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Research Article

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Promoters and barriers to work: a comparative study of refugees versus immigrants in the United States

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Abstract

Background: Immigrants in general and refugees in specific are at risk for unemployment with detrimental effects on health and social well-being. Prior work has identified a series of barriers preventing employment among immigrants and refugees. However, these studies either fail to have a comparison group, or it is improper. The objective of this study is to compare unemployment determinants among culturally comparable Iraqi immigrants and refugees.

Method: A convenience sample of Iraqis residing in Michigan, who came to US after 2003, were surveyed covering socio-demographic aspects, prior and current job history, perceived barriers and facilitators to get a job, discrimination, and health.

Results: results show that refugees were twice as likely to be unemployed. Lack of language skills was a bigger barrier among refugees. The results indicate that immigrants are more successful than refugees in securing a job, even after taking their pre-migration and professional experiences into consideration.

Conclusion: This comparative study showed that refugees were more likely to have a difficult time in successfully finding a job. More attention is needed to help minimize the barriers that refugees face in the employment process**.**

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INTRODUCTION

According to both the United Nations and US government, a refugee is defined as a person who resides outside their place of birth and is unable to return to their place of birth due to racial, ethnic or religious persecution [1]. An immigrant, on the other hand, chooses to leave his or her country, often for economic reasons, and under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA),they are granted legal immigrant status for three primary reasons: for family reunification, to provide a work force as U.S. employees, and for humanitarian concerns[2].

A refugee, like many people in the United States, must find employment enable to afford a decent living[3,4].

However, in addition to the employment troubles the United States is currently facing, refugees have added difficulties in finding jobs [3-6, 8] Prior research has shown that new refugees fall into one of two categories when seeking a professional vocation: either attain the same profession they held in their

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previous country of residence, or they are forced to work a low paying job. Many refuges, however, remain unemployed upon their migration to the US [4-8].Several studies point out that language proficiency plays a critical role in the ability of refugees to attain a job. Due to the fact that many of them were not raised in the United States and have not been introduced to the English language well enough to communicate fluently, many refugees are having difficulties in obtaining a job. One of the top qualifications that employers seek is someone who masters the English language. A good background in English grammar and spelling is required in many jobs such as engineering, medicine, and teaching. It takes years of practice and schooling enable to fully master the English language. Unfortunately, refugees, specifically adults well past the grammar learning stag[8-10].The difficult process of recertification of credentials and degrees was another stumbling block that decreased a refugee's chance of obtaining a job[8,11-14].Refugees escape their place of birth in hope of escaping discrimination. Unfortunately, however, it seems that they also faced discrimination in the new country where they sought refuge. This discrimination played a role in their ability to gain an occupation, In fact, research has shown that discrimination proved to play a big role in affecting a refugee's chance of obtaining employment [5, 15-20] Strand reported that length of residence played a role in finding a job [3].

The study also showed that increased time will result in a higher utilization of programs, adaptation of the new culture, and increased knowledge of the labor market. This is in contrast to the study conducted by Krahn, which identified that factors such as language, work experience, and credential recognition to be the most important when finding a new job[8]. Having connections (networking) with people living in a culturally similar immigrant community who could potentially provide the refugee with a job could also promote employment [4-6] Other studies show that poor mental health is detrimental for many refugees in finding and maintaining a job in the new country [5, 6] Having a job is considered for many refugees as a source of satisfaction [5]. Physical problems (i.e. war injuries) could also adversely impact on their employability in the new country [5-20] Other interesting factors discussed are the individual's personality as well as work ethic, and determination [4, 5, 21] A major limitation of studies to date is the lack of either a comparison group of other immigrants or the comparison group consists of culturally and ethnically different immigrants. Some studies discussed above even compare refugees' job experiences with that of host country residents, clearly raising the concern for serious confounders.
Since 2003, Iraqi refugees were ranked among one of the world's highest number of refugees.

Data indicates that more than two million Iraqis have left Iraq since 2003[22]. History shows that U.S. was able to overcome the problems generated by a growing number of refugee influx, notably when 1,330,000 Indochinese refugees entered the US in the spring of 1975[4].Other countries have had similar experiences particularly in Canada, United Kingdom and Australia [6, 8, 19]. But refugees are not the only ones who are leaving their home country. The second group, immigrants are also leaving, possibly for the same reasons as the refugees, or, for different reasons. As these groups matriculate into their respective new countries, they will be differentiated based on their legal status. There is insufficient research comparing how these two groups fair in terms of employment, and whether obstacles and facilitators for employment differ between the two groups. The purpose of this paper is to explore this unknown, comparing culturally similar refugees and immigrant groups in terms of employment. Our hypothesis concludes that if given equal educational attainment, there would not be any observed difference between refugees and immigrant from Iraq. We further hypothesized that refugees, due to their higher level of assumed trauma exposure, would perceive more barriers to employment as compared to immigrants.

METHODS

Information about the study was announced on the local radio, after receiving approval from Wayne State University's Human Investigation Committee [Protocol # 0904007060]. One of the authors (H.J.) used the radio to reach out to the target audience, and then to contact and survey them either directly or by a phone number, which was provided by the surveyor. The information about the study was also disseminated to churches, mosques, party stores, gas stations, Arabic restaurants and other areas that Iraqi people usually attend, located in three Southeast Michigan counties (Wayne, Macomb, and Oakland).

Several Iraqi health care professionals, Iraqi graduated physicians, participated in the research project to conduct interviews on Iraqi refugees and immigrants. The volunteers were required to take a four hour training course on data collection. They were also responsible for contacting potential Iraqi participants to obtain further information and to secure consent. The Metropolitan Detroit area houses the largest population of Iraqis in the United States.

Information regarding the name and address of the participants were not collected. However, the participants were required to write their first and last initials and their respective zip code to avoid duplication of the survey. The volunteer team was able to collect 396 surveys within a three month period (May-July, 2009). The survey included a range of questions regarding age, gender, health, and the occupation held before (Iraq) and after (Michigan) the migration process. The survey also questioned what the participant believed were factors involved in securing a job. A researcher reviewed the data to identify more recently immigrated persons, after 2003, in order not to work with a sample that had been in the United States for too long, irrespective of their legal status. We excluded participants (n=166) who entered the U.S. before 2003, those who were older than 65 years of age (n=11), and disabled (n=3). The remaining participants (n=218) represented the final study population. Some of the variables, e.g. number of years in the U.S., were dichotomized into those who arrived between 2003 to 2007 and 2008 to 2009, respectively. The reason for choosing 2008 as the cut-off point was because it marked the initiation of the global financial crisis. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 17.0. Chi-square tests, and Student's t-test, respectively, were used to compare differences in discrete and continuous variables between refugees and immigrants. Logistic regression was used to estimate the predictive value of various promoters and barriers between refugees and immigrants. We used logistic regression to predict dichotomous outcomes (e.g., employed vs. unemployed) after adjusting for pertinent socioeconomic factors, e.g., gender, as reported in the logistic regression models. Significance was set to a two-tailed p-value of <.05.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows demographic characteristics of both groups (refugees and immigrants). No significant differences between the two groups were found with respect to age, gender and education at attainment. There was, however, a significant difference between the two groups in terms of the period of residence in the U.S. Mean (±SD) for refugees was 1.86 (±1.31) years vs. immigrants 3.43 (±1.74). Furthermore, among refugees, 65.1 % were unemployed as compared to 39.9% of immigrants. Refugees were twice as likely to be unemployed compared to immigrants (OR 2.08; 95% C.I. 1.07-4.00), adjusting for age, gender and level of education. There were no correlations between immigration status and period of residency in terms of employment. Table 2 shows that before they came to America, most of the participants worked as professionals in Iraq. After immigrating to the US, refugees were less likely to secure a professional job than immigrants. Table 3 shows the results of the self-reported barriers to finding a job. There were significant differences between refugees and immigrant in terms of: language, lack of US professional knowledge, and health. Refugees were more likely to report poor language skills as a barrier to securing work as compared to immigrants (OR 3.61; 95%C.I. 1.21-10.73). There were no significant differences between the two groups in terms of having financial support or their ability to access professional training in order to help them find a job. As shown in table 4, refugees and immigrants rated their own health similarly. Immigrants were four times more likely to report that they enjoyed their jobs as compared to refugees (OR 3.72; 95% C.I., 1.38-10.06). Participants who worked as professionals, regardless of immigration status, were 18 times more likely to enjoy their work as compared to those who worked in non-professional jobs (OR 18.19; 95% C.I., 2.26-146.70). The results of this finding were taken after adjusting for age, gender and level of education.

Variable	Refugees (n=160)	Immigrant (n=58)	Total (n=218)
Tears in U.S. / Mean (±Std) ***	1.86 (±1.31)	3.43 (±1.74)	2.28 (±1.59)
Age / Mean (±Std) age *	41.85 (±9.72)	43.84 (±11.23)	42.38 (±10.14)
	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
Years arrived U.S. ***			
2003-2007	70 (43.8)	48 (82.8)	118 (54.1)
2008-2009	90 (56.3)	10 (17.2)	100 (45.9)
Gender			
Female	62 (61.3)	27 (53.4)	89 (59.2)
Male	98 (38.7)	31 (46.6)	129 (40.8)
Education *			
Bachelor's	103 (64.4)	30 (51.7)	133 (61.0)
MD, DDS, Pharmacy /	45 (28.1)	23 (39.7)	68 (31.2)
Master / Ph.D.	12 (7.5)	5 (8.6)	17 (7.8)
Work in U.S. / Michigan ***			
Unemployed	104 (65.0)	23 (39.7)	127 (58.3)
Non-Profession	55 (34.4)	24 (41.4)	79 (36.2)
Profession	1 (0.6)	11 (19.0)	12 (5.5)
* P = n.s. ; *** P < 0.001			
Likelihood of Unemployed	Sig.	Odds Ratios	95% C.I.
			Lower-Upper
Less than 2 years in U.S.	0.002	0.381	0.21-0.69
Refugees vs. Immigrant	0.029	2.08	1.08-4.00

Table 1. Demography of Iraqi participants by legal status.
Logistic regression, adjusting for age, gender &education. There was no interaction between employment status and length of stay in U.S.

Work Status	Refugees (n=160)	Immigrants (n=58)	Total (n=218)
	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
Work in Iraq (P = n.s.)			
Non Professional Job	19 (11.9)	4 (6.9)	23 (10.6)
Professional Job	141 (88.1)	54 (93.1)	195 (89.4)
Work in U.S. / Michigan (P <0.001)			
Non Professional Job	55 (34.4)	24 (41.4)	79 (36.2)
Unemployed	104 (65.0)	23 (39.7)	127 (58.3)
Professional Job	1 (0.6)	11 (19.0)	12 (5.5)

Table 2. Work status of Iraqi participants before and after immigrant to U.S. by legal status.

Self reported variable	Refugees	Immigrants	Total
	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
Major barriers to get employment			
No Job available *	57 (37.0)	21 (38.2)	78 (37.3)
Language ***	34 (22.1)	4 (7.3)	38 (18.2)
Lack of professional knowledge **	21 (13.6)	16 (29.1)	37 (17.7)
Financial support for training / family *	26 (16.9)	7 (12.7)	33 (15.8)
Discrimination *	11 (7.1)	7 (2.7)	18 (8.6)
Poor health **	5 (3.2)		5 (2.4)
Factor helping to get employment			
Have Experience *	32 (86.5)	9 (32.1)	41 (63.1)
Enter training course *	3 (8.1)	11 (39.3)	14 (21.5)
Different support * (E.g. family)	2 (5.4)	8 (28.6)	10 (15.4)
* P = n.s. ; ** P < 0.02 ; *** P < 0.003			
Likelihood of language barrier	Sig.	Odds Ratios	95% C.I. for OR
			Lower-Upper
Refugees Vs Immigrant	0.021	3.612	1.21-10.71

Table 3. Major reported barriers or factors help to finding a job by legal status of Iraqi participants
Logistic regression, adjusting for age, gender, education, employment status, and length of stay in the U.S.

Self Report	Refugees	Immigrant	Total
	No. (%)	No. (%)	No. (%)
Enjoyment of work (P < 0.001)			
Strongly agree	1(1.8)	12(34.3)	13(14.4)
Agree	12(21.8)	10(28.6)	22(24.4)
Disagree	29(52.7)	10(28.6)	39(43.3)
Strongly disagree	13(23.6)	3(8.6)	16(17.8)
Self Rated Health (P = n.s)			
Excellent	30(19.1)	15(25.9)	45(20.9)
Very good	50(31.8)	12(20.7)	62(28.8)
Good	51(32.5)	18(31)	69(32.1)
Bad	22(14)	13(32.4)	35(16.3)
Very Bad	4(2.5)		4(1.9)
Likelihood Job enjoyment	Sig.	Odds Ratios	95% C.I. for OR
			Lower-Upper
Profession Vs Non profession	0.004	18.2	2.26-146.70
Immigrants vs. refugees	0.001	3.7	1.37-10.06

Table 4. Job satisfaction and self-rated health by legal status of Iraqis.
Logistic regression, adjusting for age, gender, education, and length of stay in the U.S.

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that immigrants were substantially more successful than refugees in securing a job. Moreover, immigrants were more likely to secure a job in accordance with their pre-migration and professional experience. Using logistic regression, control for age, gender, and level of education, refugees were also less likely to be satisfied with their job. Professionals in general, however, were more satisfied with their US jobs as compared to non-professionals. This is another consequence of being underemployed. Not only does society lack optimal return of human capital, it also results in more disenfranchised and dissatisfied immigrants. Refugees, despite their prior academic and professional achievements, had difficulties finding a matching job in the U.S. For example, none of the refugees holding doctoral degrees in medicine, pharmacy, or dentistry were able to find matching jobs in Michigan after an average of 1.8 years in the United States. In contrast, immigrants were substantially more successful in attaining the same job as the one they previously held back in their home country. Although the study identified numerous hindering factors for the refugees to acquire a job as compared to immigrant, those of primary concern include: language skills, lack of US professional knowledge, and health.

Additional research is needed to further elucidate the underlying mechanisms for these factors contributing to the higher unemployment rate among culturally and skills-based comparable refugees. Furthermore, in contrast to our hypothesis, there were no significant differences in job promoting factors between refugees and immigrants. The study thus suggests that more attention should be directed towards identifying barrier to securing work among refugees and not merely offering policy that focuses on job promotion. The latter strategy seems to be relevant for refugees and immigrants alike. Legal status appears to be a critical factor in the process of finding a job. This may be due to employers favoring an individual with regular immigrant status, or because immigrants are better prepared than refugees [4-6]. Immigrants clearly know well in advance which country they are relocating to, the steps that need to be taken in able to find a job, and the requirements they must meet enable to secure their job in the future. Refugees, on the other hand, are typically unaware of where they are moving to, and, as a result, are ill prepared [4-6].This in fact may be the prime reason for the discrepancy between the success of refugees and immigrants. Even after adjusting for immigration status, age, gender, and education, those that had been in the US for 2 years or less were substantially less likely to have secured a job. This finding signifies the importance of early and proactive job and language training programs. It might be that immigrants, after a couple of years settling in, lose self-esteem and motivation, and consequently stop looking for a job. Our findings contrast to some earlier studies suggesting that length of stay in the new country is directly related to likelihood of employment [3], although other research supports our findings [8].Neither group believed that their inability to find a job was due to poor health or discriminatory reasons. This is in contrast to some other studies [5, 6, 8, 20]. Poor health was discussed ,as mentioned, to be a barrier to refugees' employment[5,6,20].Refugees and immigrants alike strongly believe that having relevant labor market experiences in the United States were the most important factors in getting a job. Enrolling in training courses or making use of other support services did not appear to be helpful [4]. Immigrants reported that they were more satisfied with the jobs they held as compared to refugees. More immigrants were able to secure the same advanced jobs as they had held back home. For refugees, only 1 out of the 160 were able to successfully secure the same job as held back home, which might explain why refugees were substantially less satisfied with their current jobs[4]. In line with our findings, legal residence has been discussed in the literature as an important job promoting factor [4-6]. This factor plays a minor role in our study because all of our participants have legal residence in the United States. Language proficiency has also been identified as a critical factor for securing a job [8-10].A much larger percentage of refugees in the current study reported that inadequate language skills were one of the main barriers. Some of our results do not support previously reported findings. As mentioned, employment plays a vital role in the wellbeing of an individual. Securing a job is the primary goal for immigrants and refugees alike Because of the rate of unemployment; we predicted that it would produce negative health effects, which was not the case, at least not over the short run. We specifically hypothesized that refugees would relate a great deal of their barriers to health issues, due to a multitude of reasons already mentioned in literature [5]. Overall, health was the least frequently reported barrier regardless of immigration status. Specific U.S

professional knowledge has been considered in the literature as a powerful promoter of job success, but this finding was not substantiated in the current study [4-6].The immigrants reported a much lower percentage of U.S. professional knowledge than refugees, but still were more successful. Early integration of refugees into the American society may also play an important role in improving language skills and improvement of socioeconomic status. If the newcomers integrate faster and more easily into the American culture, there will be measurable benefits to both the receiving country's social and economic structure and to the immigrants themselves [23] Refugees cannot expect full participation in the life of a new country if they are not recognized as a group with specific cultural and ethnic experiences and contributions. The analysis shows that threat to minority groups' identity is the greatest obstacle to social harmony [23] Social harmony is best achieved by maintaining, not weakening, subgroup identity [23].

Our results on discrimination does not support the notion that overt, or refugee-perceived discrimination, would contribute to refugees' higher unemployment [5, 8, 15, 20]. Overall, discrimination was the 2nd lowest barrier listed by the participants.
Social networks may also provide information on alternatives to employment whichmay in fact facilitate economic assimilation. Bertrand found that larger communities who use welfare extensively encourage welfare usage among the new comers[24].Montgomery's seminal theoretical work emphasizes the role of social networks in helping to overcome the problem of the lack of personal and professional references enable to resolve any doubts about unemployed individuals' capabilities. If members of a social network have better information about other members' credentials, then firms will use informal employee referrals to make hiring decisions [25].

We cannot assess precisely the effect of social networks on this population compared with other populations on the basis of the current study. However data from this study indicates that 28.6% of the immigrants included in this survey received some kind of support, especially family support, to find a job compared with 5.4% of the refugees. Thus, in conclusion, social networks seem to play an effective role in labor decision making of recently arrived refugees and immigrants.

Study limitation

Several study limitations are observed. First and foremost, is the use of convenience sampling. It is not clear if the data is representative of refugee and immigrant populations in general. Our results were based on a cross-sectional study, which limits our research. Finally, future studies need to cover a larger area of possible explanatory variables behind these findings.

Conclusion and Recommendation:

This comparative study showed that refugees were more likely to have a difficult time in successfully finding a job. More attention is needed to help minimize the barriers that refugees face in the employment process.

Service programs that expose refugees to the work force and provide "shadowing" opportunities in area of interest could prove to be very effective[15-19]. Such services would play a crucial role in informing newcomers about what they need to do to strengthen their likelihood of successfully competing for a job. Such programs could also implement other services like writing an effective resume, strengthening interviewing skills, and much more [15-19].

Finally, volunteering in the work force has been reported to be effective [8]. At the same time, policy and programs need to be adapted to the current economic situation with an overall high unemployment rate for both US born and immigrants. More research is needed in this area as both refugees and immigrants could play an important role in the economic development of countries, especially when they are highly educated.

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