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Beyond “Temporary Shelter”:
A Case Study of Karen Refugee Resettlement
in St. Paul, Minnesota

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Since 2005, refugees from Burma residing in the nine camps on the Thai–Burma border have been eligible for third country resettlement. Approximately 75% of the refugees who have departed from the border camps have been resettled in the United States, including the majority of the largest ethnic group among the refugees, the Karen. This case study of the Karen refugee community in St. Paul, Minnesota supported the conclusion that although resettlement has yet to prove its effectiveness in resolving the refugee situation in Thailand in the absence of other durable solutions, it has succeeded in providing a viable alternative to life in the camps for thousands of refugee families from Burma. However, it was found that there were also lessons to be learned from the Karen in St. Paul about limiting the detrimental impacts of the program, better supporting the integration process, and broadening participation in resettlement.

KEYWORDS Karen refugees, Burmese refugees, Thailand refugees, St. Paul refugees, refugee resettlement, refugee integration

INTRODUCTION

St. Paul, Minnesota is currently home to the largest Karen refugee population in the United States (Binkley & Binkely, 2010). While estimates vary due to a lack of precise data about secondary migration of refugees after arrival, the Karen leadership in St. Paul and the nonprofit organizations providing social services to the community place the current population total at between

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4,000 and 5,000 Karen. The majority of these are congregated in just a few small residential neighborhoods of the St. Paul metropolitan area, including the Arlington Avenue and Westminster areas as well as in nearby Roseville.

The Karen first began arriving in significant numbers in St. Paul through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program in 2003 (Bright, 2008). Following successive waves of resettlement from Thailand, a large and well-organized Karen community has become firmly established in the Twin Cities. Whereas the initial arrivals consisted mainly of a small number of former students and other political activists who fled Burma following the government crackdown on the pro-democracy movement, after the scope of the resettlement program was broadened in 2005, Karen from all nine of the refugee camps in Thailand began arriving in higher numbers in the St. Paul area (see Figure 1).

The resettlement effort from the camps on the Thai–Burma border is the world’s largest resettlement program, (Sciortino & Punpuing, 2009) with the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHCR), International Organization for Migration, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and resettlement countries coordinating operations on the ground in Thailand, 12 receiving countries accepting refugees and countless organizations providing integration services after resettlement overseas. However, despite the large-scale financial and human resource engagements in the operation, there has been limited research conducted on how successful the resettlement program has been as a durable solution from the perspective of refugee integration in receiving countries. This is a particularly important concern for Karen refugees as even among other groups of resettled refugees in the United States there is an awareness that the Karen are in need of special assistance with integration due to their protracted stay in the refugee camps in Thailand (Gilbert, Hein, & Losby, 2010). In some cases, the Karen have lived in the refugee

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camps for over 20 years, constituting a whole generation born and raised in asylum.

In spite of the difficulty of integrating refugees from protracted situations, there are certain communities in the United States that are particularly well suited to meet this challenge. The Twin Cities area possesses a long and successful history of supporting resettlement of refugees and is home to some of the largest groups of refugees in the United States or the world, including significant Hmong, Somali, Vietnamese, and former USSR refugee communities. In total, more than 90,000 refugees have been resettled in Minnesota since 1979. (AANews, 2010)

While the figures are less well defined, it is also known that thousands more continue to arrive in the area through secondary migration from other resettlement locations. According to a report prepared for the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the amount of secondary migration of refugees to Minnesota is the highest in the United States (Gilbert et al., 2010, p. 78). In 2007, the most recent year for which official statistics are available, Minnesota had a net in-migration of 1,373 refugees (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2008, p. 68). As a result, the Minnesota Department of Human Services (2010) now estimates that 20% of its refugee services caseload is due to secondary migration.

Pulled by a multiplicity of needs and attractions, including a well-established Karen community, a generous public welfare system, the availability of unskilled employment opportunities, an accommodating and supportive educational system, access to affordable housing, a robust support network of religious and community-based organizations (CBOs), and a diverse and tolerant local community already heavily experienced with resettlement of refugees, the Karen community in St. Paul seems likely to expand considerably in the future. In this regard, the integration experience of the Karen in St. Paul provides an important case study for generating lessons learned about providing services to refugee populations from extensively protracted refugee situations. Such groups are a significant emerging concern for refugee service providers as it is estimated that nearly two-thirds of the world’s refugees are now living in situations of protracted displacement (Loescher & Milner, 2011, p. 3).

The primary objective of this segment of a larger international research project on the refugee situation in Thailand was to conduct an ethnographic research study of the Karen community in St. Paul in order to assess the integration process locally and determine what the impacts and implications of resettlement have been internationally on the refugee situation within Thailand. In addition, the research sought to determine the critical motivations and constraints for refugee participation in the resettlement program in order to assist with evaluating the causality of these impacts. The results have been analyzed to form a case study of the integration stage of the resettlement program for refugees from the border camps in Thailand and to
support a greater understanding of both its current function and how it can be strengthened to play a more beneficial role as a durable solution for the situation.

RESEARCH METHODS

The field research was conducted in the St. Paul Metropolitan Area during the month of August 2010 utilizing a mixture of qualitative research methods primarily garnered from participatory research techniques. The research site of St. Paul was chosen due to its significance as the largest resettled community of Karen refugees in the United States and its reputation as a major destination for secondary migration of refugees. The following principles were used to guide the research:

- Respect. Listening, learning from and respecting local intellectual capabilities.
- Inclusiveness. Enhanced sensitivity to inclusion of marginalized and vulnerable groups within the study target population.
- Flexibility. Allowing the community itself to largely dictate the course of the research through applying the sampling technique of snowballing.

The research subjects included leadership representatives from nonprofit social service providers, Karen CBO representatives, elders of the Karen community, representatives of the Karen National Union, spiritual leaders from the Karen and American religious communities, government officials overseeing refugee services, American volunteers providing assistance to refugees, and randomly selected refugee households. The subjects were asked both coded and open-ended questions to assess their views about the Karen community in St. Paul and the refugee situation in Thailand. A non-positivist approach to data collection was applied to a total of 10 in-depth key informant interviews, 15 semistructured interviews with Karen refugee households, two focus-group sessions (a group of six Karen community leaders to collect the Karen perspective on resettlement and a group of five engaged local community members to ascertain community support for Karen integration), participation in community activities at two Karen church services as well as a Karen baby’s first birthday party, and an extensive review of secondary data sources. The data was analyzed using the observer impression interpretive technique and the research results from all sources were methodically triangulated to reach the study’s conclusions.

The discussions with 15 refugee households were designed to be opportunistic and driven by the individual stories and histories of the families. In order to provide cross-sectional data about Karen refugees in St. Paul, a mixture of new arrivals from Thailand, those who had lived in St. Paul for
several years, and those who had arrived via secondary migration from other regions of the United States were interviewed. Families representing each of these three groups were chosen randomly for interview based upon the query of a local service provider’s database. The researcher was accompanied by an interpreter from the local Karen community who administered the questions in the Karen language.

Based upon the review of the literature published about refugee resettlement in Thailand, it was determined that there is only a limited amount of research currently available that addresses the impacts that have resulted from the program. As resettlement has been the only available durable solution for the displacement situation within Thailand for over 5 years, additional efforts to understand the effects that resettlement is having in both asylum and resettlement countries appear necessary. This study was intended as a contribution towards that end, to be utilized in refining resettlement operations in Thailand and integration services within the United States in order to improve resettlement’s impact as a durable solution and provide more effective services to refugee participants.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT FOR US RESETTLEMENT OF THE KAREN

Sustained conflict within the country of Burma has forced large-scale displacement of a broad mix of ethnic groups across the border into Thailand. Since their establishment in 1984, documented and undocumented refugees in the nine major camps along the Thai−Burma border now form the largest protracted refugee situation in East Asia (Adelman, 2008). The registered camp population as of December 31, 2010, as documented by the UNHCR and the Thai Government, is 98,644. However, there are 141,076 residents in the camps currently receiving food rations, tens of thousands of whom have yet to receive an asylum status determination (Thailand Burma Border Consortium, 2011, pp. 6–7).

Thailand is not a signatory country of the United Nations Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. As a result, the refugees are technically illegal aliens under Thai immigration laws. From a strictly legal perspective, the refugees have no rights to asylum in Thailand, and even the term “refugee” has been vigilantly avoided by the Thai Government. In the late 1990s, the government adopted the terminology “displaced persons fleeing from fighting,” which effectively demarcates their status as being separate both in definition and in protection obligation from the international standards for treatment of refugees. Likewise, the refugee camps are referred to as “temporary shelters” rather than refugee camps in the official parlance of the Royal Thai Government. However, in practice, the displaced persons in the camps are recognized as having legitimate claims to asylum and are “accepted and assisted on a humanitarian basis” (Adelman, 2008, p. 71)
Since 2005, those refugees residing in the nine camps who have been registered by UNHCR and the Ministry of Interior of Thailand have been eligible to apply for third country resettlement. During 2010, 11,107 refugees from Burma left for resettlement, bringing the total number that have departed from Thailand to over 64,513 since 2006 (TBBC, 2011, p. 8). Approximately 76% of these were destined for resettlement in the United States, with the remainder accepted by Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Japan, and the United Kingdom (Figure 2; TBBC, 2011, p. 8).

While the program has been widely heralded for finally offering an alternative to indefinite internment in refugee camps for the displaced ethnic groups, the opportunity for resettlement also brings with it a host of potential fears and trepidations for displaced persons. Concerns about moving to a distant foreign country to start a new life with little assurance of their ability to survive in the unfamiliar living environment are not easily dismissed. Adding to their unease is that the refugees are given no choice as to which country they are to be resettled in if they are accepted. This has led to some of those in the camps choosing to remain in the familiar if dissatisfactory camp situation rather than to take a chance on starting a new life through resettlement. Others in the camps remain unsure about their decision on whether to apply out of fears of not being accepted or that resettlement will lead to separation from friends and family (Sciortino & Punpuing, 2009). A final grouping is ineligible to apply for resettlement because they have yet to have an official status determination made, in some cases even years after seeking asylum in the shelters.

Additionally, while the positive implications of the opening of a major durable solution for the refugee situation on the border are apparent, it has
also been documented that there have been negative impacts on camp administration and humanitarian services due to the loss of a disproportionate amount of the most skilled and best educated among the camp population. By 2007–2008, three of the most critical service sectors of the camps (health, education, and camp administration) had lost as many as 75% of their skilled staff through resettlement, posing a serious challenge for the community-based service structure in the camps (Banki & Lang, 2007).

Finally, there is a growing concern with resettlement's lack of impact upon the camp population totals. Depending upon if the figures of UNHCR and the Thai government are used or those of the consortium of NGOs providing services in the camps, after approximately 5 years of resettlement and over 64,000 departures, there was either approximately a 28% decrease in the aggregate refugee camp population (UNHCR/Thai government) or a 1% decrease if the unregistered population is included (NGO consortium). In either case, it seems clear that the ideal scenario for the resettlement program, in which the shelters are gradually closed down as they are depopulated, is not going to occur in the near future. In order for the refugee camps to be shut down as a result of resettlement alone, the influx of new refugees, a high birth rate within the shelters, delays in registration of new residents, and significant levels of disinterest in resettlement will all have to be overcome. (Sciortino & Punpuing, 2009)

U.S. RESETTLEMENT POLICIES ON THE THAI–BURMA BORDER

The refugees registered in the nine camps in Thailand have received a Priority 2 classification in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, as a “group of cases designated as having access to the program by virtue of their circumstances and apparent need for resettlement,” and are therefore eligible to apply (U.S. Departments of State, Homeland Security, & Health and Human Services, 2009, p. 6). Those displaced persons in the shelters with “anchor” family members already residing in the United States are categorized as Priority 3 cases and are also eligible (U.S. Departments of State, Homeland Security, & Health and Human Services, 2009, pp. 10, 13). However, neither of these designations is a guarantee of admission for resettlement in the United States.

In the wake of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001, the passing of the USA Patriot Act of 2001 and the Real ID Act of 2005 significantly impacted the number of refugees admitted for resettlement to the United States due to broad interpretation of clauses in the legislation barring those who had provided material support to groups engaging in terrorist activity from resettlement (Refugee Council USA, 2007, p. 4). “The material support bar,” as it is commonly referred to, severely curtailed resettlement of Burmese refugees during the early stages of the
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resettlement program in Thailand, with a 20% rejection rate for applicants because of affiliation with armed insurgent groups within Burma (Refugee Council USA, 2007, p. 1). After heavy lobbying pressure from a coalition of concerned organizations within the United States, the State Department began issuing waivers protecting supporters of individual insurgent groups from the application of the bar, including the Karen National Union, the Chin National Front, and others. (Senate Judiciary Committee, 2007) Although progress was initially slow, the legislative barriers to resettlement of refugees from Burma have now been mostly ameliorated.

The U.S. government has used its leadership position in global refugee resettlement as leverage with countries of origin and first asylum to promote both its humanitarian and foreign policy interests. During the Cold War, resettlement was frequently used as a humanitarian element of foreign policy strategy, targeted to further U.S. anti-communist goals in the conflict by resettling politically important refugees such as the Vietnamese “boat people” and dissidents defecting from behind the Iron Curtain (Hammerstad, 2005). It should also be noted that, with the exception of the large Indochinese resettlement program during the period following the Vietnam War, resettlement to the United States and other countries has mostly been used as a much smaller scale piece of durable solutions strategies for refugee situations (Hammerstad, 2005). This may be partially attributable to the fact that large-scale resettlement programs, as was implemented during the Indochinese refugee situation, have been less than an uncritical success in achieving their humanitarian objectives. According to a comprehensive retrospective account written by an authority on refugee situations in Asia:

There is general agreement in most Western capitals that what began as an essential durable solution for the Indochinese became part of the problem, both by perpetuating an outflow of people in search of permanent exile and by hampering the search for other durable solutions, namely local settlement or voluntary repatriation. (Robinson, 1998, p. 274)

A senior immigration official who was heavily involved with the Indochinese program referred to large-scale resettlement as “the narcotic of cures. It is expensive, addictive and, in the long run, destructive” (Robinson, 1998, p. 274).

According to the U.S. Department of State, the current U.S. resettlement operations in Thailand are being conducted both as a humanitarian response to the displacement situation in Thailand as well as a strategic intervention to support the long-term foreign policy goal of a transition to democracy within Burma (U.S. Departments of State, Homeland Security, & Health and Human Services, 2009). Whether success in either helping to effectuate permanent governance changes or to restore conditions of peace and security
in Burma remains to be seen. Few signs of success in affecting either governance changes or helping to restore conditions of peace and security within Burma are so far apparent, however. Likewise, while the resettlement efforts of the United States and other countries may have helped to increase the amount of dialogue between the Thai government, the United Nations, NGOs, and donor countries regarding the prospects for increased livelihood options and local integration in Thailand, little tangible progress is yet apparent in changing the conditions of internment faced by the refugees in the camps.

MOTIVATIONS AND CONSTRAINTS TO APPLYING FOR RESETTLEMENT

Motivations for Applying

The research results indicated that there are a number of key motivating factors that influence Karen refugees to apply for resettlement. These were frequently a combination of push factors away from life in the camps and pull factors towards life in the United States.

A frequent response for the rationale of choosing resettlement was a conviction that it would never be safe to return to Burma or at least not in the foreseeable future. This becomes a push factor when coupled with the feeling among the refugees that they would not be allowed to stay in Thailand indefinitely and their frustrations with the restrictions on their ability to attain self-sufficiency in the camps. As one man put it, “We have no rights in Burma and our village has been destroyed by the military. We have no right to work in Thailand and don’t want to live our whole lives without being able to take care of ourselves.”

The inability to freely engage in livelihood activities, limitations on educational opportunities, and a general lack of human rights were the major push factors within the camps described as motivating the choice to resettle. One man summarized the problems with life in Umpiem Mai camp as “no security and poor quality education for children,” and that these reasons were enough motivation to leave. Another man describing his time in the camps during a focus group simply stated: “Life in the camps is like being in jail.”

The pull factors motivating the choice to resettle in the United States were noticeably focused on three interrelated desires: better educational opportunities for children, better job opportunities, and an overall better future for their families. Additionally, family reunification was a key driver in the decisions for many to apply. The chance for regularized citizenship status, greater respect for human rights, positive recommendations from friends and relatives in the United States, and an overall better future for their families were also repeatedly stated as reasons for choosing resettlement.
Constraints to Applying

The most frequently stated constraint for not applying/reluctance to apply for resettlement among those who were eligible was a fear about a lack of sufficient English-language skills. It was clear that these fears can carry over for many years after arrival in the United States, as many of the middle-aged and older Karen in households interviewed were still uncomfortable with speaking English even just for basic pleasantries. As a result of these enduring fears, there was definitely a feeling in many of the households that the older Karen did not go out too much if not working.

Additional constraining factors mentioned included concerns about their ability to find work, low educational levels, the high cost of living, negative reports from friends and family in the United States about the difficulty of life there, depictions of life in the United States as dangerous and difficult from various media channels, and a reluctance to leave the Karen community behind. A key informant from the Karen Organization of Minnesota agreed that concerns about the separation from their people are critical for many: “Leaving the community is like breaking a promise.”

No recurring resettlement process or policy-related constraints were identified during the research for those who were already registered as refugees and eligible to apply for resettlement. The delays in the refugee registration process appear to be far more of a policy obstacle to the efficiency of the resettlement program’s operations than the duration of the resettlement application process itself. Particularly for families with a split household registration status within the camps, making some family members eligible to apply while others are not, these deferments have provided an extraordinarily difficult dilemma.

While some of the constraints identified go well beyond the scope of the resettlement program and may be impossible to address in the short-term, an increase in the amount of training in English-language skills for adults as well as young people was repeatedly mentioned as an important intervention area for expansion of NGO programming in the camps. As one key informant stated, “Preparation for life in the United States is insufficient because the young people are the only ones being trained in English.”

The motivations and constraints to apply for resettlement proved to be highly individual for refugees and the research showed that the internal algorithm that combines all of the different factors involved for each individual and leads to a decision to apply or not is difficult to standardize. However, when refugees talked candidly about their motivations, they tended to center around educational and employment opportunities, family reunification, and an overall hope for a better future as the primary pull factors for choosing resettlement. Conversely, the lack of freedom of movement, livelihood, and educational opportunities were key push factors from life within the camps, as were the lack of prospects for the other two
durable solutions of local integration in Thailand or a safe return to Burma.
Finally, while none of the displaced persons complained openly about the
poverty they experienced within the camps, based upon the proxies and
euphemisms for impoverishment discussed, it was evident that the condi-
tions of prolonged destitution are a significant push factor for choosing
resettlement.

POST-RESETTLEMENT IMPACTS FOR REFUGEES
IN THE UNITED STATES

Impact on Refugee Integration
According to research conducted by the Brookings Institute, “For newly
arriving refugees who are not being reunited with family members, local
non-profit organizations and a host of individuals on the ground are the
most important integrating features of life in the United States” (Singer &
Wilson, 2006, p. 19).

The positive impact of having both a community and community-based
organizations, made up of those who have already been through the reset-
tlement process themselves and who are deeply vested in the well-being
of the Karen refugees, is striking and seems to account for much of the pull
factor that the area has for secondary migrants. One key informant from the
Karen Community of Minnesota stated that the type of mutual aid available
in St. Paul is the reason that “50 families per month are coming to St. Paul
through secondary migration.”

Although most Karen refugees arriving in St. Paul have chosen to pursue
resettlement partly as an escape from the so-called “dependency syndrome,”
whereby refugees become trapped in the role of passive recipients of aid, it
is important to acknowledge that at least initially, many find themselves be-
coming even more dependent on welfare and social services due to language
barriers and other sociocultural impediments to self-sufficiency.

Multiple factors appear to determine how rapidly individual Karen
refugees engage with the local community and attain functional indepen-
dence. While educational level, language abilities, and vocational skills are
certainly key, the age of refugees appears to be the critical variable deter-
mining how quickly the process occurs. After only a few years, many young
Karen are virtually indistinguishable from U.S.-born citizens, embracing the
local culture and community as their own. Conversely, older Karen appear
to struggle with acceptance of American culture, speaking English, and the
psychological transition to embracing the United States as their home.

In order to provide an understanding of what the typical resettlement
process undergone by refugee arrivals in St. Paul looks like, the timeline in
Figure 3 diagrams the refugee resettlement experience from displacement to
integration.
The duration and complexity of the process of successful integration for Karen refugees should not be minimized. It is a long-term and typically uneven process that involves the support of multiple formal and informal actors and forms of assistance. A focus group among the Karen leadership in St. Paul stated that resettled Karen refugees often experience a wave pattern of emotional states during the process with most eventually finding a more stable level of satisfaction with their decision after securing long-term employment and receiving an earned income.

Generally speaking, social services within St. Paul were found to be exceptionally responsive to the needs of refugees during this process. For example, a key motivation for many refugees to choose resettlement is the desire for a better quality education. However, upon arrival in the United States, they often find that they are over the age limit to attend local public schools. According to a focus group with several local teachers, Minnesota is unusual in the United States in that it allows students to attend public schools who are over the age of 21, at the discretion of individual school districts. In addition, while there have been recent budget cuts at the Federal level, the refugee assistance services funded by the Minnesota Department of Human Services and provided by local CBOs utilize a significantly more comprehensive system of indicators for refugee integration outcomes. While
these do address the federal metric of sustainable employment, they also provide funding for programs that attend to additional refugee needs such as adjusted immigration status, stable housing, engagement with community services, and independent functioning.

The importance of the role of informal and voluntary assistance in their integration was also clearly critical for the majority of refugees interviewed. Almost all stated that the First Baptist Church of St. Paul had helped them with food, furnishings, and household items upon arrival. Americans from the local community were also said to have helped with household items and clothing. Many refugees also cited the assistance they had received from within the Karen community itself as being an important source of support for interpretive services and food items. For those that had come through secondary migration, the availability of interpretive services was frequently stated as a prime motivation for relocating.

Impact on Livelihoods and Welfare

Despite the well-documented lack of livelihood opportunities available in the camps, only about 13% of refugees interviewed stated that they did not work in the camps compared with 67% after arrival in the United States. However, those who were able to find jobs were reportedly doing quite well according to a key informant from an organization providing refugee employment services. The Karen appear to be well-liked by employers due to their strong work ethic and reluctance to complain. The primary businesses in St. Paul that have been hiring recently arrived Karen refugees are meat-packing plants, large-scale commercial laundries, and bakeries.

Most refugees stated that it had taken between 1 and 6 months to find work in the United States, and almost all of those employed said that they “liked their jobs.” Many even professed that they “loved their jobs” despite the repetitive manual labor required by most of the positions refugees were employed in. However, much of this was later qualified by responses stating that they were not so pleased with working graveyard shifts, commuting long distances, cold working conditions, and the arduous physical demands of the jobs.

When asked what type of welfare assistance they were receiving, food stamps were by far the most common response and were nearly universal among the refugees. Most families were receiving between $300 and $600 worth of food stamps per month. A large proportion were also receiving rental assistance, although this was problematic for some refugee households who said that it did not fully cover their actual rental expenses and that they didn’t have enough income to make up the difference. The majority of the families interviewed had also been enrolled in Medicare for their health-care needs, although the program was challenging to utilize for many.
Impact on Gender Roles

The research results appeared to indicate that even after only a few years in the United States, gender roles among the Karen community have begun to change. Many of the Karen women in households interviewed worked outside the home, and as a result, were gaining greater control over household decision-making. Young Karen women in particular seemed to be adapting very quickly to a more American model of femininity, with increased levels of personal independence and pursuit of educational and employment opportunities.

In many of the refugee households visited, the women in the family had been initially more successful at finding work, which meant that the men in the family remained at home taking care of children. Overall, the Karen seemed to be adjusting fairly easily to these major changes in gender roles. As one focus group member jokingly stated, “In Burma, the man is king. In the United States, it’s the woman.”

However, despite the evidence of these changes within individual households, it should also be noted that only one of the Karen community leaders interviewed was female despite significant efforts to identify such informants. While it is likely that there are additional women in positions of leadership within the community then were identified through this research, on the whole, female representation in leadership positions appeared to be relatively minute.

Impact on Social Problems

Some of the negative impacts of resettlement on the Karen community mentioned included an increase in the prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse and some high-profile racial conflicts with the African American community in St. Paul. According to a key informant from the First Baptist Church interviewed, a lot of the conflict stems from a perceived competition for services, housing, and jobs between the communities. In addition, when incidents have occurred, the Karen do not always want to report it because they are used to being afraid of the police from their time in Thailand. Religious leaders from the two communities have been working cooperatively to address the tensions and violence, and these efforts do appear to be having a positive impact on the situation as there have been no major incidents recently.

As to the issue of substance abuse, a religious leader from the First Baptist Church stated that he felt that alcohol and drug use are becoming more problematic among the Karen. This perspective was also shared by the social services director at the Karen Organization of Minnesota, who stated that he considered the increase in drug use among the Karen to be an emerging social problem for the community. However, no statistical data or
literature was located on the prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse for the Karen and additional research is needed to determine how widespread the problem has become.

IMPACTS OF RESETTLEMENT ON THE REFUGEE SITUATION IN THAILAND

Impact of Resettlement as a Durable Solution

None of the key informants interviewed in St. Paul were of the belief that resettlement on its own could resolve the displacement situation in Thailand. While several of those interviewed stated the opinion that resettlement had been effective in providing better living conditions for individual refugee families, the general consensus was that the source of the problem lies within Burma and that it would not go away until conditions changed inside the country. As a key informant from the Karen Community of Minnesota stated, “It has been 10,000 out and then 10,000 right back in as a result of the armed conflict and human rights abuses within Burma.”

It was also found that none of those interviewed felt that resettlement had become a significant pull factor for additional refugee flows into the camps relative to the push factors of armed conflict and human rights abuses within Burma. However, several key informants were confident that fraudulent claims to asylum and eventual resettlement were taking place: “For $3,000 USD, people are smuggled into the camps, including transportation, a house in the camp and registration documents.” The Karen in St. Paul appear to be aware of such people resettled within their community but seem inclined to leave well enough alone.

Both from seeing the leadership capabilities within the Karen community in St. Paul and from hearing their comments during interviews, it was clear that resettlement is causing a significant degree of “brain drain” from the camp environment. While it does seem likely unavoidable that resettlement will continue to result in the loss of some of the best and most experienced staff within the camps, from a broader perspective, this is not an entirely negative impact. As a resettled Karen CBO director stated, “the resettled refugee community needs leaders too.”

One seemingly promising option for addressing some of the critical losses of staff within the camps that came up repeatedly within discussions was the possibility of establishing programs that would facilitate some former refugees returning to the camps to work in NGO staff positions. As there seems to be significant interest in this prospect within the resettled Karen community, and their commitment, language abilities, and educational levels would likely have a significant impact on improving service quality within the camps, it appears to be a worthwhile option for NGOs to explore.
in their efforts to repair some of the deterioration in capability caused by resettlement.

Impact on Community Linkages

The research confirmed that the links between resettled refugees and those back in the refugee camps are strong. Most refugee families reported that they regularly had contact with friends and family members still in the camps and that they planned to continue these associations. Several families stated that they were sharing their resettlement experiences with those in the camps, however, it was somewhat difficult to determine exactly what the messages being sent back were actually recommending. For the most part, refugee families interviewed seemed to be encouraging others from the camps to apply, while at the same time, providing a more realistic view to those in the camps about what life is actually like in the United States. A focus group of the Karen leadership in St. Paul stated that the resettled Karen community have primarily been trying to educate those in the camps about life in the United States so that they can make informed decisions and prepare themselves accordingly.

Four out of five refugees interviewed stated that they were still in regular contact with family, friends, or the camp committee back in their previous refugee camps through phone calls. When asked what they were telling their contacts about life in the United States during these phone calls, the most common response stated was that they were telling those in the camps about the better employment and educational opportunities. A smaller portion of responses did have less positive news for those in the camps however. One man stated that he was telling his friends and relatives that they should be serious about preparing for employment and in learning English before leaving the camps, and that “life is not heaven here.” Another man, who was disabled from losing his leg to a landmine, stated that he was telling people that it was difficult to get a job or use transportation in the United States and that the welfare assistance he was receiving was insufficient for his needs.

While many refugee families stated their desire to send remittances back to friends and family members in the camps, most were simply not in a solid enough economic footing to do so. While amounts with a specified purpose such as paying off debts or covering medical expenses were being sent, there did not appear to be a large scale of regular remittance flows to the camps from families who had only been in the United States for a few years or less. A focus group of Karen leadership stated that remittances being sent back to the camps and Burma are still limited in quantity because of the difficult economic conditions for newly arrived refugees. However, the remittance flows are certainly existent for some families and seem likely to increase over time.
CONCLUSION

The Karen community in St. Paul, based upon both the indicators of the federal and state outcome areas for integration and the qualitative assessment of this research study, appears to be adapting successfully to life in the United States. While using the resettled Karen refugee community in St. Paul as a case study provides what may be a somewhat rose-colored view of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program’s potential for resolving the displacement situation within Thailand, it does grant a number of valuable lessons learned about the practical realities of integration of refugees from extensively protracted refugee situations in the United States, as well as open a window into the Karen perspective on the refugee resettlement program and its impacts on the displacement situation in Thailand.

The Karen have endured conflict and human rights abuses within their homeland in Burma for generations and anyone who has witnessed the quiet but unyielding resolve of the Karen people would have to agree that it seems unlikely that the integration experience will push them beyond the limits of their cultural fortitude. However, more can be done through policy and programming to support the inherent cultural resilience that makes the Karen such a comfortable fit with the ethnic diversity of the United States.

While the research revealed that the inertia and frustration that characterizes life in the refugee camps coupled with the freedoms and opportunities that are available within the United States remain the most compelling motivations for refugees to apply for resettlement, another key issue in encouraging a broader acceptance of resettlement among the Karen is an assurance that they will be resettled within an existent Karen community within the United States. Due to the special service needs of Karen refugees resulting from their exceptionally protracted stay in the refugee camps in Thailand, there are clear benefits both for the Karen and for the American communities that they integrate into to have established populations and ethnically specialized organizations ready to welcome new arrivals. These community features appear to account for a large portion of the current pull factor for secondary migration of the Karen to St. Paul. The type of community development and mutual aid that exists and continues to mature in the St. Paul Karen community is simply not possible in every resettlement location. Therefore, while it is necessary to avoid overwhelming individual resettlement communities, voluntary agencies in the larger and already established Karen communities should be encouraged to increase their level of specialization in order to facilitate additional arrivals.

Addressing the reciprocal question of constraints to participation in the resettlement program, the research determined that reluctance to apply for resettlement due to differences in registration status within families appears to be a major constraint to participation in the program that can only be properly
addressed through reinvigorating the stalled status determination process in the camps. However, while this is a hard constraint on participation that appears somewhat intractable until alternative policies are implemented by the Thai government, the obstruction posed by refugee fears about integration in resettlement countries because of capacity limitations (i.e. language skills, vocational skills, cultural adaptation, etc.) appears more feasible to attempt to ameliorate programmatically. Further programs encouraging dialogue and capacity building on these concerns, perhaps incorporating the skills and experiences of those who have already been through the resettlement process, might be able to provide uncertain refugees with the confidence they need to make a decision as well as pay long-term dividends in facilitating a speedier integration process within the United States.

In addition to the benefits of resettlement in an existing Karen community, there are lessons to be learned from the successes of St. Paul in establishing strong intra-community linkages: between the newly arrived refugees and established members within the local community to encourage adaptation and provide access to resources, between the voluntary agencies and CBOs in order to bridge the gap between the short-term and long-term social service needs of refugees, and between different refugee populations themselves to support a refugee to refugee learning process.

The refugee-to-refugee model of learning that has been encouraged between the Karen community and the resettled Hmong, Somali, and Vietnamese communities in St. Paul has had obvious benefits for increasing the rapidity of the integration process and surmounting internal capacity constraints for the Karen. Interestingly, the newly formed Karen Organization of Minnesota actually has a Hmong American as its new executive director, which is overtly symbolic of the broader environment of mutual support between former refugee groups and the contemporary group of resettled Karen that exists in St. Paul. Additional opportunities to implement this model of learning should be sought out and nurtured through support for capacity building programs between CBOs.

All of these linkages are further strengthened by refugees receiving sufficient English-language skills training before arrival. While the mutual assistance provided within the Karen community is an essential element of the support network for many refugees and should be supported, the longer-term welfare of refugees still depends upon high-levels of engagement with the local community. Particularly for older Karen, much of the ongoing isolation that many experience is the unfortunate result of a lack of confidence in their ability to speak English within the larger community.

The impacts and implications of the resettlement program for the displacement situation in Thailand appear both clear in some respects and deceptively simple in others. While the reduction in educated and experienced staff members from the NGO service providers and the camp administration is easily discernible, as are the strong connections between the diaspora and
those remaining behind within the refugee camps, the impact of the resettlement program on camp population totals is more nuanced and difficult to determine. While it is certain that resettlement has so far been ineffective at depopulating the camps in the aggregate, most of the evidence available seems to suggest that the new refugee flows into the camps are primarily due to the ongoing conflict and human rights abuses within Burma rather than created by the pull factor of resettlement itself. As a result, a large number of those who have departed through resettlement might very well be appended on to the current population totals had the program not taken place. Just as importantly, it is only from a somewhat myopic policy standpoint that one can ignore the well-being provided to refugee families through resettlement because it has yet to reduce the refugee situation in Thailand quantitatively.

While the future for Karen refugees in Thailand appears as murky and indefinite as ever, and resettlement has yet to prove its effectiveness in resolving the situation in the absence of other durable solutions, it does continue to provide a viable alternative to indefinite encampment for thousands of Karen in supportive communities like St. Paul. The value of a “home” after years and even decades of temporary shelter is based on a function perhaps difficult to calculate but certainly not without worth for Karen refugees.

NOTES

1. Refugee research subjects were informed of the researcher’s affiliations as well as the objectives of the research project and were asked to give consent for their participation. The research was conducted in accordance with the Chulalongkorn University Ethical Guidelines for Research on Vulnerable Groups and the research approach, and results were also reviewed by a United Nations interagency team experienced with the international ethical principles and guidelines for conducting research with refugees.

2. Key sample demographics for the refugee households interviewed were as follows: 53% male and 47% female; 73% had a household size between 3 and 4 and 27% between 5 and 7; 33% had never attended school, 40% had completed middle or primary schooling, 20% had completed high school or secondary school, and 7% had completed a university degree; 20% had lived in a refugee camp between 7 and 10 years, 53% between 11 and 15 years, 20% between 16 and 20 years and 7% over 21 years; 13% had arrived in the United States in 2007, 13% arrived in 2008, 34% arrived in 2009, and 40% arrived in 2010; and 40% had arrived through secondary migration while 60% had arrived directly.

REFERENCES

