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West African Refugees in Baltimore City: Pros and Cons

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West African Refugees in Baltimore City: Pros and Cons

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PIM 74

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for a Master of Arts in
International Education at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA

May 16, 2016

Advisor: Peter Simpson

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Abstract

Conflict in Africa remains one of the continent's principal development challenges (David, 2009). However, peace remains the highest priority in the minds of people across all of the African continent. The unfortunate violence and conflict have left so many African citizens to constantly live in fear, and this fear has increased the urge for many to flee their countries for safety. This research study seeks to explore the experience of West African refugees in the United States with more focus on Baltimore City. This research work also examines their integration process and challenges they face, including the opportunities they receive and bring to the United States. Ten West African refugees from Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, and Guinea were interviewed. The Researcher collected data through a focus group and a face-to-face interview with each of the participants. From the findings, six principal themes were generated: safety, advanced educational system, rigorous application process, language, economic factor, and attitude. This research work suggests how stakeholders can improve in making the integration process less stressful for refugees.

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Chapter One

Introduction

It is no news that more and more West Africans are fleeing their countries due to an epidemic of extreme ethnic crisis, poverty and political oppressions to gain refuge or asylum status in different countries. Karin (2010), in her literature, states that “approximately 60,000 refugees entered the United States in 2008, many of them arriving to metropolitan areas” (p. 9). She went further to analyze that although this population is 10 percent, which is a relatively small portion of total immigration, resettlement placement decisions excessively impact a city’s urban fabric and foreign-born population. However, Kristen (2011), in the Spotlight report, states that the number of African immigrants in the United States grew 40-fold between 1960 and 2007, from 35,355 to 1.4 million. Refugees are placed under a resettlement program that is designed for them in order to achieve a successful integration within 8 months of arrival. However, despite the access to temporary services, refugees tend to still face obstacles to integration in their host communities.

In a community filled with refugees from different countries, I am interested to explore the integration process of West African refugees in Baltimore City and how they adjust to the economic and political difference from their home countries. I also seek to explore opportunities they encounter in the United States, especially in Baltimore City. As a career coach working presently with refugee youths in Baltimore City, I decided to select Baltimore City as the location for study due to several services and initiatives rendered that exemplify the struggles of refugees.

Refugees all over the United States go through the same process before they are placed in a particular state. However, what they experience differs from state to state. The purpose in

researching this topic is to understand the integration experience, resettlement process, opportunities they enjoy, as well as the challenges they encounter in the host community from the viewpoint of West African refugees themselves.

Definitions

- **Refugee:** A refugee is someone who has fled from his or her home country and cannot return because he or she has a well-founded fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group, (Annual Flow Report, 2014).

According to the Article 1 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, a refugee is defined as: “A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country: or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such event, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”

- **Asylee:** An asylee must meet the definition of a refugee. However, he/she must be in the United States or seeking admission at a port of entry (Annual Flow Report, 2014).
- **Foreign born:** Foreign born are often non-citizens, but many are naturalized citizens of the country that they live in and others are citizens by descent, typically through a parent. The term foreign born encompasses both immigrants and expatriates but is not synonymous with either (Annual Flow Report, 2014).

- **Integration:** I view integration to mean the process of allowing people of all races to use a place, institution, or organization.

Qualifying for refugee status is a pathway for any refugee. The individual seeking refugee status must meet the definition of a refugee and must be found unable to return to the country of origin or remain in the second country or country of temporary asylum (Karin, 2007).

Problem Statement:

For West African refugees who have lived in Baltimore City for over three years:
How has your experience living in Baltimore City affected or impacted your resettlement process?

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

While more research has been conducted examining Sub-Saharan African refugees in the United States, very little literature exists on West African's struggles in their resettlement and adjustment process (Singer et al., 2008, Briggs, 2005). More research is conducted around refugee integration in the European Union (Daley 2007; Robinson, 1998). This could be because refugees are only a small part of total US immigration statistics.

According to the Year Book of Immigration Status, (2013), different categories of people that immigrate to the US are:

- Permanent Residents (persons who have been granted lawful permanent residence in the United States. They are also known as “green card” recipients),
- Naturalized citizens (persons aged 18 and over who become citizens of the United States. Most legal permanent residents are eligible to apply for naturalization within five years after obtaining Lawful Permanent Resident status),
- Non-immigrants (persons who are authorized to stay in the United States for a limited period of time. Most nonimmigrants enter the United States as tourists or business travelers, but some come to work, study, or engage in cultural exchange programs), and
- Refugees and Asylees (persons who sought residence in the United States in order to avoid persecution in their country of origin. Persons granted refugee status applied for admission while outside the United States. Persons granted asylum applied either at a port of entry or at some point after their entry into the United States),

Statistically, in 2013, 173,100,000 persons obtained nonimmigrant admission to the US, 779,293 persons were naturalized, 25,361 persons obtained lawful permanent residence, while only 13,984 refugees gained a refugee status (Year Book of Immigration Status, 2013). The aforementioned analysis shows how small the portion of refugees are in the total number of immigrants to the US in 2013.

For the purpose of this research work, I will break down the literature review into different sections.

Refugee Immigration to the United States

This section examines how refugees' immigration started in the United States, the guidelines in place to facilitate immigration process, as well as the stakeholders involved in the resettlement process.

Korac (2003) stated that in the immigration studies literature, integration is understood in terms of social service provision by the receiving society and access to social services that facilitate resettlement. This understanding is particularly significant due to the fact that people prioritize job, education, income, social status etc. higher than from integration (Karin, 2007).

Immigration to the United States began as an open-door policy (Karin, 2007), where foreigners (mostly unskilled workers) were welcomed to partake of the "American Dream," but later shifted towards a selection process. Presently, more preference is given to educated and skilled workers. Karin went further to state that immigration regulations give preference to more highly educated workers and family members of US citizens, while entry of poor huddled masses is reserved for one category – refugees (p. 15). Quota systems for refugees started in the 1920s (Karin, 2007). The United State began accepting more refugees after the refugee crisis of World War II, where 250,000 displaced Europeans arrived after the war under the quota system.

In his literature, Holman (1996) states that President Harry Truman issued an order that 90 percent of the regular quotas for Central and Eastern Europe were to be used for displaced persons, and the US accepted 400,000 more of the 1 million refugees who resettled overseas. According to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR, 2007), the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was amended to produce the US Refugee Act of 1980 describing requirements and assistance process, while identifying the refugee's economic self-sufficiency as an important aspect of the resettlement process. This amendment opened doors for Cuban refugees in 1980, when almost 125,000 arrived in the US (Karin, 2007). Similarly, the Displaced Persons Act of 1984 initiated federal regulation of this refugee's resettlement process, giving preference to people who will engage in educational and vocational professions (Gordon, 1996:350).

Resettlement Process

The US Refugee Act of 1980 amended the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and prescribed requirements for admission and the duration of assistance (Karin, 2007, p.16). Also, in the legislation, it states clearly that employable refugees should be placed in jobs immediately and also recognizes economic self-sufficiency as an important expectation of the resettlement system, (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2008). It also states that states must have a federally approved plan to provide assistance to refugees.

Coordination of the US resettlement is based on the public-private partnership administered by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) (Karin, 2007). DHS manages overseas processing, reception, cultural orientation, and adjudication of cases, including security clearance through local resettlement agencies, while DHHS manages federal funding to US states assistance programs.

At the state level, each State Refugee Coordinator oversees the state programs for a continuum of employment, education, case management, health, and financial support services to newly arrived refugees. However, the State Coordinator is not involved in placement decisions. He/she monitors contractors to ensure compliance with requirements from the Department of Public Welfare, the Bureau of Employment, and the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (Karin, 2007).

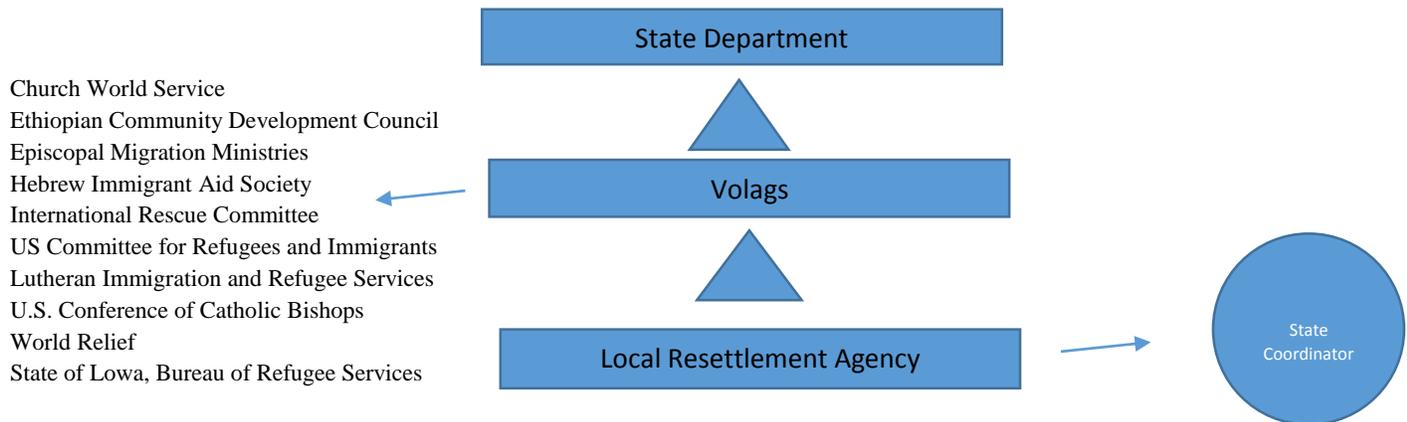
The State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (BPRM) works with Volags (Voluntary Agencies) who receive funding on a per capita basis for refugee resettlement. Volags include nine national refugee resettlement agencies and one state-sponsored agency. Volags are responsible for sending a brief description of the arrival's biography to their local affiliated resettlement agencies. Once the local affiliate agency receives the biography of the arrival, it is their responsibility to arrange housing, clothing, employment, and medical care for the period of three months after arrival.

Similarly, the U.S. Department of State's fact sheet on Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Process (2013) provides procedures and 98 guidelines for individuals that might want to gain refugee status in the United States. Although resettlement in the United States goes through a long process that can last months, if not years, the process is voluntary. Resettlement process is at no charge, but the applicants, if approved, would be required to sign a promissory note for the flight ticket and would have to pay the cost back at a specific time upon resettlement in the United States.

The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) in 2008 reported that there were nearly 42 million refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons (IDPS)

around the globe. Karin 2007 states that refugees represent 15.2 million, almost one-third of this total population.

- **US Refugee Resettlement Structure**



Adapted using data from Karin (2007).

Statistics on Refugees

This section analyzes the total number of refugees admitted in the United States from different countries, with more emphases on West African countries.

According to Singer and Wilson (2006), New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago were ranked as cities that hosted the largest population of refugee communities. The data from the metropolitan areas with largest refugee populations from 1983 to 2004 shows that New York received 12 percent and Los Angeles received 7 percent of all arrivals. More than 30 percent of Soviet refugees settled in New York City, making New York the city that received more Soviet refugees than other cities (Karin, 2007).

The total of African Refugees increased from 58,179 in 2012 to 69,909 in 2013 (Year Book of Immigration Status, 2013). Similarly, the Office of Immigration Statistics, in their Annual Flow Report (2014), analyzed that 977 refugees from Democratic Republic of Congo arrived in the United States, due to civil unrest in 2011, 1,863 arrived in 2012, and 2,563 arrived

in 2013. These statistics ranked Democratic Republic of Congo as the 7th top country of nationality that come to the United States. This analysis shows an increase in the number of refugees that immigrated to the US.

The report went further to analyze the total number of West African refugees admitted into the United States between 2008 and 2012. A total of 31 refugees were admitted from Cameroon, 4 refugees were admitted from Ghana, 23 refugees were admitted from Guinea, 6 refugees were admitted from Guinea-Bissau, 121 refugees were admitted from Ivory Coast, 3 refugees were admitted from Niger, 83 refugees were admitted from Nigeria, 11 refugees were admitted from Senegal, and 236 refugees were admitted from Sierra Leone.

In Maryland, a total number of 5,368 refugees were resettled between 2008 and 2012, and from this total, 994 were from Africa. (Maryland office for Refugees and Asylees, 2013). Out of all the West African refugees admitted, a total of 51 refugees from Sierra Leone were resettled in Baltimore between 2008 and 2012. Similarly, from Guinea, a total number of 3 refugees were resettled in Baltimore, while other refugees from other West African countries were resettled in other states. (Maryland Office for Refugees and Asylee, 2012).

In Africa, the spread of Ebola in Guinea, Nigeria, Senegal and Sierra Leone has killed over 3,000 people, which is having a huge effect on the economic activities in West Africa. There is no longer a smooth movement from one country to another. This outbreak has also affected the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) operations on refugee resettlement. For instance, since July 2014, UNHCR has suspended Ivorian refugees from returning to Liberia. According to Gwendolyn Glenn (2014), there were over 2,500 Liberian Americans living in Baltimore as of 2014.

In September 2014, immigrants from Liberia were the thirty-second largest foreign-born population in Baltimore, while immigrants from Nigeria were the sixth largest foreign-born population in Baltimore and the largest foreign-born African population in the city. In addition, according to Sven Rubenson (2003), in September 2014, speakers of various languages of Africa were the third largest non-Anglophone group of language speakers in Baltimore, after Hispanophones and Francophones.

Community Reaction to Refugees in Baltimore City

In an article in the Baltimore Sun titled “*Families that fled strife a world away are now Baltimore’s newest homeowners*” (Yvonne Wenger, 2015), Ruben Chandrasekhar, the executive director of the rescue committee in Baltimore who was interviewed said: “Refugees also enrich our neighborhood with their cultural values by establishing strong family and community relationships, pushing their kids to excel in our schools and showing respect for and taking care of the elderly.”

Opportunities Refugees Receive

Refugees have more opportunity and access to state and local benefits than other groups of immigrants. The following are some of the opportunities refugees enjoy in Baltimore city and in the United State as a whole.

Refugees have legal status in the United States

Refugees receive immediate status upon their successful application process and when the necessary requirements have been met. Gaining status is a pre-requisite in their integration process. When refugees arrive in the United States, they have the right to apply for a permanent residency after a year of being in the United States. With their legal status upon arrival, they have the legal authorization to join the workforce. It is important for them to equip themselves

with the necessary skills needed to get employment in order to advance their career opportunities.

Access to services

Various opportunities are opened to refugees when they arrive in the United States. They enjoy both local and federal programs. Resettlement Support Center (RSC), a local resettlement agency, is a great resource for providing necessary information and providing community resources. The refugees undergo cultural orientation the first week they are in the United States. This orientation is conducted to expose them to the American way of life, from food, mode of dressing, weather, language, to mention a few. However, the services differ depending on the location of resettlement.

In addition, apart from the services from local and federal sources, refugees also enjoy social, ethnic and volunteer networks that assist in navigating through the existing programs and systems. The Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs), which are community-based organizations operated by former refugees, help the newly arrived refugees in their integration.

Similarly, as mentioned above, the Department of State's Reception and Placement program under BPRM provides assistance for refugees' resettlement in the United States. There is a standard cooperative agreement between the Department of State and each of the nine domestic resettlement agencies that specifies the service that each agency must provide to each refugee. The resettlement agencies match the particular needs of each incoming refugee with the specific resources available in a local community. The nine domestic agencies have placed refugees in about 190 communities throughout the United States (U.S. Department of State, Diplomacy in Action, 2016). The agencies provide housing, make available schools with special services, medical care, English classes, and employment services, to mention a few services

within their capacity. Tatiana Dwyer (2010) opines that grants secured from Reception and Placement Program (R&P) are used for the basic core services to refugees within the first 30 – 90 days post-entry to the United States.

In Baltimore, the Baltimore Resettlement Center (BRC), a local resettlement agency provides services for newly arrived refugees. One of the organizations under their umbrella is the Department of Social Services that facilitates refugees' access to public benefits. They provide caseworkers that work with a refugee's family in the resettlement process. They also provide services that ensure that they receive benefits like food stamps, housing, and other amenities they need to be comfortable in their new home. International Rescue Committee (IRC) which is one of the Volags, assists Baltimore refugees in obtaining the necessary documentation needed to work in the United States, and the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services provides the bulk of social services to the refugees in Baltimore city.

Furthermore, private organizations like the Baltimore City Community College (BCCC) provide educational services, which include English Language classes and employment training. An organization known as the Refugee Youth Project (RYP), a department under the Baltimore Community College, conducts services to help the refugee youths in the community. A recent initiative for assisting refugee youths in Baltimore is the career coaching which I coordinate. I meet with clients who we refer to as "opportunity Youths" (youths that are out of school) from ages 18-24. I assist them to write resumes, apply for college and secure scholarships, engage in work readiness trainings and apply for jobs. This initiative has helped many of the displaced refugees in Baltimore City.

Another initiative is the Matching Grant Program. According to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, Matching Grant Program is an alternative to public cash assistance providing

services to enable ORR-eligible populations (refugees, asylees, Cuban and Haitian entrants, Victims of Severe Forms of Trafficking, and Special Immigrant Visa Holders (SIVs) to become economically self-sufficient within 120 to 180 days of program eligibility. The Matching Grant Program was established by the Congress in FY1979 with federal funding of about \$1,000 per refugee. According to Karin, (2007) it serves as the main program for refugees. This grant program aims for refugees of working age to secure a job. To qualify, participants must be between 18-65 years old. They must not be disabled and must be employable. A full-time commitment is required for participants that want to enroll in the program with a four-month timeline. The program provides financial support of 4 months' rent and \$200/month in cash assistance to families until employment is secured. Success of the grant program is determined by the number of refugees who completed the program by securing employment. However, Ramic (2009) stated in an interview that what refugees need is a post-Matching Grant Program with long-term goals.

Opportunity Refugee Bring to the United States: Ethnic diversity

The US is a country filled with people from different cultures and races. According to the Boundless Report (2015) on the racial and ethnic diversity in the US, the US Census in 2010 states that white Americans (non-Hispanic/Latino and Hispanic/Latino) are the racial majority, with a 72% share of the U.S. population. Hispanic and Latino Americans compose 15% of the population, making up the largest ethnic minority. Black Americans are the largest racial minority, composing nearly 13% of the population. The White, non-Hispanic or Latino population comprises 66% of the nation's total. The United States is a diverse country, racially and ethnically, with over six races officially recognized by the U.S. Census Bureau (Boundless report, 2015).

In addition, the U.S. has successfully integrated millions of refugees over the years. According to the data from U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics, the largest refugee groups in the U.S. from the last two decades have only some overlap with the largest refugee groups in the world overall.

According to Claire Gordon (2015), the largest refugee groups in the US in the last two decades were:

- Afghanistan: there are currently 2.6 million Afghan refugees. But in the last 20 years, the U.S. has taken in less than 20,000,
- Rwanda: by 1994, 2.3 million people had fled the country. The U.S. has taken in less than 1,500,
- Syria: since the Syrian crisis began more than two years ago, more than 2 million refugees have fled the country. Since then, the U.S. has taken in 90 Syrian refugees,
- Former Yugoslavia: from the civil war that broke up Yugoslavia in the early '90s, and the NATO bombing campaign in 1999, 1.7 million in the region became refugees,
- Iraq: while the U.S. began taking in large numbers of Iraqi refugees in 1998, it did relatively little to address the Gulf War's refugee crisis. In 1991, Iraqi refugees totaled 1.4 million, and
- Liberia: the 1999-2001 civil war in Liberia resulted in 640,000 refugees. The U.S. took in a number of displaced Liberians during those years, and in the last two decades, has accepted over 33,000.

According to Bloemraad and Graauw (2006), the United States had almost 40 million foreign born people which constituted 12.9 percent of the country's 309 million residents, a proportion four times the global average. This statistic indicates that the United States is a country with huge diversity of people from different backgrounds and culture.

From the above statement, it is evident that refugees have positive impact on the community in which they reside.

Challenges

National Policy on Refugee Integration

The United States as a diverse country has various laws, regulations and policies. Some of these laws differ from state to state. A national refugee policy on integration will create a national platform on integration which will influence and improve the process of refugee integration. Creating a general policy with the same standard for a whole country can be daunting. However, a central framework should be put in place. In addition, there should be a standard framework within refugee resettlement which includes refugee integration. Tatiana Dwyer (2010), conducted an interview for her paper titled *Refugee Integration in the United States: Challenges and Opportunities*, with the Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program staff. The interviewees supported the fact that a national policy on refugee integration when enacted will set up clear goals, benchmarks and funding that will promote and improve the system. Also de Graauw (2008) states that different states in the U.S. are working on creating policies to improve the social integration of immigrants in their states. Some states like New York and Maryland are developing programs to support refugee resettlement and integration in their jurisdiction. However, there still seems to be a large gap between the foreign born and native which is one of the main red flags for integration.

Cultural Adjustment and Attitude of Host Community

The cultural adjustment process can be intense and daunting. However, adequate assistance and guidance from the earlier stages of integration will go a long way in helping with the refugee settlement and adjustment process. Apart from the fact that most refugees tend to have undergone violence and trauma prior to their entry into the United States, moving to a new environment can be stressful. This post-traumatic stress can make refugees susceptible to physical or emotional attack or harm. It might not be easy for refugees with such a past to integrate smoothly into the new environment. Some of these refugees take months, if not years, to adjust to the new resettlement life. Cultural adjustment is a crucial element for a successful integration.

The communities that most African refugees resettle in is paramount. From my experience as an immigrant to the US, I am of the opinion that most natives tend to be extremely unfriendly and hostile to the refugees, which can create timidity and extreme anxiety for them. Due to this situation, it is important that refugees are settled in a conducive and accommodating environment with people who will appreciate them regardless of their background and status. This will in turn aid the smooth process of integration. Some communities are not open to having new cultures and traditions around them. Host communities need to be educated and enlightened about who the refugees are and the positivity they can bring to their communities. They also need to be exposed to the importance of being culturally sensitive because no culture is supreme. This process will contribute immensely to the smooth transition. In addition, there is need for the local resettlement agencies to provide locations that will be suitable for the refugees and to conduct cultural orientation for not only the refugees but also host communities that they serve.

Communication Skill

Most African refugees are not exposed to the western way of life and some of them do not have the English language skills to thrive in the United States. Many of the refugees have difficulty understanding the culture and securing employment because of their inability to speak and understand English. For example, in Baltimore, the Refugee Youth Project under Baltimore City Community College serves refugees from middle school to high school. Many of these refugees cannot communicate in English and most of the time interpreters are called upon to interpret, if needed. The office organizes after-school programs that assist them with English language learning and help with their homework. This avenue has helped many of the refugee youths in Baltimore city. Most of them now speak English at an advanced level of competence. In addition, Free English Language classes are organized by public and state colleges solely for non-native speakers of English who are willing to learn English as a second language. However, access to these programs is limited due to limited funding by the government.

Economic Factor

Tatiana Dwyer (2010) opines that “economic self- sufficiency is as important to refugees as adapting to their new homelands social rhythms” (pg. 19). She went further to note that in line with the Refugee Act of 1980, refugees, irrespective of the countries they come from, are expected to achieve early economic self-sufficiency in order to be independent. Thus, social services programs such as language training, employment and housing assistance, and cash subsidies are put in place to facilitate economic goal. Most African Immigrants in Baltimore city tend not to have skills necessary to work and settle immediately, rather they require some form of assistance and vocational training before they can take up jobs in an industrialized organization.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This research work is a qualitative case study. Yin (2003) describes qualitative case study to be the “preferred strategy of ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (p.13). He went further to note that multiple sources of evidence must be employed by the researcher (p.23).

Data Collection Methods

The primary method used to collect data, in addition to an in-depth review of relevant literature, was through a focus group interview and one-on-one interviews with ten participants from West African countries. Babbie and Mouton (2006) states that individual interview is one of the most frequently used methods of data collection within qualitative research, where the researcher is provided with greater flexibility, iteration, and continuity to elicit more information from the interviewee. This indicates that interaction and a firm grip on the content of the interview is necessary to elicit more information on the subject matter by seeking to understand the motivation of the process from interviewee.

One-on-one interviews were conducted in the participants’ school. Scheduling interviews with the participants were easy as it was always the same location. The one-on-one interview was helpful for the timid ones. They were able to open up and gave constructive answers to my follow-up questions. Also, one of the ten participants is at the beginner level of English and could not respond at the same pace as the intermediate and advanced speakers. I was able to gather information from the advanced speakers. An interpreter was used in the one-on-one interview I conducted with the one participant who could not express herself fully in English. It

was easy as the interpreter was her friend and speaks the same mother tongue. After conducting interviews, I was able to gather information sufficient to respond to the questions.

Prior to each interview, I read the informed consent form (see Appendix 1) and told participants that the research work was for my capstone. I also explained that the research work seeks to explore West African Refugees in Baltimore City, their integration process to the United States, experiences with the host community, the challenges they are faced with, including the opportunity they receive and bring to the United State with more focus on Baltimore City. I promised to keep their responses confidential.

Interviews were recorded on my iPad with permission from the participants, and hand-written notes were taken to ensure proper transcription. On average, the interviews took 35 minutes to complete. The longest interview was for 55 minutes. I transcribed the interviews as soon as possible after conducting them.

Data Analysis Methods

According to Neuman (2006), data coding system is used to condense and reduce the large amount of raw data to small and manageable data into analytical categories. He went further to states that the researcher uses an open coding technique to identify interspersed thematic categories, so as to link both complementary concepts and theories together, and also to identify contrasting features in the data.

Using open coding, I categorized the data into six themes based on the frequency of the response. Thereafter, I used axial coding to determine how these particular themes illustrate the perception of the participants on the impact of the host community on their daily lives.

Participants' Demographic

Ten participants from West African Countries were represented. Four of the participants were males and six participants were females. Four of the participants were from Guinea, three were from Guinea Bissau, one of the participants was from Nigeria, one from Ghana and the last participant was from Senegal. All the participants were 17 to 19 years of age. All the participants are in high school, with different levels of English language capability.

Chapter 4

Presentation of Data

In total, ten participants were interviewed. For the purpose of this section, narrative analysis will be used to highlight the themes that were generated from the focus group interview as well as the one-on-one interviews. To protect the identity of my participants and also keep my promise to them, I will refer to my interviewees as participants A-J.

Findings from the Interviews

During the coding of both the focus group interview and the one-on-one interviews, six principal themes emerged.

Safety:

After asking the participants three general questions about whether or not they fit the criteria for this research work, why the United State was their country of choice was one of the in-depth questions asked. Not surprisingly, of all the ten participants interviewed, seven expressed that safety for their lives and that of their families were the primary reason for fleeing their home countries. Participant D said “my family chose the U.S. because they believe that it was safer because we were endangered in our home country.” Also Participant F expressed that “we had to go to three countries before we were able to get the refugee status in the United States. We were been rejected from the other two countries.” I went further to ask her why they left their home country, she replied, “it was because my father’s family are from the royal lineage and there was an issue about who should be the next chief. His brothers started killing themselves. We had to run to another country. When we got there, we applied for a refugee status but we were rejected. We had to go again to another country before they gave us the refugee status.” Participant F’s situation is reflected in the definition of a refugee, stated in the

Article 1 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol as mentioned in chapter one under the definition section.

Other participants' answers were similar to that of participant F. Participant J responded to the question saying, "There are no wars in American and my parents are certain that our freedom will not be cut off."

I asked the participants whether they ever thought of going back to their home country in future as a follow-up question, seven of the ten participants responded saying "NO". I asked why and their answer was that their home countries are not safe.

Advanced Educational System:

Education is one of the most important factor for the interviewees. The interviewees displayed a broad range of educational experiences. Surprisingly, all the participants except two expressed that the educational system in the United States is far better and advanced in comparison to that of their home countries. Participant B expressed that "there are more resources in American schools, there are computers and enough books for the students compared to my country." Furthermore, Participant G said that "American teachers are not as strict as African teachers." However, most of the participants stated that there is discipline in African schools compared to American schools. Participant A complained about how the students tend to be extremely rude to the teachers. "Students in my school are kind of disobedient and disrespectful. They play music on their phones so loud and doesn't listen when they are told to put their phones away," she said.

Rigorous Application Process

When asked about the application process, all the participants gave negative answers to the question. All the participants expressed that the process of gaining refugee status in the

United States is a daunting process. Participant C expressed how the health clearance stage took forever to complete. In addition, Participant F in her statement voiced how her family had to leave their country to three different countries before they were given a refugee status to the United States. The evidence gathered from these participants validates my claim in the literature review that the application can go into months, if not years. Participants also expressed how they were asked a long series of questions. Participant G said, “I remember how my parents were asked questions that they couldn’t remember the questions when they came out from the interview because they had already lost count of the questions.”

Language

All the participants expressed that language difference was the most challenging experience they face upon arrival to the United States, when they were asked about the significant experience they faced in the United States. Most of these refugees have zero understanding of English upon their entry to the United States. Understanding both their teachers and fellow students was daunting for most of them at first. This challenge supports Rivera-Batiz’s (1990) and Chiswick’s (1991) stance on language barriers. They stated that the importance of language skills cannot be overstated for immigrants integrating in the US, particularly for entry into the labor force.

Participant E stated that “I used to be ashamed in the classroom when the teacher asks me a question that I can’t answer because I don’t know how to put the English in a correct manner”. Another participant expressed that “my classmates always laugh at my sister and I because we had interpreters in the classroom to interpret what the teacher was teaching.” The above responses support that most refugees have little or no knowledge of English language before they entered the U.S.

In addition, when the participants were asked what they would want differently in the US, six out of the ten participants said that English language classes should be given to their parents because their parents could only get jobs that do not require the use of English. Participant C said, “My dad only got a construction job because he doesn’t have to speak English and my mom works at an African restaurant.” Similarly, Participant J expressed that “I would want the government to organize English classes for our parents that will not be expensive so that they can at least get a better job.” The wish of this participant supports Korac’s (2003) statement highlighted in the literature review, that access to social services facilitates settlement.

Furthermore, when asked what services the participants receive from the government, all the participants expressed that the government provided housing, health care, and food stamps for their family. However, they believe that more support should be given to them beyond the few months they receive support. This evidence also validates Tatiana Dwyer (2010) statement that grants secured from Reception and Placement Program (R&P) are used for the basic core services to refugees within the first 30 – 90 days post-entry to the United States.

The participants also mentioned that they receive support from Baltimore Resettlement Center (BRC) and International Rescue Committee (IRC). The IRC provided navigators and mentors for their families. Participant F said that “I have a mentor that comes to the house on weekends to assist me with my homework and help me apply for college.”

When the participants were asked how they improved their English speaking skill, Participants A, D, and H expressed that they got extra assistance from their teachers. Participants B, C, E, F, and G said that Refugee Youth Project’s (RYP) after-school program helped to improve their English because they were always using the language with the volunteers that worked with them. However, two of the ten participants interviewed expressed that the program

can be boring sometimes. They suggested that more activities should be incorporated by the office to better engage the students.

Economic factor

Economic factor was one of the themes that surfaced from the interviews. Two of the ten participants interviewed complained that the situation their families found themselves in was not what they expected. Participant C stated that “my parents thought that as soon as we enter America, their government will be responsible for us.” I went further to ask a follow up question of why the family might think that way. The participants replied, saying “we saw on the TV how the government provide for their citizens.” As I wrote in the literature review, everyone wants to partake in the “American dream,” however, the realization set in when they arrived in the country that nothing can be achieved without hard work. According to David (2009), he states that high unemployment among refugees can result in protractive refugee aid dependency. He believes that gaining employment early after arrival in the host country can help refugees integrate in the communities within which they work.

Also, as Karin (2007) states, people prioritize job, education, income, social status etc. differently from integration. The evidence gathered from the participants indicates they initially thought that once they arrived in the United States, the next thing was for them to start working and start earning the dollars they dreamt of. The evidence gathered is enough to support the claim that refugees need to be economically sufficient as it is an important step in adapting to their environment. The interviewees believes that job opportunities are a key factor when considering integration into the host community.

Attitude

Surprisingly, there was a diverse response when the participants were asked how they perceived the attitude of the host community. Four of the ten participants expressed that African Americans were mean to them in school compared to white American. That was surprising to me because of the same skin color they share. According to Participant D “once they hear our accent, they automatically know that we are not Americans, then they start laughing at us.” From the responses given by the interviewees, I realized that the attitude of the African Americans in their school is one of the dominating factors making the interviewees associate with themselves, and not having the desire to mingle with the African Americans.

Chapter 5

Moving Forward

Conclusion

This research work asked questions about the integration of West African refugees in Baltimore City, the challenges they face, as well as the opportunities opened to them. From the data analyzed, it is evident that guidelines for refugee resettlement differ from country to country. Some refugees were able to apply and gain refugee status from one country, while some had to move to other countries before they could gain the status.

According to David (2009), integration is a comprising mutual adjustment and participation by the host community, as well as by the refugees themselves, rather than as a one-way process of assimilation in which refugees learn to adjust and settle into prevailing culture of the host society. Despite the opportunities opened to refugees, for them to make use of these benefits, it will depend on factors as education, language, employment experience, and attitude of the host community.

After collecting and analyzing the data gathered, it was discovered that participants had both positive and negative experiences. Amidst all barriers, resettlement agencies do provide services to support refugees in the United States. According to Blum (2009), resettlement agencies are at the forefront in facilitating refugee integration and can “make the transition more easy or difficult.” I support Blum’s statement as they are the first people refugees meet upon their arrival. They are responsible for conducting orientation and providing housing placements, and employment counselling. These task is delicate one and the ability to deliver effectively, will strongly determine refugee’s successful integration.

The US Refugee Act clearly states that refugees should be given employment immediately after their arrival. This is not only because employment is key but also because it creates in them a sense of self-sufficiency and a means to escape poverty.

Through analysis of the data, six principal themes emerged. Three of these themes (Rigorous application process, Economic factor, and Language) were directly in-line with previous research studies cited in the literature review. Safety, Advanced educational system, and Attitude were themes that represent specific concerns of the refugees interviewed.

In addition, it will not be out of place to assert that successful refugee status depends on a host of factors: education, language factor, quality school system, and household composition. Absence of these factors could lead to frustration and deterring integration.

Limitations

In completing the research study, key limitations were noted that included:

First, the pool of participants was relatively homogenous, largely female. It would have been interesting to have equal gender representation. In addition, it would be interesting to compare the responses of these youths with those of their parents that are in the labor market. Many of the participants entered the country at a younger age and might not remember some events that happened during the process of integration. However, their parents would be more knowledgeable in this regard.

Second, time was a significant limitation for this research project. Because of the time constraints, I had to proceed quickly from interviewing to transcription, and then to coding in order to meet the deadline. There was little or no time to reflect and relax.

Finally, English language was another limitation as not all the participants are at the same level of English language. Some of the participants are advanced speakers of English and it was

not difficult for them to express themselves. However, for the lower level speakers, an interpreter had to be used. This addition prolonged the interview time a little further.

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Appendix 1

Written Informed Consent Form

You have been invited to participate in a research study conducted by Christianah Adeneye from the SIT Graduate Institute Capstone in the spring. My research is designed to explore West African Refugees experience before gaining a refugee status in the United States, their integration and adjustment process in Baltimore City, which is their resettlement site, and opportunities they bring and receive in Baltimore City, including the possible challenges they might be facing.

If you feel uncomfortable with any question, you may choose to opt out of that question. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Any audio recordings will only be administered with your consent and will be destroyed once my research is complete. If you wish to possess an individual interview recording, that can be arranged on request.

Your participation is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Christianah Adeneye at 347-681-1663 or christianah.adeneye@mail.sit.edu. You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

Your signature indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation, and that you will receive a copy of this form.

Signature

Date

Appendix 2

Instructions to informants & interview guide

Instructions & Interview Guide

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to be a part of my research study. This research is designed to explore West African Refugees in Baltimore City, Pros and Cons. In this study I will be asking participants a series of questions through interviews and a focus group. Participants will be asked to describe key events in their experience from their country and in Baltimore City, and how that experience (positive, negative or otherwise) altered (or perhaps did not alter) their adjustment and integration process. A written sample of the questions will be sent to you ahead of time upon request. Risk is anticipated to be minimal and will vary on a case by case basis. If you have any questions or clarifications about this study, please contact Christianah Adeneye as written below.

***Interview:** Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Participants' identities will be kept confidential by the researcher. All data will be destroyed upon completion of my research.*

***Focus group:** The list of questions will be provided to you upon request prior to your participation. If you feel uncomfortable with any question, you may choose to opt out of that question. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Any audio recordings will only be administered with your consent and will be destroyed once our research is complete.*

Your participation is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.

Copies of the final research project will be made available upon request.

I hope you will find this research study to be beneficial for yourself as you reflect on your own experiences. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Christianah Adeneye at 347-681-1663.

Appendix 3

Data collection instrument

The ten participants will be scheduled for individual forty-five minute interviews with the researcher. Participants will be asked the following questions:

a. Background Questions

- What part of West African are you from?
- How long have you been in Baltimore City?
- Why you believe you fit the criteria for this study.

b. In-Depth Questions

- What inspired you to apply for a refugee status and why was United States your choice?
- What was the process like before your application was approved?
- Describe a significant experience that happened to you when you arrived into the country.
- How can you describe the attitude of your host community towards you?
- What benefits do you receive from government and people around you?
- What is not really working well for you at present?

The researcher will inform the participant that they can leave at any time and are not obliged to answer any questions they do not feel comfortable with.