their arrival, refugees who settled here between 1975 and 1980 earned 20 percent more in wages, worked 4 percent more hours, and had improved their English skills 11 percent more.

"Unlike other immigrants, refugees do have immediate access to some welfare programs," Nowrasteh added, "but they generally leave them rapidly and are more likely to enter the workforce than natives or other immigrants." This is a good thing, because the availability of welfare doesn't do much to help assimilation and may even hinder refugees' well-being.

A 2000 paper by Andrey Vinokurov, Dina Birman and Edison Trickett in *International Migration Review* looked at the psychological impact of working on 206 (mostly Jewish) Soviet refugees in the United States. It compared Russians who settled in Brighton Beach in Brooklyn to those who settled in the Washington, D.C., area.

The New York refugees had more access to welfare. However, the data show that those in the D.C. area were more satisfied with their lives and more upwardly mobile. The more the job matched a refugee's original skills, the more positive the impact. There was no real difference on the level of acculturation.

But what about the impact of these new entrants on Americans? Economists have shown that immigrants generally increase the host country's overall gross domestic product (GDP). The result on GDP per capita is a source of debate, but the literature suggests that the effect depends on the relative skill set of refugees compared to the native population. Highly skilled refugees would add much more to the average per-person income than low-skilled ones. But does that mean that low-skilled refugees have a negative impact?

That doesn't seem to be the case. In a well-known 1990 paper, economist David Card looked at the impact on the Miami economy of 125,000 Cuban refugees who arrived during the Mariel boatlift crisis. Although the immigrants increased Miami's labor force by 7 percent — and were concentrated in less-skilled occupations — contrary to people's fears, the influx had virtually no

effect on the wages or unemployment rates of the city's less-skilled workers, even among previous Cuban immigrants.

Low-skilled refugees, like other immigrants, tend to boost the employment opportunities of native workers, either by providing cheap child care services that enable women to increase their labor force participation or by pushing native workers to pursue more complex occupations and higher wages. A 2013 National Bureau of Economic Research working paper by Mette Foged and Giovanni Peri, for instance, looked at the effect on Danish workers of a large inflow of non-European refugees between 1991 and 2008. It found real positive wage effects set in after five to six years, as the rest of the economy adjusted to the increase in workers, and the native laborers moved into more complex jobs. The flexibility of the Danish labor market played to everyone's favor, much as the strong economy in the U.S. in the 1980s did.

Assuming these results hold true today, accepting more refugees is not just the moral thing to do. It's in everyone's best interest.