

The Value of Community in Lowell

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns Lowell, Massachusetts, USA

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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About the Author



Joseph Zorokong is a graduate student at the Fletcher School at Tufts University, pursuing an MA in Law and Diplomacy. He seeks to leverage an internationally focused education to better understand the most effective methods of addressing the Human Security needs of disadvantaged populations around the globe, hopefully within Sierra Leone. Joseph first came to the U.S. at age 6, growing up mostly in Lowell, MA, and attended the University of Massachusetts in Lowell for his undergraduate studies.

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Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank the Refugees in Towns (RIT) Project for pursuing a learning initiative to uncover the experiences of people in new environments; none of this would be possible without this ongoing project. Just as importantly, I'm grateful for the guidance and patience by RIT Charles Simpson and Madison Chapman, two superb project managers who helped me stay focused and organized throughout this process. Additionally, they provided me with all the resources I needed in overcoming challenges associated with this self-reflection research.

I am also eternally grateful to all of the project participants who agreed to be interviewed. Their insights and perspectives added richness and color to my observations, and motivated me to represent them the best I could.

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Introduction

My family found our way to the U.S. after escaping war-torn Sierra Leone in the mid '90s. With the support of a small community of Sierra Leoneans, my mother was able to raise my brother and me. Lowell is known as a migrant-hosting city that embraces its diverse populations. However, integrating in Lowell was a vastly different experience for my mother than for me. I use this report to explore our shared and unique experiences integrating into Lowell, while also shedding light on how a general lack of services aimed at assisting immigrant populations can complicate the transition to Lowell. The broader purpose of this study is to highlight the strengths of informal networks that established immigrant communities create and leverage to fill the void in the lack of adequate immigrant services provided by local governments and organizations.

Through qualitative research conducted with immigrant transition assistance organizations, my high school peers, and Sierra Leonean immigrants, this report explores the diverse ways in which immigrants have assimilated in their new environment, while highlighting some anecdotes about organizations that exist to help these immigrant groups integrate in cities like Lowell. In the case of Sierra Leoneans in Lowell, rather than reliance on traditional immigrant or refugee resettlement services, integration is attained through reliable networks of other members of the Sierra Leonean community.

Methods

I interviewed various local community members for whom I am immensely thankful to for helping me probe some of my deepest, most personal thoughts. I received IRB approval on December 27, 2019.

There were a few limitations in this study. First, no other women (aside from my mother) were interviewed, which dilutes the reader's ability to understand the full experience of Africans who immigrate to cities like Lowell. Additionally, the only African perspectives came from two countries: Sierra Leone and Liberia. Providing viewpoints of Lowell residents from other countries may have unearthed some key differences that residents from different countries experience (e.g. financial differences or reasons for immigrating). In addition, the report only includes perspectives from organizations that tend to be friendly toward immigrants. Finally, including perspectives from former teachers and faculty from the high school I attended would have been beneficial in contextualizing the integration experience for students in their most formative years.

The Author's Position in the Town

I first arrived in the U.S. in 1995 when I was six years old and spent my first three years in Ithaca, NY while my mother sought to establish herself in Lowell, MA. I moved to Lowell at age nine, when my mother finally gained legal custody over my brother and me. Since then, I have called Lowell home and have come to appreciate its distinct culture of inclusion and grit—two features I try to bring everywhere with me. For an immigrant like me, growing up in this city has forced me to confront my own identity (often a battle) in ways I never could while living in Ithaca at such a young age. Despite living in such a diverse city as Lowell, in my formative years I struggled with a sense of my culture and American identity, often weaving in and out of being “African” or “American,” depending on my social context.

My mother, deeply connected with the city’s Sierra Leonean community, played an integral role in helping my brother and me maintain ties with this community while we attempted to live “normal” American lives. However, coping with the realities of living in two distinct cultures was never easy. At home and within the community, gaining true acceptance felt like a losing battle. My pidgin—a West African creole language that mixes English with local languages—sounded incoherent, I was deemed “too American,” and I felt I had only superficial knowledge of Sierra Leone’s history, particularly its recent civil war. On the other hand, when amongst typical Americans, gaining acceptance had other challenges; I didn't have the life-long relationships that other American students had with one another. From what I recall, I rarely had the opportunity to bond with friends (e.g. sleep over at friends' houses), we didn't vacation, and I didn't live in the same neighborhoods as most of the people I found myself surrounded with on a near-daily basis.

Luckily, I found football and a support system of friends and coaches who helped me feel as if I were part of a community that I contributed to just as much as every one of my teammates did.

To this day, I still feel connected to Lowell and want to share my experiences with others who may find them relatable. I also want to find ways to help people, often marginalized themselves, to connect to communities where they live. I want to leverage the experiences of Africans who helped raise me within the community, as well as my own experiences to broaden our understanding of the nuances of fitting in to new surroundings. I still remember the lengths my mother would go to make sure my brother and I didn’t stand out, almost as if she internalized our fear of being ridiculed or ostracized by our peers. She often worked over-time to save money that she could use to buy us trendy outfits that would help us blend in with our American surroundings at school or at extra-curricular events. Food also played a role in our integration. My mother adopted some American-inspired recipes that she often

cooked for us, inviting the American influence on a deeply traditional expression of our culture.

In parallel, my mother and the Sierra Leonean community in Lowell did everything to ensure that our customs and cultural values will be passed down through our generation. From the time we arrived in Lowell, my family was often well-represented at community events – weddings, church gatherings, graduations, holidays, and baby showers. Often, these turned into continued celebrations at a community member's home, providing me with the opportunity to communicate and grow from the myriad lessons I learned from our community. Like many lessons, these opportunities came with challenges, with none looming larger than my sense of competing dual identities.

I chose this topic because I wanted to appeal to anyone, particularly the many young people struggling with their racial identity, straddling multiple cultures, religions, or social lives. Growing up in this way can feel isolating and immensely limiting to whom you aspire to be or what path you ultimately follow. As a child and young adult, I found it difficult to understand these sentiments, thinking that I might spend the rest of my life without an identity. Thankfully, by leaning on the Sierra Leonean community, I came to a realization of a quote that my mother shared with me during my first day of my undergraduate studies. She said, "if you don't know where you're going, know where you came from." Now that I'm proud of (and still searching for) my Sierra Leonean heritage, life seems to be making more sense.

City Context

Located about 30 miles from Boston, Lowell has been a manufacturing hub that has provided economic and social opportunities to generations of European, Asian, and African immigrants.



[Lowell is the fifth largest city in MA](#), and a quarter of the city’s residents are immigrant-born, with the portion of immigrant-born residents increasing by nearly [13% from 2012 to 2017](#). According to The Urban Institute, African-born residents make up 6% of the immigrant population in Lowell—nearly twice the national average. Africans in Lowell are a diverse population: [nearly half of the city’s African-born residents come from Western Africa](#), which includes the countries of Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone.

Wandering through Lowell provides a history lesson on America’s introduction to the Industrial Revolution. Take a moment to roam through downtown, and you will notice the mechanical façades of a city once hailed an “industrial utopia.” Its canals, powered by the almighty Merrimack River, and cobblestone streets are lined with red-brick textile factories that once served as the engine to a burgeoning [economy during the early-to-mid nineteenth century](#). It was during this nascent period that Lowell’s current distinction as a multicultural hub began to develop. Lured by the promise of opportunity as a result of a thriving economy, waves of French Canadians, Irish, Portuguese, and Polish nationals flocked to downtown Lowell, [establishing the city’s persona as an immigrant gateway](#).

Nearly two centuries later, a new wave of immigrants—[led mostly by Cambodians escaping the Khmer Rouge genocide in the 1970s](#)—have not only sought refuge from conflict-ridden countries and impoverished lives but have established themselves as an increasingly

irreplaceable component of Lowell's economic development. For instance, the city's total immigrant population—which accounts for approximately one-quarter of Lowell's 110,000 residents—has outperformed its American-born counterparts in several economic metrics when factoring in their disproportionate makeup of Lowell's total population, [according to research commissioned by Gateways for Growth](#). Additionally, African immigrants [are increasingly concerned with receiving adequate support from the city](#).

Immigrants to Lowell have had an immense positive impact; this is hardly surprising, given that the US was built on the backs of foreigners seeking the same opportunities as Lowell's current flow of immigrants. This is also a reminder that the support of immigrants who settle in Lowell should be prioritized by city officials. What is remarkable to me is how immigrants and their families (much like mine), many of whom were forced to abandon their past lives, adapt to host cities like Lowell.

Lowell is a multicultural place of diverse people, languages, and food. Growing up, it seemed like Cambodians, Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans made up most of Lowell's population, while Brazilian and African populations seemed to be increasing. The most diverse parts of Lowell are three neighborhoods in the center of the city: Downtown, Back Central, and the Acre. Here you can find a mixture of people and food originating from West Africa, India, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Ireland, and Brazil. Southwest of Downtown is the Highlands, mostly home to Lowell's Asian communities. Most Asian migrants in Lowell hail from India, Cambodia, and Laos. The city's more affluent residents can be found on the outskirts of the Pawtucketville, Centralville, Belvidere, and South Lowell neighborhoods, which form a backwards "C" around the more central [neighborhoods](#). On any given day in Downtown, you might smell the intoxicating aroma of Cambodian eggrolls, or you might hear the dazzling sizzle of empanadas from a busy street vendor. These smells and sounds bring me back to the food I grew up eating at home. Despite the relatively low number of Sierra Leoneans in Lowell, the city boasts two African grocery stores. Because of this, we were able to enjoy food from our native country growing up, including many dishes that feature dried fish, cassava leaf, and jollof rice, a seasoned fried rice mixture made of vegetables, fish, and meat.

Downtown's boutique shops and restaurants mirror the city's diversity. In the spring and summer, languages heard on the street include Khmer, Spanish, Portuguese, and West African Pidgin - from people engaged in daily conversation or simply selling and trading goods.

Experiencing the cultural diversity provides a welcoming landing spot for immigrant families seeking to establish foundations for future generations. Children growing up in Lowell experience and internalize a variety of social and cultural customs while attending the local YMCA. The city center is a hub for cultural immersion. Lowell's many Irish pubs and restaurants attract diverse patrons from neighboring towns, as well as students attending the University of Massachusetts.

The city has many traits that distinguishes it from other towns in Massachusetts. Lowell is characterized by its historically large immigrant population, and it is the norm for communities from diverse ethnicities and social classes to openly express their cultural values. However, political power and economic mobility in Lowell still feels confined to white-identifying communities like the descendants of Irish and Greek immigrants. Immigrant communities are united by the struggle for economic opportunity and stability, although some intolerance and racism exists between these groups. It is impossible to escape the role that race plays in migrants' integration into the United States.

Lowell's immigrant resources heavily favor Southeast Asians (particularly Cambodians), the city's most populous and established immigrant group. However, while no services exclusively target Sierra Leonean immigrants, support and advocacy for African immigrants has gained momentum in recent years, thanks to grassroots efforts by emerging organizations like the African Community Center. This Center dedicates resources such as afterschool childcare and adult learning services to Africans in Lowell. Similarly, Lowell Alliance supports the city's marginalized groups, including immigrants and refugees, by partnering with a coalition of community leaders and local organizations to coordinate access to resources that enhance the neighborhoods they reside in.



Why African Refugees Settle in Lowell

"The people I knew in the U.S. talked about America and having the ability to finally support their families," (Halimatu Sarmu, Mother, Sierra Leonean, Resident of Lowell for past twenty-five years, Interviewed December 2019).

Access to Resources

There are myriad reasons that immigrants relocate to Lowell. Having an entrenched, dependable network of other people from the same country of origin already settled in the destination city is crucial to building a stable life. These networks provide a support system

unique to the needs of its community members. My mother continues to depend on and support the Sierra Leonean community in Lowell. She reminisced about her motivations to immigrate and how it was evident that this social support system was going to be imperative to her family's survival once she came to Lowell.

"Living well and getting access to resources are very difficult [in Sierra Leone]," she recalled, "It's like greener pastures going to the U.S. It's a motivator to come here" (Sarmu, Interviewed December 2019). Coming from a war-torn country like Sierra Leone, where livelihoods and resources are often depleted, she noted that local communities tend to be the first line of support that immigrants rely on to help them gain the independence they need in a land that is entirely foreign to them. Once established in a host city, these community members feel an unwritten obligation to return the favor.

My mother plays a large role within the Sierra Leonean community in Lowell. She is a vocal member of various Sierra Leonean community groups in the city, a trusted child caretaker for several members of the community, and is heavily relied upon on to coordinate food and hospitality during social gatherings.

As I was peppering my mother with questions in the home in Lowell that she proudly purchased several years ago, the doorbell rang. She greeted the visitor, another Sierra Leonean immigrant to Lowell. After a lengthy exchange of pleasantries, she walked her visitor to the kitchen, where she had spent half the day preparing traditional Sierra Leonean meals for customers. She handed him a large Tupperware filled with stew in exchange for a fee, and then proceeded with a light-hearted conversation before the visitor went on his way. Typically, she sells several of these containers a night, with Fridays being the most profitable. Often, these informal customers will stay a while, keeping my mother company while discussing current affairs that affect the community.

Visitors often travel in groups, bringing children and friends to join in these social gatherings. Sometimes, my mother's customers will leave their children behind for my mother to babysit while their parent runs errands or attends work. I have come to appreciate her informal business as a way of uniting and strengthening the community that many depend on for stability when they initially arrive in the U.S. In Lowell, there are no Sierra Leonean restaurants for people to engage with the community. Without this type of informal support system, it is difficult to imagine communities like this surviving. As both a participant and bystander, these social settings appear to reinforce the strength of immigrant communities in Lowell and fill a need that the city and transition services have not fulfilled.

Visitors from the Sierra Leonean community (or other Africans, for that matter) sometimes extend their stay. In the past, newly immigrated members of our community would stay with us for some time. Reasons varied from needing a place to stay while passing through on their way to another U.S. community to needing assistance in better understanding the resources available to them in Lowell. As my mother puts it, "They were in the same situation as we were at one point...they didn't know where to go to for help." As a teenager, I remember wondering why people stayed with us and would get frustrated that strangers were occupying the little

space we had. I never confronted my mother, feeling I had to accept the way things were because that was how our culture operated. Years later, I can see why my mother's grace compelled others to seek temporary refuge in our house. It wasn't because they weren't capable or willing to take care of themselves. It was simply because they didn't know the environment, and their way of acclimating quickly was to seek out other immigrants who were already rooted here. My mother explains, "Most of us came from Africa and we need to find someone who can lead us to the benefits that are in the U.S."

How Refugees Help Each Other Integrate

The Keys to Integration

To me, integrating is about feeling accepted or welcomed in your new surroundings. I had an easier time integrating to Lowell than other immigrants because I moved to the U.S. when I was five years old and became familiar with the culture and language while living in Ithaca. By the time I came to Lowell at age ten, I was comfortable with the American way of life. But I still did not feel fully accepted or welcomed in Lowell. I felt that I needed to integrate, which I realize sounds a bit absurd considering how much harder it must be for other immigrants to integrate who arrive directly in Lowell when they are resettled to the U.S.

For me and the other first-generation migrants in Lowell I spoke with, the path to achieving a sense of acceptance and welcome feels like walking two parallel lines which you must carefully straddle between two worlds. My high school football teammate Joseph—a Liberian immigrant to Lowell—and I both experienced the complications of gaining acceptance not only in our local immigrant communities, but also within Lowell. As he said, "Integration doesn't mean completely absorbing a city's rules or norms-- it means adding yourself to it to help enrich the community with what you bring."¹ Joseph's insight helped me realize that the moment when I truly felt connected to Lowell was when my bond with the Sierra Leonean culture and community strengthened. That symbolic moment came a few years back when I was asked by leaders of the Sierra Leonean community in Lowell to offer the "vote of thanks" during Lowell's raising of the Sierra Leone flag to commemorate the anniversary of our country's independence. Proudly donning traditional West African attire, I read aloud the names of the distinguished city officials who allowed us to perform the honor. I doubt this scene would have taken place any time before I graduated college. Growing up, I struggled to form an identity between the two cultures I grew up in and never truly felt like I belonged to one or the other.

To me, they were at odds, and felt like I had to hide one side in the presence of those who represented the other side. In American culture, I rarely spoke of my mother's soul-stirring food or the experiences of Sierra Leone that my family members would recall. Still, in American circles, I was too African and not American enough, forcing me to further suppress my beautiful culture. My high school and college years were marred by my absence during culture-preserving activities—like church events, cookouts, weddings, and community gatherings—to

¹ Joseph Harris, Liberian, high-school friend and former teammate, Lowell resident for seventeen years, Interviewed December 2019

develop my “American-ness” by playing football or spending time with friends. The few times that I was present at these cultural opportunities, I felt too American, highlighted by the fact that I had forgotten how to speak my native language, Mende. All said, while growing up, the few times I truly felt that both sides of my identity made me a valued member of my community were while playing high school football alongside teammates who represented diverse cultures and could relate to many of the identity issues I grappled with.

Relying on the Community

“There are two types of communities: your own cultural community and the broader community outside your ethnic social circle,” (Matthew Mastas, American, high school friend and former teammate, Lowell native and resident for twenty-five years, Interviewed December 2019).

One evening during college winter break while I was staying at my mother’s home in Lowell, I was told that members of the local Sierra Leonean church would be gathering for Friday prayer at her house. As someone who is not overly zealous about religion, but well aware of how celebratory and emotionally stirring this experience can be (especially in our community), I rationalized that it would be better for me to skip out on Friday worship to hang out with some hometown friends I hadn’t seen in a while. Returning home after midnight from an evening of my own personal celebration at the local pub I was shocked by the scene in my mother’s living room. A large crowd of community members were still huddled together, chanting personal requests mixed with exaltations to a higher power.

I dashed upstairs to my room, hoping no one would notice me so I could call it a night; I’d feel too obligated to warmly greet everyone. But before I went to sleep, I opened my door slightly to listen to the needs of my community. I heard in the prayer requests to deal with the hardships prevalent in immigrant communities like mine, including the desire to protect (physically, socially, and economically) family and friends back in the home country, the resources necessary to help those living here with physical ailments, and whatever it took to strengthen the bonds needed to help keep the community together. In this gathering for prayer, it is evident that the support of the community will always be central to immigrant populations feeling integrated in our host cities. Organizations who seek to assist in transitioning these groups to cities like Lowell need to understand how important this social fabric is and should seek out these communities in informal settings such as churches, cookouts, and festivals.

Lowell’s growing Sierra Leonean population isn’t unique. Places like Boston and Worcester also boast Western African communities like the one I grew up in. In conversations with my mother, I got a sense that the challenges and opportunities that she experiences are no different than those of other Sierra Leoneans in other cities in Massachusetts and across the U.S. She continues to stress that regardless of what city you live in, there is a necessary overreliance from the newly immigrated on the immigrant communities that have rooted in the U.S. They provide the best and most relevant way to find the right channels necessary to access resources in order to integrate in their host communities. I also learned from her that many Sierra Leoneans she knew chose their U.S. occupation because of a comfort level in knowing who would be in those roles, when forced to choose which line of work to enter.

Unfortunately, several African immigrants she knew were forced to restart their careers and aren't able to take up the same line of work that they had in their home country because of differences in education standards. Thus, many immigrants who are well-educated in their home country accept more menial jobs when they immigrate to the U.S. They are often connected to these jobs by members of their immigrant groups. For instance, my mother routinely informs other Sierra Leoneans of job opportunities that arise in her place of employment.

Generational Differences

"I realized some didn't have the full support of their parents,"² said my former high school football coach Scott Boyle (American, High school coach, Lowell native and resident for over forty years, Interviewed December 2019), reflecting on his experience with coaching immigrant students at my high school. His observation sparked an enduring high school memory.

Swaying side to side in front of our home crowd, I was anxiously awaiting my name to be called to get recognition for an honor my brother had received just three years prior. The PA announcer was slowly calling the names of the few Lowell High School seniors who played football for the school on the annual "Senior Night." It was supposed to be one of the many highlights of a successful season, but I couldn't help but notice a pattern playing out: as the seniors were called one by one, most of the American students had parents by their side, but I and other immigrant students rarely did. I heard the loudspeaker blare my name, beckoning me to take the long walk to midfield, without my mother, to meet my fellow seniors.

As I approached midfield, I took the opportunity to ponder the many occasions—Friday night games, the team dinners at a teammate's parents' house, the parent-led fundraisers—my mother was unable to be present at, for a sport I had started taking seriously. My mother had more than enough good reasons that forced her to miss out on my high school athletics. If she wasn't working the sixty-plus hours she was notorious for, she was making sure the needs of the Sierra Leonean community were met, whether that meant cooking for a community-wide event, hosting other Sierra Leoneans, or organizing a social gathering. Her motivations were clear: ensure that her children had a safe place to call home where we could get our schoolwork done, ensure that she was supporting the Sierra Leonean community in Lowell, and provide financial assistance to family back home in Sierra Leone. Football must have seemed like a luxury to her.

The truth is, many immigrant and first-generation students I know struggled with parental involvement in their activities: sports, band, music, or theater. Because immigrant parents often cope with overloaded work schedules and responsibilities to their communities, it makes it nearly impossible to be engaged with their children's extra-curricular activities—an issue that didn't seem to affect the American families I knew growing up. What the students of immigrant

parents miss out on is the emotional, social, and oftentimes financial support that their American peers are privileged to have. Sometimes, “[Immigrant] parents don’t understand the importance of sports and where it can take their child,” said my former teammate, Joseph Harris (Interviewed December 2019). My brother, for example, was not only a model high school student but also a talented athlete who went on to play football at Hamilton College, which opened doors that led him to the success he has achieved in life.

How the City Helps Refugees Integrate



Limitations of Local Immigrant Services Organizations

My mother, like many immigrants who are forced to adopt a new home, came to the U.S. without fully realizing the many transition services offered by the government and nonprofits. There are many reasons for this lack of awareness, including language and communication barriers, lack of transportation to reach service centers, personal discomfort with Americans on arrival, and having to provide childcare during the hours when services are being offered. As a result, many of the immigrants I spoke to felt that they had no other choice but to lean on familiar social networks in order to get a job, find housing, and become settled in Lowell. The transition service workers I spoke to echoed similar concerns. A community organizer from a refugee and immigrant-focused nonprofit transition organization, Lowell Alliance, noted that “The hardest to reach are the ones we want to connect with most.” She said this was because many new arrivals are not so tech-savvy and have language barriers that prevent them from learning of Lowell Alliance’s services.

Unaware of the impact that such programs could have on her experience getting established in Lowell, my mother laments, “I was blind to all these privileges. I felt this when I found out there were resources and privileges available that could assist people like me.” Last year, sitting on a newly purchased couch in my mother’s living room, I couldn’t help but recall her path toward a career and owning a home. I beam with pride when I recall the day I handed her a bouquet of congratulatory flowers after she graduated from her nursing program to become a Licensed Practicing Nurse (LPN), which gave her a fulfilling career and gave her the ability to support

herself and everyone who relied on her. These achievements required a local network of other Sierra Leonians who could empathize with her experiences, assist with crucial services like childcare, provide us meals, and often take my brother and me to school while she worked or studied. Had my mother's social network been nonexistent or more fragile, attaining her practicing nursing license may have been near impossible, even with the presence of immigrant services organizations in the city.

Community-Based Organizations

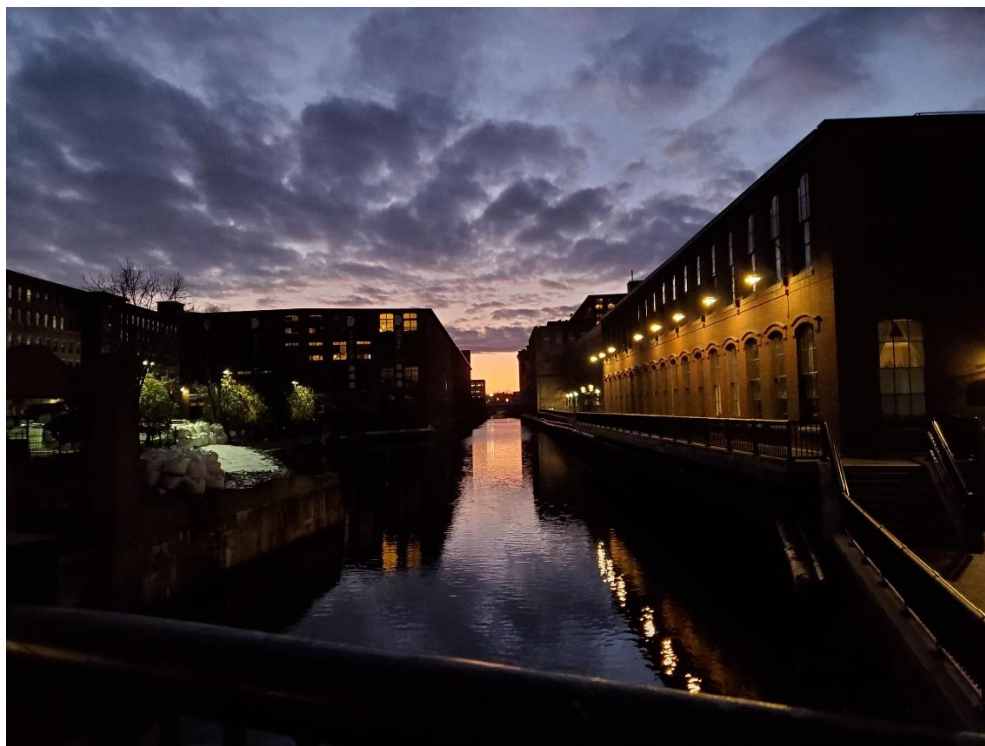
Lowell's transition resources for immigrants heavily [favor Southeast Asians \(particularly Cambodians\)](#), the city's most populous and established immigrant group. However, support and advocacy for African immigrants has gained momentum in recent years, thanks to grassroots efforts by emerging organizations like the African Community Center (ACC). Similarly, Lowell Alliance supports the city's marginalized groups—including low-income Americans, as well as immigrants and refugees—by partnering with a coalition of community leaders and local organizations to coordinate access to resources. Despite the challenges outlined above, these two organizations are determined to help immigrants assimilate to their Western surroundings by providing tailored education for English language learners, access to jobs and training, and advocating for the rights of immigrants. However, both organizations expressed the need for increased participation of local elected officials in funding and publicizing the support of Lowell's immigrant and refugee communities.

Beyond providing tangible benefits, community-based organizations, as ACC's Executive Director noted, help immigrants feel at home. Mary Taurus, a Community Organizer for Lowell Alliance, concurred: "Immigrants and refugees need full, holistic service to not let them fall by the wayside once transition services conclude," she said. She added that "People need to feel a sense of belonging—belonging to both the cultural community and the town they live in. Lowell is considered their second home, especially imperative when raising their children here." (Mary Taurus, American, Lowell resident for twenty-two years, Interviewed December 2019). There remains a need for niche services that are local and culturally adapted.

Conclusion

Fitting in and feeling welcomed in a new place is daunting. The struggles of African immigrants that I observed in Lowell—unstable living conditions, language and social barriers, and limited local resources—can result in a sense of despair. Despite the efforts of immigrant transition organizations, these individuals often lose faith in a host city's ability to fully meet their needs. Often, African immigrants sought support within their cultural communities, which are more easily accessible, offer flexible work-life balance arrangements, support childcare, provide communal cooking, and reinforce customs and norms that may get lost without the strength of a community. While it is important that transition services continue to provide assistance, it is also imperative that immigrant communities help themselves too—and that transition services

respect, work with, and work through these deeply established informal networks. For a city such as Lowell, which gained prominence through the ingenuity and determination of foreigners during the industrial revolution, ensuring that today's immigrants feel connected to the past and future of Lowell will help both refugees and the city to flourish for decades to come.



About the RIT Project

The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

www.refugeesintowns.org