Episode 239: Supporting the Needs of Refugees

Lisa: Hi, I'm Lisa Hernandez

Lizzy: And I'm Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich

Lisa: And we are your hosts for Scholar Strategy Network's No Jargon. Each month, we will discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers without jargon. And this month we are talking about refugee resettlement in the United States.

Lizzy: And a topic that can only get more and more timely. Uh, as we see the, the amounts of refugees across the world, and those who are seeking to live in the US increase.

Lisa: Absolutely. I mean, there's definitely a lot of political turmoils, a lot of, uh, climate turmoils, a lot of everything going on in the world and people are shifting to places that they wanna resettle to, or not, they want to resettle to, but have to resettle to. So it was really interesting talking about the process of what it's like to actually flee your own home country and have to move elsewhere and find assistance and lack of assistance

Lizzy: Right. It's that final part. When we think about immigration and we think about refugees, we think so much about the journey or I do anyway. The things that led them to flee their country and the process of them coming over here. But then once you get here, once you've really made it, there's a whole new kettle of fish you're opening up.

Lisa: Right. You're having to relearn everything about your surroundings, everything about like, how do you fit into this entire new world that you are being pushed into?

Lizzy: And there's a host of services for that. Yes, but Dr. Nicole Kreisberg says they are not quite enough.

Lisa: Uh, yeah, so I'm glad that we got to talk to Nicole about the services and what there needs to be more of. So for this week's episode, I did speak to Nicole Kreisberg, who is a sociologist who studies the relationship between organizational behavior and employment, declines among refugees and employment discrimination.

More generally. She's a bell fellow at the Harvard Center for Population and Development studies. And she just recently co-wrote a paper Explaining Refugee Employment Declines, Structural Shortcomings in Federal Resettlement Support for the academic journal, Social Problems. Here's our conversation…

Lisa: Hi, Nicole. Thanks for coming on No Jargon.

Nicole: Thank you for having me.

Lisa: Of course. I wanna start by talking about some numbers that are pretty staggering. So according to the United Nations, we currently have around a hundred million forcibly displaced people in the world, which is alarming.

And of course, with so many crises, like the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and the war in Ukraine. Just this past year, we have seen an increase in the number of people fleeing their homelands and seeking safety in places like the United States. So let's start by getting an understanding of these conditions and what people are fleeing from.

Um, can you share some of those conditions?

Nicole: Yeah. Sure. So obviously we've all probably read news accounts, um, from Ukraine most recently, I just read, I think it was yesterday that, Some parents just buried their four year old who was hit while on a walk in a missile strike. So aside even from these really atrocious levels of violence that individuals are fleeing just in their day to day lives.

Even after that level of violence, a lot of individuals have to face a really protracted period of uncertainty and precarity. So. I was touring...um, it's not a refugee camp technically, because these were folks who were displaced within the country that they were fleeing. But I was touring a camp for internally displaced persons in Haiti.

One year after the earthquake in 2010. So this was 2011 and not everyone gets placed into a refugee or internally displaced person's camp. But among those who do they, they have some, things in common and, you know, if you can picture rows and rows of, of, and then along the perimeter, fence with larger tents where folks can receive healthcare assistance or education.

This tent camp had had no paved roads, so, it was quite dirty and there was also no running water. So at the time, cholera was a big problem. And, and I would imagine that now COVID 19 is a big problem with, with anyone living and, and cramped or crowded conditions without access to proper sanitation.

But that's just an example of, you know, What individuals have to go through, not just violence that they're escaping, but sometimes a period of, of years where they're in a limbo in terms of their legal status and they're, and they're in a limbo physically without access, even to safe housing.

Lisa: You just mentioned Haiti, and people who were suffering consequences of climate disaster. So as far as refugees coming into this country, these numbers like the hundred million…do those also account for people escaping climate disasters?

Nicole: So it includes individuals who are internally displaced. That's about 50 to 51 million. Unfortunately, or at least, unfortunately according to some, refugees by definition, are only defined as people who have fled war violence, conflict or persecution, and have again by definition crossed an international border to find safety in another country.

So as it stands right now, individuals who are fleeing climate disasters, whether that be a long term climate shift or an acute event, like the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, it's actually challenging for those individuals to seek any kind of refuge in another country under that term. So what countries like the United States do instead is find other legal pathways to accept individuals, either asylum, meaning individuals have crossed the border, let's say through Mexico or, crossed the border by sea through Florida, for example, and are seeking legal asylum.

Once they arrive rather than refugee status from abroad or a number of temporary protected statuses, that have a lot fewer resources than refugee status, but at least provide some kind of lawful admission. And so that's been, you know, something of, of debate in the refugee policy community, but obviously as these latest.

Fires right across, across the world. Um, and today, at least in, in the UK have shown these acute events probably aren't going to be abated anytime soon. So it might be necessary to provide more paths for admission for climate refugees.

Lisa: So people that do fit into the category of refugees, how do they transition from being in their country to going to the us? What kind of program is there for people that are facing the conditions that have them in the category of refugees and resettling in the United States?

Nicole: Well, it definitely starts from. the origination country. And I would say there are two different paths. One path is if there's a protracted period of armed conflict, let's say in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, it might be, as I said, several years or even decades before individuals are ultimately resettled into.

A third country like the United States, but when there are really acute events, like Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for example, the United States has to sort of scramble a little bit because the refugee resettlement program is built. I would say for more protracted periods of violence, where the United States might have time.

Like let's say several years, to arrange and coordinate and screen individuals to come into the United States, meaning pair them with a sponsoring resettlement organization. find them an

exact location or city in the United States. Arrange for, for flights, a range for lawful permanent resident card, a social security number, all of that takes time.

And so when we have these, emergent crises, like in Afghanistan or Ukraine, the United States has to. Divert its attention somewhat from the formal refugee resettlement program by also opening up other avenues to admit more individuals much like they did after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. So the United States, for example, currently has a ceiling of a hundred thousand refugees for the fiscal year, the Biden administration.

Uh, more recently said we are going to make it a goal to admit a hundred thousand refugees beyond that ceiling, just from Ukraine and by the summer. and they've, they've gone a long way in meeting that goal and that's in part by working around the refugee resettlement. Formal system and using these other legal pathways.

So, humanitarian parole is one example. Asylum is another example. Um, so really exhausting, like any kind of legal. possible in a more creative way to admit as many people as possible. And, the state has done that in response to other acute events as well. But that's, that's the process of just getting into the border in the United States.

It's, it's complicated from day one.

Lisa: It definitely sounds like there's a huge increase of people that are having to flee different areas. And also I'm assuming that the funding is not going to be. expanding all of the time, um, in order to meet the needs that are, um, having to be met by all of these crises.

So I wanna talk a little bit about in your paper and your brief that you wrote with some coauthors. You talk about how when refugees are being resettled, a lot of the focus is on self sufficiency, for the refugees. Can you tell us a little bit about the goal of self sufficiency for them and how these nonprofits settlement agencies are helping them work towards that?

Or if that's maybe not working for them?

Nicole: Absolutely. So as it stands right now, it's a lot better for an individual to be coined a refugee than any of these other lawful pathways and that's because refugees, quote, unquote, get a huge number of resources as soon as they step foot in the United States. So I was volunteering with a refugee resettlement organization back in 2015 and Providence, and I accompanied a

Syrian family. This was one of the first Syrian families that was resettled in Providence, Rhode Island at the time, and learned a little bit about what kinds of resources, refugees get that other migrants that might be fleeing similar or the exact same circumstances don't get, because they're not officially deemed to refugee, but the family that I helped a little bit. When they first

arrived, I had accompanied them to get social security cards. They also received temporary cash assistance, food assistance, they had three children. So the parents had help, with getting them acquainted with what schools each of the children was going to be getting into.

They each had different sets of mental health counseling options. The mother was introduced to a G E D class. the father was trained abroad, had a college degree abroad, but, Couldn't necessarily translate that college degree into the United States because he didn't speak English. So were also provided with English language assistance, and then employment counseling.

And something I didn't say was, as, as soon as refugees arrive, they're greeted by a case manager at the airport and taken to their, their housing. So fortunately, no refugee has to find their own housing to the best of my knowledge organizations have already. Secured housing for individual families and they accompany refugee families to that housing.

Now that housing might look very different from Rhode Island say to Denver, Colorado, but that's a resource that refugees have as soon as they arrive into the United States and another resource that only refugees have compared to other migrants who might be fleeing similar circumstances, but haven't been lucky enough to be afforded that label. And so these are a huge number of services that are all given as soon as folks step foot onto the United States. The problem is that self sufficiency is the ultimate goal of the refugee resettlement program. So even though these are a really phenomenal amount of services that refugees are afforded and other migrants, uh, who might be exactly the same other than for the term are not, those services end rather abruptly.

And the dates vary between, you know, three months and eight months, depending on the source of funding. But the common thread is that once individuals funding ends, the idea or the expectation is that those refugees are quote self-sufficient, meaning employed and no longer relying on cash assistance from the government.

Lisa: Three to eight months, as you shared that…it's not a pretty, that's not a long time for someone to get settled in an entirely different country facing whole new set of challenges. Um, so what are your recommendations for, improving upon the system that we have right now?

Nicole: So one thing that we found in our paper was. There are a lot of resources given to refugees. And there are a lot of organizations who even have the resources to help refugees beyond that three to six to eight month time period. these are faith-based organizations, community organizations. Local volunteers who are asking sometimes, you know, begging for more opportunities to help.

And one thing that we found in our paper in Social Problems was that there's just not a lot of coordination between official organizations that resettle refugees, whose funding to support refugees ends in that, you know, three to eight month time period. And then these other kinds of

organizations that, you know, may or may not receive some kind of funding from the government.

They might receive funding from foundations. They might be entirely volunteer driven. [00:13:00] And so one thing we talk about a lot in our paper is, the need for more coordination between all of these kinds of organizations. because I think that there are resources out there to help folks beyond eight months.

It's just a matter of coordinating them so that refugees aren't left with a gap in care, between when they're they're formal quote unquote refugee services end and when they might prefer those services to end, if they haven't say found, a higher paying job yet, that lets them breathe a little bit more easily without government assistance.

Lisa: And then as far as the collaboration between organizations. so they are just federal resettlement focused organizations and how many different types are there?

Are there ones that just focus on job placement? Are there ones that just focus on housing and you're thinking they could work together?

Nicole: Yeah. So right now there are nine major organizations in the United States that resettle refugees. And then once they're assigned a caseload of, let's say a hundred people, it's usually more than that, but let's say a hundred people, they might filter down those a hundred people into. They're not called this, but I'll call them subsidiary organizations organizations on the ground.

that then have case managers who are assigned to like one of those 100 people. And so case managers are actually really crucial in, connecting refugees to all of those services. You mentioned. So connecting folks to. House, initially connecting folks to employment counseling, to educational assistance.

They're really in charge of shepherding individuals from the second. They arrive to the United States until when they're no longer eligible for services. And so the problem is that these official resettlement organizations often don't, former speaking with smaller organizations that are not subsidiaries of those nine big resettlement agencies.

So if I, as a volunteer, wanted to say sponsor a refugee family, which happens fairly frequently, let's say with a church or a synagogue or something, there's. an easy way for me as a volunteer to even do that. Because right now, these two sets of organizations we found in our paper work in parallel, but they don't really coordinate with one another.

And so, I think that in addition to this focus on, on self sufficiency is a problem. Especially given that the, the mandate for self sufficiency, which comes from the government is really focused on

immediate employment. And that's the other big takeaway of our paper is that, immediate employment doesn't set individuals up for long term socioeconomic success because immediate employment

often takes place in lower wage, sort of dead end jobs. That for example, don't require you to speak English, that don't have many paths for upward mobility or promotions. And so. It's that combination of this focus on like, get a job as quickly as possible. And, once you're done getting that job, you know, formal services kind of end and other organizations might not even know you need assistance.

That's the tension, I would say, in, in the formal refugee resettlement program. Right.

Lisa: So we've talked about it as a national issue, but of course, um, people are being resettled two states. Are There particular states that have taken on the issue and figured out how to maybe have more local organizations take on some of the work of helping with long term resettlement?

Nicole: There are, there are a number of initiatives that are trying to think more creatively about employment and about self sufficiency. So one organization actually recently interviewed me, was in Colorado. They're trying to set refugees up to be entrepreneurs in the hotel industry. So not just, working as, you know, cashiers or back of house, kitchen staff, or cleaners jobs that might not have passed upward mobility. but rather thinking about how refugees could potentially start their own businesses in food services or, or in the hotel industry, and hire, you know, other folks as well, to help with any number of services.

And so I think that there are definitely local pushes out there in the United States to think more creatively about how they can work within the federal guidelines, which are very strapped, right? I mean, if, you, as an organization are losing out on funding in six months to support a family, you know?

Yes. It's understandable that you want, uh, that family to be quote self-sufficient and earning an income as quickly as possible. But I think there are other organizations out there and initiatives out there that are trying to think creatively about ways to work within that guideline. While also thinking ahead about long term upward mobility for families.

Lisa: And we talked about the timeline that you addressed was like three to eight months, just varying. is there a chance that this timeline can be increased for these services? As far as national, assistance goes?

Nicole: So that's been one thing that's changed between. The Obama Trump and now Biden administrations is a massive fluctuation in federal funding. And when we were working on this

paper, we had conducted interviews with organizational leaders across the country who at this time, this was, you know, the interviews ranged from this past year to like 10 years ago.

And at all of those points in time, a common thread was like, we don't have enough money to do the work that we need to do. Like we don't have enough case workers. We don't have enough, you know, even internal human resources to service refugees. Even in those first six months. I think that one, you know, it takes a lot more funding to extend the timeline beyond six months, but two, I think it takes more resources than what organizations are allotted now to even work within the six months.

And so that's something that the Biden administration for example, has committed to doing since the. Refugee resettlement program was, was slashed pretty markedly in terms of funding during the Trump administration. But I think there's still this tension between, you know, what's expected for organizations to accomplish in terms of resettling refugees and what actually happens on the ground.

Lisa: Um, I always feel silly asking about whether you feel hopeful about something, but to anyone in general, but do you feel hopeful that things will improve for refugees, in this country moving forward? Especially since we have quite a bit of experience just from this year, um, trying to meet the demands of newer refugees coming in.

Nicole: I feel like there's reason to be hopeful because there are a lot of individuals. I think the, you know, recent media attention has made it clear. There are a lot of individuals who want to help. I think there is an op-ed in either the Washington post or wall street journal. The headline was like, we should allow just individual, you know, United States citizens to sponsor refugees.

I think that there, there is a desire to help. There's just. A lot of coordinating by the state, by, national organizations, you know, local organizations. I think there's just not a lot of cross coordination to make that help useful or, to utilize all of us who do wanna do something, beyond you.

Food or clothing drives or, or, you know, donating money, like for folks who want to volunteer their time, in, in helping a refugee look for a job. For example, I think that that's what gives me hope is that. there's the interest and the stake and the commitment among all of us. I would hope there, it's just matter of, of marshaling all of our, you know, human resources and marshaling all of that passion, into a plan that, that makes the most use of all of our passion.

Lisa: What would you say to people who do want to help right now, individuals who see people coming into this country and want to do their part in the ways that they.

Nicole: I would say currently, going to an organization that works with one of those nine major resettlement agencies. Those are the organizations that see a refugee family. The second they

arrive into the United States. So those are the organizations that I think more volunteers and other smaller kinds of organizations, faith-based organizations, you know, local churches, things like that.

I think it's unfortunately, maybe on us to introduce ourselves to those resettlement programs who are really strapped for, for funding and strapped for human resources, strapped for case manager time, to say, you know, how can we help you? And I think more than donating money or goods or in addition to donating money or goods, that would be, you know, tremendously valuable.

I think to organizations who are, who are trying to do the best they can.

Lisa: Absolutely. Well, thank you so much for sharing what we can do individually and also, addressing what needs to be done on a more federal and even local level as well. So is there anything else that you wanna share?

Nicole: I mean, to the extent that you want to talk more, about the self-sufficiency piece, that, that came out a lot in our paper was that that's the biggest thing that organizations struggle with and that individual refugee families struggle with is, you know, what, what self sufficiency means.

Right. And, and, and what it means for individuals to not rely on, on anyone else. So it's this, it's this rhetoric of like, pull yourself up by your bootstraps and, you should be able to make it on your own. And so, um, I think organizations to try and fit that rhetoric will place refugees into jobs, that will provide an immediate paycheck.

So things like fast food services, factory jobs, cleaning up at local restaurants or hotels, things like that with fewer options for upward mobility, but a very short term gain in the form of money. Right. and so I think that there's a tension between what we think that immigrants. Can quote unquote, achieve.

If they just work hard enough, they, they too will achieve the American dream like immigrants before them. I think that there's a tension in refugee policy between that idea of the American dream and the reality that not just refugees, all immigrants and all of us face that like, we need help. We need help from the state.

We need help from organizations. We need long term English training. We need long term mental health, counseling, and investments to make the American dream a reality. And I think that's something that, that came out from our conversations with organizations and working with refugee families.

Lisa: It sounds like the help help needs to be like to overall try to sustain the person as a whole person, rather than kind of force people back into work mode after they have just left a traumatic experience

Nicole: Exactly. And even, even folks who are highly educated, highly trained in their countries of origin. I had. Several individuals. When I was volunteering with the agency in, in Providence, Rhode Island who were trained to be physicians, you know, they were working full-time as physicians and their countries of origin.

Like they wanted to work. It's not, it's not as if they desired to. Sit and accept a government paycheck, which I think is maybe a myth that, that folks invoke, that People who accept temporary cash assistance are lazy or entitled. That couldn't be farther from the truth for many individuals, refugee and not.

But I think the issue is that even if folks are trained to be physicians in their countries of origin, that credential might not match into the United. Medical training system. And, and certainly, you know, you need to speak English and the United States medical system. And so, I think that there's also a need, as you said, in addition to thinking about the whole person, just thinking about refugee resettlement as a more long term investment in that whole person to really make sure that they can contribute what they want to, to us society and the economy.

Lisa: Thank you Nicole. Again, for talking through, all of your thoughts and your research. It's been so great to have you on No Jargon.

Nicole: Thank you so much for having me. It was a pleasure.

Lisa: And thanks for listening for more on Nicole Kreisberg's work. Check out our show notes at scholars.org/nojargon. No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholars Strategy Network, a nationwide organization that connects journalists, policy makers, and civic leaders with America's top researchers to improve policy and strengthen democracy.

The producer of our show is Mandana Mohsenzadegan. If you like the show, please subscribe and rate us on apple podcasts or wherever you get your. You can give us feedback on Twitter, @nojargonpodcast, or at our email address, NoJargon@scholars.com.