

***Love Thy Neighbor: Migration, Racism, and
Refugee Integration within the American
South***

A Report on Integration from Refugees in Towns
Mobile, Alabama, United States

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Cover photo: Downtown Mobile; photo by author.

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Summary: *This report examines the intersections of both racism and migration within Mobile, Alabama, to contextualize refugees’ racialized experiences within the broader American South. Interviews, historical narratives, and Alabamian politics inform the author’s analysis.*

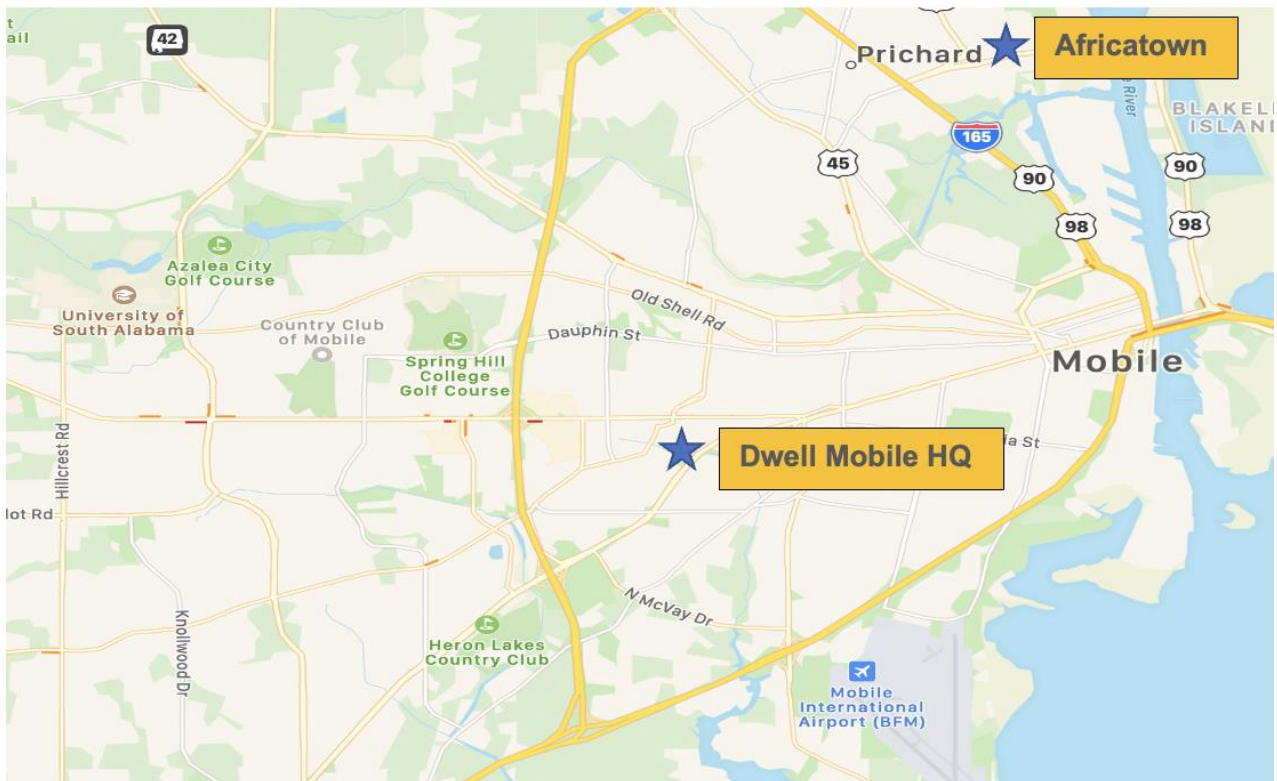
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Location: Mobile, Alabama, USA



Mobile is a port city located at the mouth of the Mobile River in southern Alabama.

Respective locations of Dwell Mobile and Africatown, as noted in this report.



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Introduction

The American South¹ (incl. “the South”) maintains historically tumultuous relationships with both migration² and racism. As a historic epicenter of the African slave trade and Great Migration exodus throughout the 1900s, early migration within the South was largely involuntary. Disparate from other American regions, the South is rarely deemed an immigration hotspot. However, since the 1970s, the American South has experienced an immigration boom as the region seeks foreign labor to support its increasingly globalized industries. New immigrants have impacted the region’s politics, norms, and receptiveness to outsiders, though such impacts are largely undocumented in conventional literature. In a region with a deeply embedded Black and White racial binary, immigrants and refugees have forged new demographic realities.³

The mid-sized city of Mobile, Alabama, has recently experienced demographic changes that are largely representative of the broader American South. Both Mobile and the Gulf Region have grim histories of slavery and racism, juxtaposed with a recent influx of refugees and immigrants. As a microcosm of the American South, Mobile is an ideal Southern city to assess the broader societal and racial impacts of augmented immigration. The following report explores whether Mobile’s history of racial strife impacts its refugee reception. Racist legacies may shape refugees’ thoughts and attitudes towards their newfound community and, in turn, their community’s attitudes towards them. Positive local attitudes towards refugees could indicate a progressive shift away from the region’s racist past. These local attitudes and interactions ultimately help shape how refugees view and understand race within the American South, and further influence refugees’ broader understanding of race relations in the United States (US).

This report bases itself upon my own experiences and exploratory research and is part of a Refugees in Towns’ (RIT) collaboration with the Hello Neighbor Network⁴ to assess refugees’ racial understanding. Between June and August of 2022, I interviewed 15 refugees within the Mobile metropolitan area for this report. Refugee participants highlighted the cultural nuances, struggles, and benefits of life as an “outsider” within the American South. Whereas my research team’s RIT report focused on refugees’ racialized experiences (i.e. how refugees learn about race before, during, and after their journeys to the US), this report seeks to understand the history and cultural context that informed these experiences. Participants’ interviews, along with my own experiences and conversations with US-born Mobilians, explore the roles and challenges of immigrants within Mobile. Respondents highlight the strengths of

¹ The American South refers to states primarily in the Southeastern United States, spanning from Virginia to Texas.

² For contextual clarity throughout this report, “migration” refers to any broad movement of peoples, while “immigration” refers to international relocation.

³ Barbara Ellen Smith and Jamie Winders, “New Pasts: Historicizing Immigration, Race, and Place in the South,” *Southern Spaces*, 4 November 2010, <https://southernspaces.org/2010/new-pasts-historicizing-immigration-race-and-place-south/>.

⁴ This research is part of a broader study with The Hello Neighbor Network. Together with my colleagues in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I interviewed refugees about their experiences with race and racism before, during, and after their arrivals in the US. This research assessed racial dynamics in both cities and compared participants’ responses between two regionally and culturally dissimilar, mid-sized American cities.

Mobile's cultural landscape and present a new optimism for refugee integration within the American South.

Research Significance

Racial strife underpins much of the United States' history, and racial hierarchies have defined and divided Americans for centuries. For incoming migrants, including refugees, these racial structures are complicated and difficult to navigate. Refugees themselves are often compartmentalized by race, labeled as Black, White, Asian, or Hispanic. Though some refugees may have an awareness of race or racism before arrival to the US, many others do not. Further, as "race" is a socially contextualized construct, refugees' home country cultures may conflate race with other categorizations, like ethnicity or nationality. RIT's study with Hello Neighbor sought to better understand how refugees understand, experience, and define "race" and "racism". A Hello Neighbor Network's founding partner, Dwell Mobile, granted me access to its client base for interview conduction. These interviews revealed that race is typically formulated via societal interactions, media, and personal experiences with discrimination.⁵ Though several participants could recount a personal experience with racism in Mobile, all refugees were quick to identify these experiences as isolated incidents.

Though my interviews primarily focused on race and racism, I quickly grew eager to learn more about refugees' individual experiences within the American South. For non-Southerners like myself, the American South has a paradoxical, stereotyped reputation. The South is often seen as a region of both hospitality and racism, and of God-fearing Christians and minority-fearing, xenophobic traditionalists. Outsiders struggle to reconcile these competing perspectives.⁶ Many Americans are quick to pigeonhole the South into a one-size-fits-all box of ignorance and intolerance. As a Northerner exposed to these stereotypes, I was curious to learn more about Southerners and their attitudes towards both race and refugees. I was especially interested to explore *how Southerners react to immigration practitioners and refugees themselves, particularly in a region known for both hospitality and racism*. Conversely, I also wondered *how refugees would react to Southerners*. Based on my own preconceived notions formulated via American media and politics, I hypothesized that most Mobilians would view refugees in a negative light and, in turn, that refugees would feel unwelcome in the American South. To explore my hypothesis, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Mobile-area refugees and US-born Mobilians. I also gathered notes via my own everyday observations, informal conversations, and interactions. Though I foresaw a hostile resettlement environment, my interviews and interactions in Mobile challenged my hypothesis. The following report chronicles these experiences.

⁵ Yumeka Kawahara et al., "Assessing Refugees' Understanding of and Responses to US Race Relations: An Analysis of Findings," *The Henry J. Leir Institute at Tufts University*, November 2022, https://sites.tufts.edu/ihs/files/2022/11/LeirInstitute_RIT-Race-Refugees-Report_v3.pdf.

⁶ Katharine Webster, "Professor Explores Southern Hospitality Myth and Race," *University of Massachusetts Lowell*, 27 September 2017, <https://www.uml.edu/news/stories/2017/southernhospitalityszczesiul.aspx>.

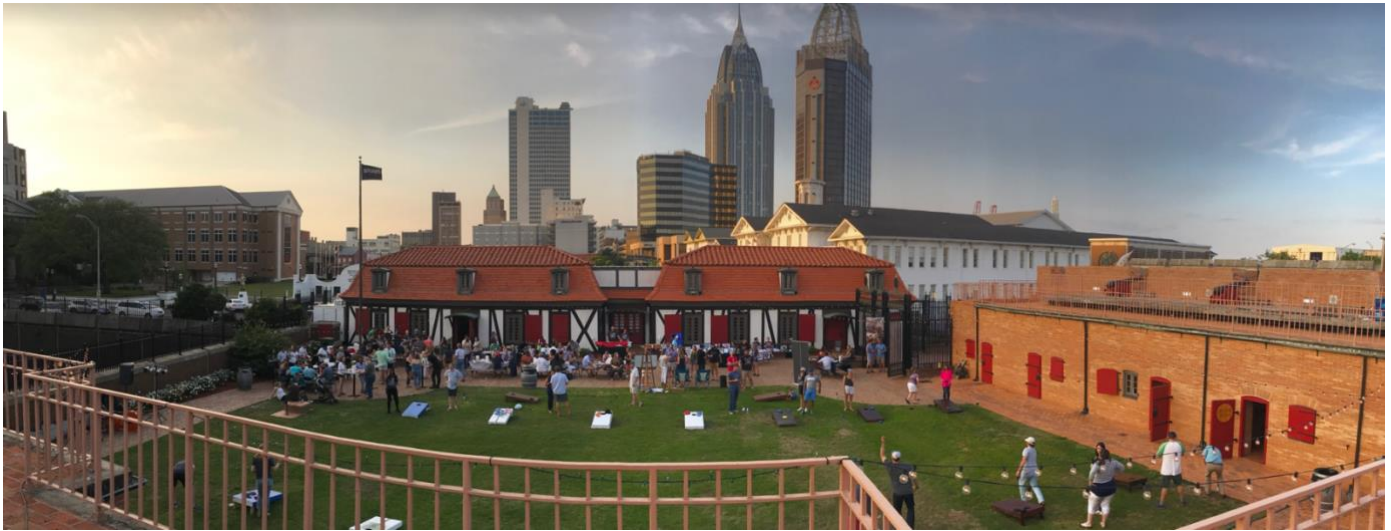


Photo 1: Dwell Mobile community fundraiser. *Photo courtesy of Dwell Mobile, Jeri Stroade.*

BOX 1: The Author's Position and Experiences in Mobile

As a researcher, I aimed to immerse myself in Mobile's community and forge connections with locals of all backgrounds. Though I had visited many Southern states prior to my research, my two months in Mobile marked my first visit to Alabama. I was thus curious to learn more about the city's cultural background and history. Upon my arrival, I was immediately struck by Mobile's charming architecture, hospitable locals, and diverse cuisine. Mobile's laid-back pace contrasted to Boston's chaos, and I immediately felt welcome.

As I settled in Mobile, I began my work with Dwell Mobile, the city's sole post-resettlement refugee services organization. Via Dwell's staff and clients, I gained critical perspectives which informed this report. In addition to my research, I simultaneously assisted Dwell with fundraising, grant applications, and volunteer coordination. In my free time, I made local friends, visited local businesses and museums, and explored new neighborhoods to better understand Mobilians' everyday experiences. Mobile's refugee community was incredibly hospitable (further outlined in the "Methods" section of this report). Outside of this refugee community, I was invited to countless dinners, church services, crawfish boils, and beach trips. Mobile's community fully embraced my presence; having lived in 4 states and 3 countries, I have never experienced such an innate level of hospitality. Community members were eager to help one another, regardless of race or ethnicity.

Such hospitality greatly shaped my own impressions of Mobile, and thus my own experiences that contribute to this report. Although my personal politics were vastly different from many in Mobile, my opinions were always welcome contributions. As I spent time in Mobile, I realized how much I had formerly misjudged the South. **The South is not a monolith**; its political, geographic, and ethnic diversity are no different from other regions in America.⁷ Though the South certainly has its share of racism and inequity, **the region is largely misunderstood**. My summer in Alabama forged new connections and allowed me to develop a newfound understanding of the American South.

City Context: Mobile, Alabama

Mobile is a port city located at the mouth of the Mobile River in southern Alabama. Mobile shares the cultural history of New Orleans, as the French-Canadian settlers founded both cities. Mobile's population is approximately 190,000 and the greater Mobile County is home to approximately 415,000 people.⁸ The foreign-born population in Mobile has doubled in the past five years to approximately 3.36% in 2019. Black/African Americans make up 51% of the city's population while 42% is White.⁹ Mobile has a lower level of income inequality (0.459)¹⁰ than the national average. Mobile's primary industries include healthcare, manufacturing, and

⁷ Mobile, Alabama," *Data USA*, 2022, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/mobile-al>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Supra, see 7.

¹⁰ Ibid.

construction.¹¹ Immigrants primarily work within the healthcare and construction sectors. Mobile has an unemployment rate of 2.8%, nearly a full percentage point below the national average of 3.6%.¹²



Photo 2: Mobile residents enjoy a piano performance. Like New Orleans, Mobile’s early days as French settlement heavily influence its culture. *Photo via Visit Mobile, Alabama – mobile.org.*

History of Race and Racism in Mobile

Mobile’s history is rooted in racism and discrimination, beginning with its early importation of enslaved Africans in the early nineteenth century. Alabama’s fertile soil and widespread land availability initially drew farmers in the Southeastern US to the state. The invention of the cotton gin in 1794 augmented this migration since Alabama’s soil was highly conducive to cotton growing. As the demand for cotton increased, these farmers began to buy enslaved peoples, most often from other Southern states. Alabama soon became the cotton and slave trade hub of the US. By 1861, Black enslaved peoples comprised over 45% of Alabama’s total population.¹³

¹¹ Andre M. Perry et al., “Why local leaders in Mobile, Alabama must address racial equity in the manufacturing sector,” *Brookings*, 16 July 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/why-local-leaders-in-mobile-alabama-must-address-racial-equity-in-the-manufacturing-sector/>.

¹² “December 2022 Unemployment Situation,” *The Alabama Department of Labor*, <https://www2.labor.alabama.gov/>.

¹³ Keith S. Hebert, “Slavery,” *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, <http://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-2369#:~:text=When%20Alabama%20seceded%20from%20the,or%20the%20Black%20Belt%20region.>



Photo 3: Enslaved laborers built the Bragg-Mitchell Mansion, an Antebellum landmark in Mobile. Mobile's history has shaped its present landscape. *Photo by author.*



Photo 4: A plaque recounts the history of Mobile's slave market. Slavery's legacy remains in Downtown Mobile. *Photo by author.*

In 1861, over 50 years after the abolition of foreign slave importation, the last known slave ship in the US entered Mobile Bay. The *Clotilda* illicitly smuggled over 110 enslaved peoples to Mobile from present-day Benin. Upon arrival in Mobile, the *Clotilda's* captain sunk the schooner to hide evidence of this illicit importation. Later, the *Clotilda's* victims established Africatown, the first entirely Black-run community in the US.¹⁴ The *Clotilda's* legacy in Mobile continues today, as over 100 Africatown residents maintain direct lineage to the ship.

In 1901, segregationist politicians rewrote Alabama's constitution to "establish White supremacy in the state,"¹⁵ mandating racially divided schools and public amenities. Alabama garnered worldwide attention for its punitive Jim Crow laws and quickly became the epicenter of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. The Supreme Court struck down these laws, though Alabama passed a constitutional amendment in response that "eliminated the state's

¹⁴ Nick Tabor, "Africatown and the 21st-Century Stain of Slavery," *Intelligencer at New York Magazine*, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/05/africatown-and-the-21st-century-stain-of-slavery.html>.

¹⁵ Megan Thompson, "Racist language may soon be gone from Alabama's constitution," *PBS News Hour*, 19 March 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/racist-language-may-soon-be-gone-from-alabamas-constitution>.



Photo 5: A mural commemorates The *Clotilda* in Africatown, Mobile. *Photo by author.*

underfunded and low-performing, whereas many White residents attend prestigious private schools. Industrial manufacturing runoff has created a cancer epidemic¹⁸ within Africatown and other Black-majority communities; Black residents physically suffer from maintained geographic segregation.

A Brief History of Migration in Alabama

Alabama's immigration history is troubled, as migration and racism have overlapped in the state for centuries. Alabama's colonial French, Spanish, and British settlers displaced local indigenous populations, while settlers' importation of African slaves marked the world's largest forced migration of peoples.

After the Civil War, Southerners generally disliked any outsider, whether Northern or foreign, as the war left bitter feelings towards the Northern carpetbaggers¹⁹ of post-war reconstruction period.²⁰ This bitterness deterred new immigrants from settling in the South and kept the region fairly isolated from new foreign influences.²¹ Beginning in the early 1900s, segregation and poor economic conditions pushed many of Alabama's Black residents north via The Great

¹⁶ "School Segregation in Alabama," *The Equal Justice Initiative*, 28 February 2019, <https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-school-segregation-in-alabama/>.

¹⁷ *Supra*, see 8.

¹⁸ *Supra*, see 10.

¹⁹ After the American Civil War, many Northerners temporarily moved to the South in an effort to garner wealth and/or political power. These Northerners came to be known as "carpetbaggers." Carpetbaggers maintained a general disdain among Southerners, who viewed these Northerners as opportunistic outsiders.

²⁰ Walter L. Fleming, "Immigration to the Southern States," *Political Science Quarterly: The Academy of Political Science*, Vol. 20, No. 2, June 1905, pp. 276-297, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2140401.pdf>.

²¹ *Ibid.*

responsibility to guarantee public education."¹⁶ This law existed until 2022, when Alabamians voted to revise the state constitution and eliminate racist notations within the document.

Despite some progress, structural inequalities still exist between Mobile's Black and White populations. Black workers, on average, make \$25,000 less than their White counterparts each year.¹⁷ Mobile communities remain segregated; most Black residents live in the northern area of Mobile while most White residents reside in western Mobile and in the suburbs across Mobile Bay. Black-majority public schools are typically

Migration. By 1980, Alabama had lost over a third of its Black population to interstate migration.²²

Alabama experienced an immigration boom in the 1970s as the demand for foreign-born agricultural workers increased. Beginning with the inception of the US Refugee Admissions Program in 1975, Alabama established a refugee resettlement program. By the 1980s, large influxes of Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees augmented Alabama's foreign-born population. Similar movements of Iraqi, Congolese, and Somali refugees have followed. Since 2002, over 1,600 refugees have resettled within the state.²³ These refugees coexist among the state's Mexican (27%), Chinese (6%), and Indian (6%) immigrant populations.²⁴ Alabama's immigrant population grew over 145% between 2000 and 2010, as its low-skilled job opportunities have attracted foreign-born migrants.²⁵ However, in comparison to other states, Alabama's refugee population is extremely small. Alabama has welcomed only one percent of American refugees since 2016,²⁶ and even fewer of these refugees reside in Mobile. Though low in numbers, refugees have rejuvenated and reshaped Alabamian infrastructure. In fishing towns like Bayou La Batre, refugees' skillsets and business ventures have revived local economies.²⁷ Mobile's culinary diversity is especially emblematic of its diverse immigrant population—Thai, Iraqi, and Indian foods are widely available. Refugee and immigrant-owned businesses, including restaurants, nail salons, and grocery stores, thrive in Mobile.

Politics and Recent Policies

Mobile County is primarily Republican. Donald Trump garnered 55.3% of votes in 2020, though this number is lower than Alabama's average of 62%.²⁸ Alabama's conservative politics are highly reflective of its policies; the state has tried to limit both refugee admissions and undocumented immigration in recent years. Alabama has passed several anti-irregular immigration laws including Alabama HB 56 (2011), which permits law enforcement to investigate individuals' legal status during routine traffic stops and forbids landlords from renting to undocumented persons. While several portions of this law have been blocked, including its proposed ban on public university attendance for undocumented students, the law remains contentious and garners some public support. In 2016, the state filed a suit against the federal government over its mandated refugee admissions,²⁹ and proposed a bar on

²² James Gregory, "Alabama Migration History 1850-2018," *University of Washington's Civil Rights and Labor History Consortium*, <https://depts.washington.edu/moving1/Alabama.shtml>.

²³ "Refugees among us: Mobile, Alabama," *The Reno Gazette Journal*, 2022, <https://data.rgj.com/refugee/alabama-mobile/all/>.

²⁴ "Immigrants in Alabama," *The American Immigration Council*, 6 August 2020, <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-in-alabama>.

²⁵ Kim M. Williams and Lonnie Hannon, "Immigrant Rights in a Deep South City: The Effects of Anti-Immigrant Legislation on Black Elite Opinion in Birmingham, Alabama," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2016, pp. 139–157.

²⁶ "Refugee Resettlement in Alabama," *Refugee Council USA*, 2016, <https://rcusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2019AlabamaRCUSA-1.pdf>.

²⁷ "Refugee Fishermen Settling in Bayou La Batre, Alabama," *Voice of America*, 12 November 2015, <https://www.voanews.com/a/3054810.html>.

²⁸ *Supra*, see 6.

²⁹ "State of Alabama v. United States of America," *The American Civil Liberties Union of Alabama*, <https://www.aclualabama.org/en/cases/state-alabama-v-united-states-america>.

refugee resettlement. Though dismissed in federal court, this suit reveals the state’s broader anti-immigration and anti-refugee agenda.

The Mobile city government welcomes refugees; however, few resources are available to refugee communities in the area. In my own private conversations with Mobile’s leaders, some expressed hesitancy to publicly support refugees and immigrants. Many Mobilians do not understand that refugees have legal immigration status and, consequently, local leaders fear political backlash if they extend support to refugee and immigrant communities. Catholic Social Services, the primary refugee resettlement agency in Alabama since 1975, also discontinued its refugee resettlement services due to public scrutiny. As of 2022, the Mobile area lacks an official refugee resettlement agency. Subsequently, other faith-based and local organizations have welcomed and supported refugees and immigrants: at Dwell Mobile, eager volunteers often outnumber refugees themselves. Though high community support creates an environment conducive to resettlement, racism and xenophobia still exist in Mobile, primarily via state and local government policies.

Background of Community Partner: Dwell Mobile

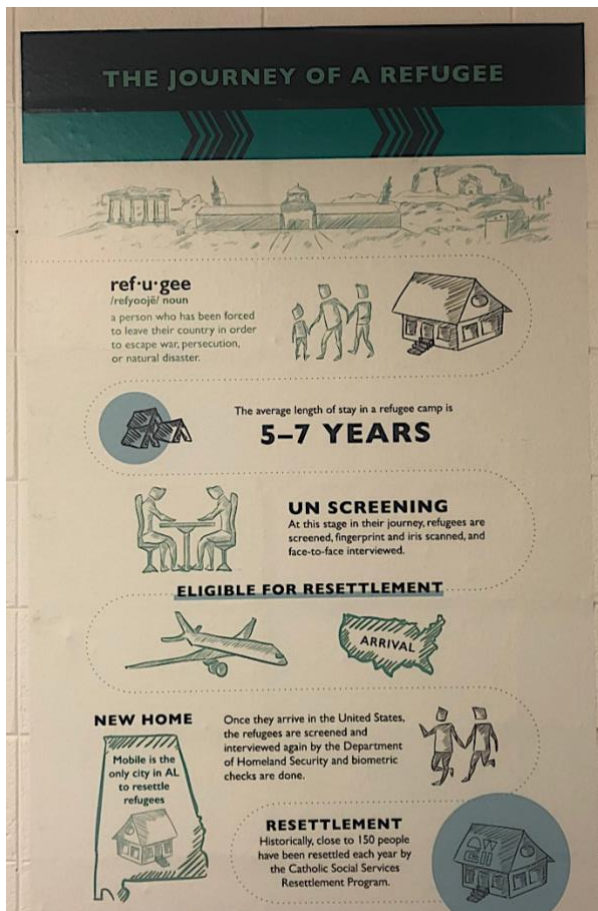


Photo 6: Informational posters at Dwell Mobile educate community members about refugees and their journeys to the US. *Photo by author.*

As the only post-resettlement service provider in the broader Mobile region, Dwell Mobile plays an extensive role in the lives of local refugees. In a state with broadly anti-immigration policies, Dwell Mobile has thrived and has garnered an extensive network of local community support. Such support speaks to many Mobilians’ growing willingness and desire to work with refugees; government policies are not entirely indicative of public attitudes.

Dwell Mobile’s story began in 2015, when founder Jeri Stroade recognized the need for expanded refugee services in the greater Mobile, Alabama community. Jeri began her work with refugees in Mobile in 2010 when she established a refugee outreach program through a local church. As she learned about the resettlement process and Mobile society, Jeri recognized a gap in existing post-resettlement services. Though refugees received assistance for the first 90 days post-arrival, few community resources were available after this period. Resettled refugees needed continuous access to language, financial literacy, and other integration services. Jeri identified Mobile’s need for a community-driven, all-encompassing refugee services organization, and Dwell Mobile was born.

For the past seven years, Dwell Mobile has connected incoming refugee communities with US-

born Mobilians and has helped over 1,000 resettled refugee families find their home and community. Dwell works to ensure that all resettled refugees have the tools and resources needed to thrive in their new environment. As Dwell’s impact expands, the organization has increased its post-resettlement services, including English education programs, food drives, at-risk youth development, and citizenship test preparation. Dwell also hosts several community events to bridge the gap between refugees and Mobilians, which foster greater community inclusivity and inter-cultural understanding.

Beyond its programs, Dwell has established a strong network of healthcare, housing, education, and employment providers. Dwell has an extremely strong volunteer and fundraising base to support its resettlement efforts, as over 500 volunteers have assisted with Dwell’s resettlement services since its inception.

Methods

Mobile’s histories of migration and racism are complex and protracted. I hypothesized that both refugees and US-born Mobilians would negatively perceive one another. To explore my hypothesis and better understand Mobile’s racial landscape, I asked participants about their experiences as refugees and/or residents within the American South. Examples of questions include:

- Have you travelled outside of Alabama or the American South?
- How do you feel about other regions in the United States?
- Do you think racism and/or anti-immigrant sentiments are worse in the American South than in the North?
- Compared to other regions, do you think Southerners are more or less open to refugees and immigrants?

Participants' demography		Participants
		15
Country	Iraq	8
	Congo	4
	Sudan	2
	Nigeria	1
Age (average: 32.7, median: 32)	21-30	6
	31-40	6
	41-50	3
Sex	Male	6
	Female	9
Years in the US (y) (average: 6.4, median: 5)	Less than a year	2
	1 ≤ y < 2	0
	2 ≤ y < 3	0
	3 ≤ y < 4	1
	4 ≤ y < 5	1
	5 ≤ y < 6	4
	6 ≤ y < 7	0
	7 ≤ y < 8	3
	8 ≤ y < 9	0
	9 ≤ y < 10	1
	10 ≤ y < 11	0
	11 ≤ y < 12	0
	12 ≤ y < 13	0
	13 ≤ y < 14	3

I interviewed 20 individuals, including 15 refugee participants and 5 community members. Refugee participants ranged between the ages of 18 to 65. Refugee respondents included 6 males (2 Congolese, 3 Iraqis, 1 Nigerian), 9 females (2 Congolese, 5 Iraqis, 2 Sudanese), 8 Iraqis, 4 Congolese, 2 Sudanese, and 1 Nigerian. On average, refugee respondents had spent a total of 6.4 years in the United States and had a mean age of 32.6 years. Though my interviews with local community members were largely informal, I discussed the aforementioned questions with 5 local community members. “Local” respondents were White, American-born, and college educated. I interviewed 3 local women and 2 local men; 2 local participants identified as liberal and 3 identified as conservative.

Figure 1: Sampling Distribution of Participants

Upon arrival, and for two weeks before I began interviews, I explored the local Mobile community, volunteered with Dwell Mobile, and interacted with Dwell's clients to build a rapport with its refugee community. I built trust with participants via everyday conversation, ESL tutoring, and childcare pickup. After two weeks of observation, I conducted pilot interviews with Dwell staff members. These staff members highlighted any cultural nuances and helped recruit local refugee participants. I assembled a convenience sample from a readily available pool of participants (Dwell's client network). Dwell's staff typically contacted participants via phone on my behalf, though I contacted a limited number of participants via cell phone messaging. Following recruitment and the expression of verbal consent,³⁰ I conducted conversation-style interviews with participants. Logistical constraints limited the provision of interpretation services; as a result, most participants had basic to advanced English skills. Interviews took place at the Dwell Mobile office and in participants' own residences. I spoke to refugee participants over tea and, on occasion, a homemade meal, in accordance with their own traditions of hospitality and meal-sharing. In turn, I provided culturally appropriate sweets to most participants. Interview experiences were not interrogations; each interview was a new connection forged and an invitation to learn. Most participants displayed incredible hospitality and were eager to share their experiences. Participants did not receive compensation for this study. I recorded the interviews (after obtaining participants' permission) and transcribed them myself. All interviews were scrubbed of any identifiable information.

My own experiences and observations have significantly informed this case study. During my eight weeks in Mobile, I maintained a journal and field log of my own observations and experiences. I also incorporated the perspectives of local educators, residents, and community leaders into this report, gathered via colloquial discussion. Though history and policies provide important perspectives, I believe that individualized opinions and conversations more aptly convey the genuine immigrant experience.

Appendix A reveals the sample and interview limitations of my research. My research employed a small sample size and its results are not generalizable. My research is exploratory, and future studies are necessary to establish more equitable and inclusive resettlement programming.

The Refugee Experience in Mobile

Throughout my time in Mobile, I felt included and supported within the local community. However, I wondered if local refugees felt this same hospitality upon their arrival; did my privilege as an English-speaking, White woman afford me a warmer "welcome"?

Upon arrival in Mobile, refugees are thrown into a complex cultural, multiethnic, and multiracial landscape. Though Mobile is a welcoming community, the city itself lacks certain social safety nets for refugees, which can make refugee integration difficult. In spite of this, Mobile's small refugee communities are largely interdependent and provide communal support to newcomers. Consequently, new refugees socialize with other immigrants and forge close-knit bonds. Larger refugee groups, including Congolese and Iraqis, maintain especially close ties with

³⁰ Cleared by the Tufts University Institutional Review Board.

individuals of their respective nationalities. Congolese and Iraqi refugees assist newcomers with translation and cultural services. Other refugee groups interact across cultural lines; connections between Congolese and Sudanese refugees are especially strong. Due to the Sudanese community's relatively small size, most Sudanese refugees connect with other refugees of varying nationalities. Dwell also serves as a gathering place for Mobile's refugees, as its English classes and other events enable refugees to forge shared connections. Within Dwell's refugee client network, everyone knows everyone.

Some participants remarked that Mobile's small refugee population increased the frequency of their interactions with US-born Mobilians, and thus eased their integration. One Iraqi participant noted that she preferred Mobile to other immigrant-heavy regions, as she believed Mobile gave her a more "authentic" American experience. The participant remarked, "*Why would I want to feel like I'm in Iraq when I'm actually in the US?*" This comment begs the question of who is truly "authentically American," as the participant believed that a limited immigrant population allowed her to forge connections with the "real" American population and thus integrate. Other participants remarked that Mobile's small refugee community made integration *more* difficult. These participants cited that Mobile's lack of translation assistance and public transit impeded their interactions with US-born Mobilians. Across all interviews, however, participants gained an awareness of American culture and tradition via their interactions with native Mobilians. Well-established³¹ refugees interacted more often with native Mobilians, and thus felt more connected to their American counterparts.

A Hospitable South or a Racist Region?

Southern hospitality and Southern racism are well-worn stereotypes. The "myth" of Southern hospitality was conjured by White Northerners who sought reconciliation with the South after the Civil War.³² While Northerners viewed hospitality as a general acceptance of other people and cultures,³³ Southerners typically viewed hospitality in individualized terms. Thus, for Southerners, hospitality grew to encapsulate manners and respect within the home, unlike the Northern classification. Today, this respect extends to refugees; several interviewees noted their inclusion in society and felt respected within their communities.

Concurrently, the South's racist reputation lies in its history of slavery and segregation. US-born Mobilian participants believed that the South's history has made the region a scapegoat for broader American racism. One participant remarked:

"Here in the South, we have that history of Jim Crow and slavery. Racism is definitely alive and well for some folks, but 99% of us condemn [racism] wholeheartedly. The Northern US has projected its own facial failures onto the South. It's easy to point fingers at the South...when a racist incident happens here, people just go, 'Well are we really surprised that this happened in Alabama?'. Whereas, in the North, if a racist incident happens, it's immediately condemned"

³¹ "Well-established" refers to those resettled in Mobile for over five years with an intermediate knowledge of the English language.

³² Supra, see 5.

³³ Ibid.

and people say, ‘Gosh, we’re so surprised about this, racist incidents never happen here!’ even when these incidents happen pretty regularly.”

- Local Mobilian

A refugee participant supported this claim, and believed that racism and xenophobia are no greater in the South:

“I’ve traveled everywhere, and I disagree that the South is racist. Yes, there was slavery here, but there’s not as much racism here as in the North.”

- Congolese refugee

Another participant disagreed with this sentiment, though he noted that ignorance and racism are two vastly different concepts:

“The Northern people are more open than Southerners. When you first meet them, they’ve traveled more and interacted with more people, so they understand you. Southerners haven’t left and don’t know as much...but ignorance doesn’t mean you’re a bad, [racist] person.”

– Iraqi refugee

Refugees overwhelmingly noted that their negative experiences in Mobile had little to do with its broader population. No refugees felt endangered, isolated, or unwelcome in Mobile. While some refugees experienced xenophobia, refugees did not attribute this xenophobia to the South. Rather, racist incidents were attributed to individuals and not the broader Southern society.

Local Integration: Reception or Rejection?

Through my interactions with locals and refugees, I better understood local perspectives on refugee integration within Mobile. Overall, refugees and immigrants seemed to garner interest within Mobile. Dwell maintains a large volunteer base, and many locals are eager to support Dwell’s mission. Many Mobilians are devoted to service and helping others; this service and kindness extends to refugees. As practitioner Jeri Stroade recounts in Box 1, few Mobilians understand the legalities of refugee resettlement, and many community members believe that refugees are undocumented. Thus, many Mobilians are less likely to support pro-refugee and pro-immigrant policies. I noticed a disconnect between policy and practice; refugees were welcomed in-person but harmed via policy (i.e. restrictions on government-provided social services like food stamps and Medicare). Based on my interactions with local city officials, I inferred an individualized acceptance of refugees, though the city is hesitant to publicly support and expand services for refugees. Refugees relayed these same sentiments: most felt welcome in Mobile but were frustrated over its lack of social welfare programming. Refugees tend to work in local garden centers and manufacturing plants, in which participants complained of low pay, long hours, and a lack of upward mobility. Few Mobilian businesses employ refugees, and refugees are not afforded the resources needed to develop business and language skills. Though individual refugees are welcomed in Mobile, the group faces broader policy and employment challenges on a collective scale.

BOX 2: A Practitioner's Perspective

In 2015, after volunteering extensively within Mobile's refugee community, Jeri Stroade founded Dwell Mobile to better assist newly resettled refugees. As an immigration service provider and community member, Jeri reflects upon her role and the Mobile community's attitude towards refugees:

"Mobile's refugee community is so big and I think my role has changed over the years as people come [to Mobile]. I think clients come to me for resources and knowledge. They know I am an ally, and they trust me. In Mobile itself, I think residents see me as an altruistic do-gooder. I think the community respects what I do, but people don't always realize the amount of hard work required to run a nonprofit. My job requires a great deal of strategy and planning.

*In terms of Mobilians' attitudes towards refugees, **I think that most people are open to new ideas.**³⁴ When you tell people refugees have come [to Mobile] legally, they're more inclined to help. I don't think a lot of people here realize that refugees are legal. Because of this, there are sometimes some unfair judgments towards refugees. That's what I try to change through my work with Dwell. Lots of people here are willing to learn, but they have to meet [a refugee] themselves to truly change their ideas. **Most anti-immigrant attitudes here stem from a lack of interaction and do not come from a place of genuine hate.** I don't think many people here would be mean or racist in-person towards an immigrant. People are less supportive of [pro-immigration] policies here but are more supportive of the refugees themselves. Dwell's work allows us to forge connections between community members and refugees. Policies matter, but personal connections go a long way in changing people's mindsets about refugees and immigrants.*

People here have a certain gratitude and acknowledge their blessings. People want to help others. And once community members have a [refugee] right in front of them, the refugee is no longer a 'threat'."

Religion and Refugee Reception

Religion plays a major role in Mobile's reception of refugees. Mobile's thriving religious community provides additional assistance to immigrants and refugees; Dwell itself formed in the basement of a local church. Religion intertwines itself in everyday conversation. In my discussions with US-born Mobilians, their commitments to Biblical values were clear. Alabama is the most religious state in the United States, with over 77% of residents noting religion as a "very important" aspect of daily life.³⁵ Many Mobilians are motivated by the Christian Bible's

³⁴ Interviewee acknowledges potential bias in her response, as most volunteers at Dwell are intrinsically service-oriented. Interviewee also lives in a more liberal part of town where her organization is largely supported.

³⁵ Michael Lipka and Benjamin Wormald, "How religious is your state?" *Pew Research Center*, 29 February 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/how-religious-is-your-state/?state=alabama>.

command to “be devoted to one another in love,”³⁶ and, in turn, support the refugee community.³⁷ Churches provide food and funding to charitable organizations like Dwell, and many church members are eager to volunteer and support Dwell’s mission. Though most church groups solely aim to assist and welcome refugees, some Christian missions promote refugees’ religious conversions. One volunteer expressed his desire to “save” non-Christian refugees and promote his faith. Some refugees do convert upon their arrivals: a family of formerly Muslim refugees converted to Christianity after conversations with volunteer pastors. While views on conversion are understandably complex and diverse, interests in religious conversion can motivate some churches’ charitable efforts.

Among refugees themselves, communities of faith serve as integration spaces. Congolese refugees find support in their own churches; Iraqi and Sudanese refugees forge connections at the local mosque. These spaces provide additional financial, spiritual, and emotional support to refugees. Faith communities connect refugees to their homelands’ religious traditions and provide a sense of peace and normalcy during an otherwise tumultuous resettlement period.

Refugee Integration and Perceptions

When they are first resettled, refugees tend to live in bustling, diverse apartment blocks, primarily in western and southern Mobile. Families then move from these subsidized apartment buildings to individually owned residences after approximately two years. Different refugee communities reside side-by-side in neighborhood clusters (see Figure 2). For example, Dwell’s Iraqi clients tend to live in West Mobile’s White, middle class communities, while Congolese and Sudanese refugees reside in the predominantly Black neighborhoods of central and southern Mobile.

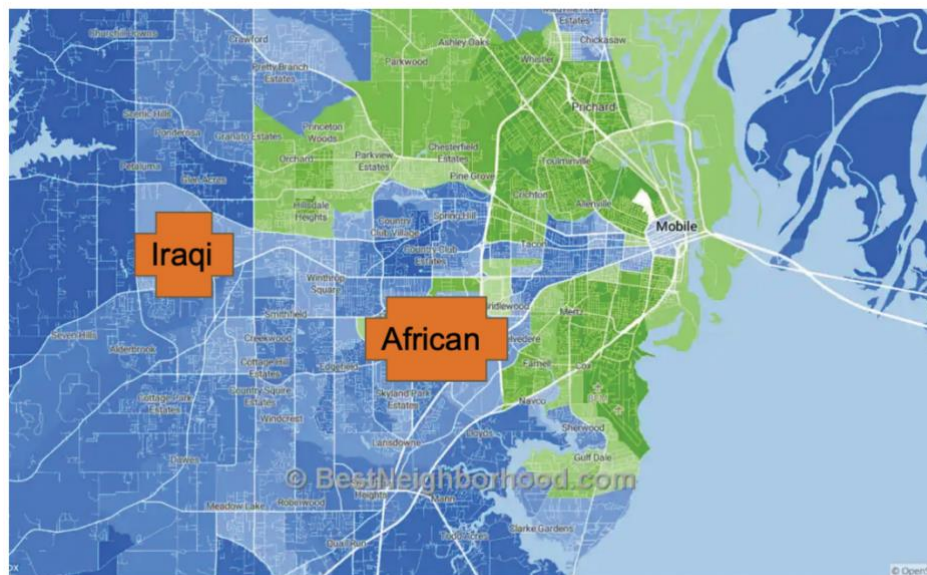


Figure 2: Racial Divisions within Mobile, Alabama¹ (revised by author to highlight Iraqi and African refugee communities)

³⁶ Romans 12:10, *The Holy Bible: The New International Version*.

³⁷ Note the “Role of Pity” in Appendix A.

Neighborhoods transform into spaces of encounter,³⁸ where refugees develop an understanding about American society via their interactions with other ethnic and racial groups. Many refugees learned about American diversity via their neighborhoods:

“Downstairs our neighbors are Mexican. Outside our neighbors are Yemeni. We have Palestinian neighbors. We talk to them a lot. They are good people.” – Iraqi refugee

“All our neighbors [are] very nice. That one over there is Black. This one is White. We are friendly when we cut the grass. They both look out for us.” – Iraqi refugee

Though most participants noted positive relations with their neighbors, some refugees developed negative views of Black Americans via their interactions:

“Well when we came here...I think we saw the Black people negatively because we lived in a bad area with them.” – Iraqi refugee

*“We only go to White [vendors] at the market, but not Black. Black...not nice. White...nice.”
–Congolesse refugee*

Many refugee youth relayed this same sentiment during my informal interactions with them. While driving children home after summer camp, a Congolesse student recounted bullying from “mean Black kids” at school and in her neighborhood. Another student attributed this bullying to cultural differences and believed that Africans had more “drive” than Black Americans. Such sentiments were often replicated at home, as African students were told to “behave” and avoid Black Americans at school. Hostile relationships between African immigrants and Black Americans typically stemmed from the groups’ competing histories, economic interests, and cultural adaptation levels.³⁹ Though social media swayed many participants’ perceptions of Black Mobilians, individual interactions more concretely influenced these participants’ opinions.

Nonetheless, refugees applauded US-born Mobilians’ generosity and kindness. Refugees appreciated Mobile’s ethnic and cultural diversity, and most felt welcome among Mobile’s various ethnic and racial groups. Refugees remained appreciative of Dwell and its volunteers, though refugees may have felt an obligation to speak positively of US-born Mobilians in a formal interview environment.

Despite refugee respondents’ generally positive interactions with local Mobilians, 11 out of 15 respondents indicated a willingness to leave Mobile. Though they enjoyed Mobile’s welcoming population, few felt that Mobile provided adequate employment and language-learning opportunities. Others aimed to reunite with family members elsewhere in the United States. All respondents agreed that Mobile’s peaceful and clean streets provided much security, and this security overshadowed their qualms with the city. Most respondents felt at home in Mobile and identified as “American,” indicative of their belongingness.

³⁸ Aneta Piekut and Gill Valentine, “Spaces of encounter and attitudes towards difference: A comparative study of two European cities,” *Social Science Research*, Vol. 62, pp. 175-188.

³⁹ Benjamin Aigbe Okunofua, “‘I Am Blacker Than You’: Theorizing Conflict Between African Immigrants and African Americans in the United States,” *SAGE Open*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2013.

BOX 3: A Refugee's Reflection on Racism and Refugee Integration

In 2009, Moses came to the United States as a Congolese refugee. Moses now serves as a liaison between Mobilian refugees and their broader community, and his insights have informed much of this report. Below, Moses reflects upon his experiences in the Southern US:

“Helping people is personal to me. I don’t like to be a leader, but I find myself in situations where people want to ask me things. Americans don’t always want to hear about other peoples’ problems, so I’m happy to help my local Congolese community. When I first came [to Mobile], I felt welcomed. There was a great community of Africans and locals, and I felt safe in Mobile. There is a spirit of humanity here that keeps the community together—this extends to everyone.

*I will say that [extracurricular] activities in Mobile are expensive and refugees have less financial support now. Refugee kids can’t play on local soccer teams and it’s harder for families to survive. **Especially in the past five years, America has made it harder to be a refugee.** Mobile needs to fund groups like Dwell that are helping refugees in the area.*

America also needs to allow undocumented people to work. Refugees are lucky since they can work legally, but what about those who cannot? For Hispanic people in Mobile, it’s harder for them to work based on my experience. This is entirely different from the refugee experience.

When it comes to [refugees] and how they are treated [in Mobile], it depends on the person. Some people look at you and frown and have this internal anger, but other people will smile at you and you feel more open to them. As an African, I feel like people trust me because of my background. When people hear that I’m from Africa, they don’t see me as a threat. It might be different with Mexicans and other groups in Mobile.

*Mobile’s past impacts peoples’ views of racism. [Locals] cannot fathom what was done [with slavery, Jim Crow, etc.] and they might try to deny it. There are plenty of racist people here, but I choose to see the good in people and be nice to everyone. **For every racist, there’s ten other people out there who genuinely want to help.**”*

Economic Barriers to Integration

Refugees and US-born Mobilians spoke about the broader challenges of refugee integration within Mobile. As noted, many refugee respondents lack essential integration services. As the only post-resettlement service organization in Mobile, Dwell must meet an array of client needs. Outside of Dwell, few other organizations provide refugees with the resources needed to thrive. Though plenty of organizations provide English programming for immigrants, many refugees lack proper transport. Mobile’s public bus service is limited, and few refugees have access to private transportation. Many refugees work low-paying jobs and have inadequate access to career training programs. Mobile’s public education system is also underfunded and segregated. Refugee youth lack adequate access to ESL programming and counseling services. Mandated school uniforms are also expensive; refugee parents struggle to afford

school fees and other activity expenses. In Mobile, structural and political inequalities are the greatest inhibitors to successful refugee integration. Alabama's policies, not people, hamper refugee integration efforts.

Conclusion

Prior to my experiences in Mobile, I expected that refugees would be negatively received in the American South. Personal stereotypes, regional politics, and the South's embedded history of racism informed my presumption that refugees would face heightened levels of xenophobia. My own conversations, interviews, and interactions suggest that my former beliefs were too simplistic – and based on stereotypes. Racism and xenophobia do exist in Mobile, but participants reported that such occurrences were infrequent. Many Mobilians welcome refugees and are eager to help them. Though some residents probably hold unspoken negative views of refugees, in day-to-day life, refugees in Mobile did not report heightened levels of racism, including when they compared their experiences in Northern cities. My research suggests that refugees' resettlement location has little correlation with the number of racist incidents that they endure.⁴⁰ Despite its history, the South has opened its doors to diversity and refugee reception. As refugees continue to alter the South's demographic landscape, many US-born residents have adapted to this change. Southerners' presumed hospitality extends to refugees, though structural and political inequities impede refugees' successful economic and social integration. Refugees themselves embrace American diversity and present an eagerness to interact with their new neighbors. Mobile's Christian values further inform locals' receptiveness to refugees; churches provide financial support to refugees and ease their transition to American life. Though the South lacks certain resettlement resources, its welcoming population and growing diversity signify its propensity for future refugee integration.

⁴⁰ *Supra*, see 4.

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Appendix A: Methods

Every study has its own limitations; findings cannot be generalized to broader populations and are not reflective of every individual's perspective. I recognize the limitations within my own research and aim to address them here:

Local Affiliation

In Mobile, I recruited participants via the Dwell Mobile network and local community contacts. My affiliation with Dwell may have deterred some respondents from comfortably expressing their beliefs and experiences.

The “Interviewer Effect”

An interviewer's age, gender, and level of experience⁴¹ alter the ways in which participants engage in a study. My identity as a White, non-immigrant woman may have altered participants' responses.

English Language

A lack of interpretation assistance limits this research sample to refugees with basic English abilities. Though Google Translate and family members provided some impromptu interpretation, some participants may not have fully understood our questions. Refugees who do not speak English may face different integration challenges.

Selection and Sample Bias

Most US-born Mobilians featured in this study have some level of affiliation to Dwell Mobile. Consequently, results may inaccurately reflect the views of all US-born Mobilians. Individuals who work with refugees are more likely to support their presence in the region; anti-immigrant individuals are unlikely to work with a resettlement organization. Mobile is more liberal than smaller towns in the region, thus locals may be more receptive to refugee resettlement.

Further, this study recruited Congolese, Nigerian, Iraqi, and Sudanese participants. Participants' responses are not indicative of other refugee groups' experiences. Asian, European, and Hispanic immigrants may experience similar or dissimilar levels of racism and xenophobia. All participants maintained a legal presence in the United States, though documentation status could also impact an immigrant's treatment and/or experiences with US-born Mobilians. As with all research, those with more outgoing, talkative personalities might have been more likely to engage with the researchers and invite the researchers into their homes.

⁴¹ “APA Dictionary of Psychology: ‘interviewer effect’,” *The American Psychological Association*, <https://dictionary.apa.org/interviewer-effect>.

Pity and Racism

An informant in Mobile noted the role of pity towards refugees, particularly in the South. The practitioner believes that some US born individuals victimize refugees and “aren’t able to view [refugees] as autonomous people who can make their own choices...we need to challenge this victimization persona.” Perhaps some people from the US have hidden racist attitudes towards refugees because they feel pity towards refugees. It is possible that refugees experience lower levels of racism, along with a false sense of welcoming, simply because some US born individuals pity them. When a researcher described this study, a White volunteer noted, “I feel so bad for them, it’s so sad. That’s why I help them, [refugees] need my help.” If these sanctimonious attitudes affect refugees’ experiences and autonomy, additional analyses could be useful in assessing the role of pity and resettlement.

The North/South Divide and Resettlement Experiences

Geographical divides impact study responses. Though this study found relatively few correlations between resettlement location and racist experiences, further research will be helpful to assess broader resettlement experiences within the South. Several participants in Mobile noted the South’s reputation as a hotbed for racism and intolerance, yet few participants expressed higher rates of mistreatment due to their geographic location. However, the urbanity of Mobile could have an impact on refugees’ experiences. Studies in smaller Southern cities might very well yield different results; therefore, further evaluation of refugees’ resettlement locations and corresponding integration experiences is required to accurately assess resettlement within the South.



Photo 7: Avenue of the Oaks, Spring Hill College.
Photo by author.

Appendix B: Refugees in the United States

The United States has a long history of welcoming refugees, and though recent resettlement numbers have declined, the United States remains one of the top resettlement countries in the world. More than 3.5 million refugees have been resettled in the U.S.⁴² Resettlement of refugees is conducted through the United States Refugee Admission Program (USRAP). The program is composed of several federal agencies, including the State Department, Homeland Security, Department of Justice, and the Department of Health and Human Services.⁴³ The President of the United States each year determines the number of refugees who may be admitted, along with the designated nationalities and processing priorities.⁴⁴

The United States' history with refugee settlement dates back to the end of World War II, when The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 (or the first specific "refugee" statute enacted by Congress), intended to assist the nearly 7 million displaced persons in Europe as a result of World War II.⁴⁵ Though the United States did not sign the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees established by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), it continued resettling refugees during the Cold War period through ad hoc resettlement initiatives focused on taking in refugees from Communist States.⁴⁶ Following the large-scale resettlement of over 300,000 Southeast Asian refugees in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as becoming a signatory to the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980.⁴⁷ The Act established the U.S. Refugee Admission Program, adopted the U.N. definition of a refugee, raised the number of refugees permitted into the US, and created the Office of Refugee Resettlement to manage resettlement operations. According to the Act, the President, in collaboration with Congress, determines the annual number of refugee admissions and how these admissions are distributed among refugees from various parts of the world. As a result, refugee resettlement in the United States is dependent on the country's present political climate, or zeitgeist, as well as the political party in power. Since the 1980s, refugee resettlement demographics in the U.S. have become more diverse and less defined by Cold War dynamics, with refugees coming mostly from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Burma, Iraq, Somalia, and Bhutan.

A large shift in resettlement patterns occurred after September 11, 2001, when refugee resettlement numbers plummeted amidst security concerns, reaching a low of 27,110 in 2002. Numbers under the

⁴² Blinken, Antony. "The Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2023 -." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State. Accessed February 22, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/the-presidential-determination-on-refugee-admissions-for-fiscal-year-2023/>.

⁴³ U.S. Department of State, 2018.

⁴⁴ Refugee Council USA, 2017.

⁴⁵ "Immigration and Naturalization Service Refugee Law and Policy Timeline, 1891-2003." USCIS. USCIS, February 7, 2023. <https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history/history-office-and-library/featured-stories-from-the-uscis-history-office-and-library/refugee-timeline>.

⁴⁶ Igielnik, R. (2017, February 3). *Where Refugees to the U.S. Come From*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved November 7, 2022.

⁴⁷ "Immigration and Naturalization Service Refugee Law and Policy Timeline, 1891-2003." USCIS. USCIS, February 7, 2023. <https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/our-history/history-office-and-library/featured-stories-from-the-uscis-history-office-and-library/refugee-timeline>.

Obama administration steadily began to increase (with yearly resettlement numbers ranging from 56,424 – 84,994 between 2008-2016), only to be decimated under the Trump Administration.⁴⁸ Trump, who claimed that "refugees constituted a national security, economic, and cultural threat to the country,"⁴⁹ reduced refugee caps to record lows and instituted policies limiting those who qualify for resettlement and enabling state governments to prevent refugee resettlement in their domains. The Trump Administration temporarily suspended admissions of refugees from 11 "high-risk" countries and later imposed further screening. Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, North Korea, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen "accounted for 43 percent of all refugee admissions in FY 2017, but dropped to 3 percent in FY 2018, before climbing to 6 percent in FY 2019 and 14 percent in FY 2020."⁵⁰ Trump's policies had significant long-term consequences. For example, a lack of federal funds forced resettlement agencies and local non-governmental organizations that support refugees to shut down offices and lay off workers.⁵¹ This, combined with the year-long suspension in refugee resettlement in the United States due to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in little over 11,000 refugees being resettled in the United States in 2020.⁵²

Under the Biden Administration, the annual refugee cap increased substantially from the previous administration, jumping to 125,000 in 2022.⁵³ However in the fiscal year 2022, just 25,465 refugees were resettled, falling 80% short of the target.⁵⁴ Not included in these numbers, though, are the nearly 90,000 Afghans and 60,000 Ukrainians who entered the country as humanitarian parolees as a result of conflicts in those regions.^{55,56} Advocates have sounded the alarm about the low refugee admissions, citing an unparalleled global displacement issue--over 100 million persons displaced in 2022--aggravated by war, ethnic conflict, oppressive regimes, and natural disasters. According to the UNHCR, more than 2 million refugees are in need of resettlement in 2023, a number that increased

⁴⁸ Rose, J. (2017, September 27). *Trump Administration to drop Refugee Cap to 45,000, Lowest in Years*. NPR. Retrieved November 7, 2022.

⁴⁹ Montoya-Galvez, C. (2022, October 3). *Biden administration falls 80% short of 2022 refugee admissions target*. CBS News. Retrieved November 7, 2022.

⁵⁰ Monin, Kira, Jeanne Batalova, and Tianjian Lai. "Refugees and Asylees in the United States." Migration Policy. MIP, February 14, 2023. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugees-and-asylees-united-states-2021>.

⁵¹ In addition to formally resettled refugees, historically there have been large numbers of irregular migrants to American cities. Efforts to manage irregular migrants have affected their precariousness to varying degrees. For example, since the 1990s, efforts like the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program have attempted to provide "provisional" humanitarian relief to displaced persons, meant to protect them from deportation and offer the right to work until the "triggering event" of their displacement has been recovered from.⁵¹ By contrast, recent "immigrant bans," bolstering Federal immigration enforcement, and efforts to remove TPS protections under the Trump Administration put strains on both legal migrants from singled-out countries—especially Muslim majority countries—and irregular migrants alike.

⁵² Monin, Kira, Jeanne Batalova, and Tianjian Lai. "Refugees and Asylees in the United States." Migration Policy. MIP, February 14, 2023. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugees-and-asylees-united-states-2021>.

⁵³ Barros, A. (2022, September 1). *Biden Administration Falling Short of US Refugee Admissions Cap*. VOA. Retrieved November 7, 2022.

⁵⁴ Montoya-Galvez, C. (2022, October 3). *Biden administration falls 80% short of 2022 refugee admissions target*. CBS News. Retrieved November 7, 2022.

⁵⁵ "Afghan Arrivals under the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State, February 15, 2023. <https://www.state.gov/afghan-arrivals-under-the-u-s-refugee-admissions-program/#:~:text=Since%20mid%2D2021%2C%20we%20welcomed,also%20known%20as%20%E2%80%9Csafe%20havens>.

⁵⁶ Barros, A. *Biden Administration Falling Short of US Refugee Admissions Cap*.

36% as compared to 2022.⁵⁷ In 2023, the Biden Administration again set the refugee admission ceiling to 125,000 refugees and took additional steps to resettle this number. These steps included deploying approximately 600 additional personnel at U.S. refugee processing centers overseas, increasing the number of local domestic resettlement offices from 199 to 270, and expediting refugee processing.⁵⁸ As refugee agencies continue to rebuild, legislators, refugee activists, practitioners, and researchers alike continue to seek legislation to secure financing and human-centered resettlement policies in the U.S.

⁵⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Global Refugee Resettlement Needs Will Rise Steeply next Year." UNHCR. UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency. Accessed February 22, 2023. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2022/6/62b18a714/unhcr-global-refugee-resettlement-needs-rise-steeply-next-year.html>.

⁵⁸ Montoya-Galvez, C. (2022, October 3). *Biden administration falls 80% short of 2022 refugee admissions target*. CBS News. Retrieved November 7, 2022.

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 a deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Leir Institute for Human Security at The Fletcher School at Tufts University.

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.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

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

About the Author: Lucy Mastellar



Lucy Mastellar is a second-year MA candidate at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, where her studies focus on migration and international law. Prior to Fletcher, Lucy worked in a variety of roles throughout the private and public sectors, including the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and a leading international Big Law firm. Lucy has hands-on experience navigating refugee and asylum crises in Greece and at the United States - Mexico border. Lucy earned her BA at American University, where her final thesis assessed the intersection of religious extremism and migration. Her grandparents' own stories of anti-Polish discrimination throughout the twentieth century drew me to this study. Lucy hopes that her research will inform more expansive and racially equitable asylum policies.