



Highlights of [GAO-12-729](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2011, the United States admitted more than 56,000 refugees under its refugee resettlement program. Upon entry, a network of private, nonprofit voluntary agencies (voluntary agencies) selects the communities where refugees will live. The Department of State's PRM and the Department of Health and Human Services' ORR provide funding to help refugees settle in their communities and obtain employment and monitor implementation of the program. Congress has begun to reexamine the refugee resettlement program, and GAO was asked to examine (1) the factors resettlement agencies consider when determining where refugees are initially placed; (2) the effects refugees have on their communities; (3) how federal agencies ensure program effectiveness and integrity; and (4) what is known about the integration of refugees. GAO reviewed agency guidance, monitoring protocols, reports, and studies; conducted a literature review; reviewed and analyzed relevant federal and state laws and regulations; and met with federal and state officials, voluntary agency staff, and local stakeholders in eight selected communities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes several recommendations to the Secretaries of State and Health and Human Services to improve refugee assistance programs in the United States. HHS and State generally concurred with the recommendations and each identified efforts they have under way or plan to undertake to address them.

View [GAO-12-729](#). For more information, contact Kay Brown at (202) 512-7215 or brownke@gao.gov.

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REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

Greater Consultation with Community Stakeholders Could Strengthen Program

What GAO Found

Voluntary agencies consider various factors when determining where refugees will be placed, but few agencies we visited consulted relevant local stakeholders, which posed challenges for service providers. When deciding how many refugees to place in each community, some voluntary agencies prioritize local agency capacity, such as staffing levels, while others emphasize community capacity, such as housing availability. Although the Immigration and Nationality Act states that it is the intent of Congress for voluntary agencies to work closely with state and local stakeholders when making these decisions, the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) offers limited guidance on how this should occur. Some communities GAO visited had developed formal processes for obtaining stakeholder input after receiving an overwhelming number of refugees, but most had not, which made it difficult for health care providers and school systems to prepare for and properly serve refugees.

State and local stakeholders reported that refugees bring cultural diversity and stimulate economic development, but serving refugees can stretch local resources, including safety net services. In addition, refugee students can negatively affect performance outcomes for school districts because they often have limited English proficiency. Furthermore, some refugees choose to relocate after their initial placement, and this secondary migration may stretch communities that do not have adequate resources to serve them. In fact, capacity challenges have led some communities to request restrictions or temporary moratoriums on resettlement.

PRM and the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) monitor their refugee assistance programs, but weaknesses in performance measurement may hinder effectiveness. Although refugees are eligible for ORR services for up to 5 years, the outcome data that ORR collects focuses on shorter-term employment outcomes. ORR officials said that their performance measurement reflects the goals outlined by the Immigration and Nationality Act—to help refugees achieve economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible. However, the focus on rapid employment makes it difficult to provide services that may increase refugees' incomes, such as helping them obtain credentials to practice their professions in the United States.

Little is known about the extent of refugee integration into U.S. communities, but research offers a framework for measuring and facilitating integration. PRM and ORR both promote refugee integration, but neither agency currently measures integration as a program outcome. While integration is part of ORR's mission, ORR officials said one of the reasons they have not measured it is that there is no clear definition of integration. In addition, research on refugee resettlement does not offer an overall assessment of how well refugees have integrated into the United States. Most of the 13 studies GAO reviewed were limited in scope and focused on particular refugee groups in specific geographic locations. However, these studies identified a variety of indicators that can be used to assess integration as well as factors that can facilitate integration, such as English language acquisition, employment, and social support from other refugees. Despite limited national information, some U.S. communities have developed formal plans for refugee integration.