



# Crafting Knowledge and Community in the Hardware City

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns  
New Britain, Connecticut, USA

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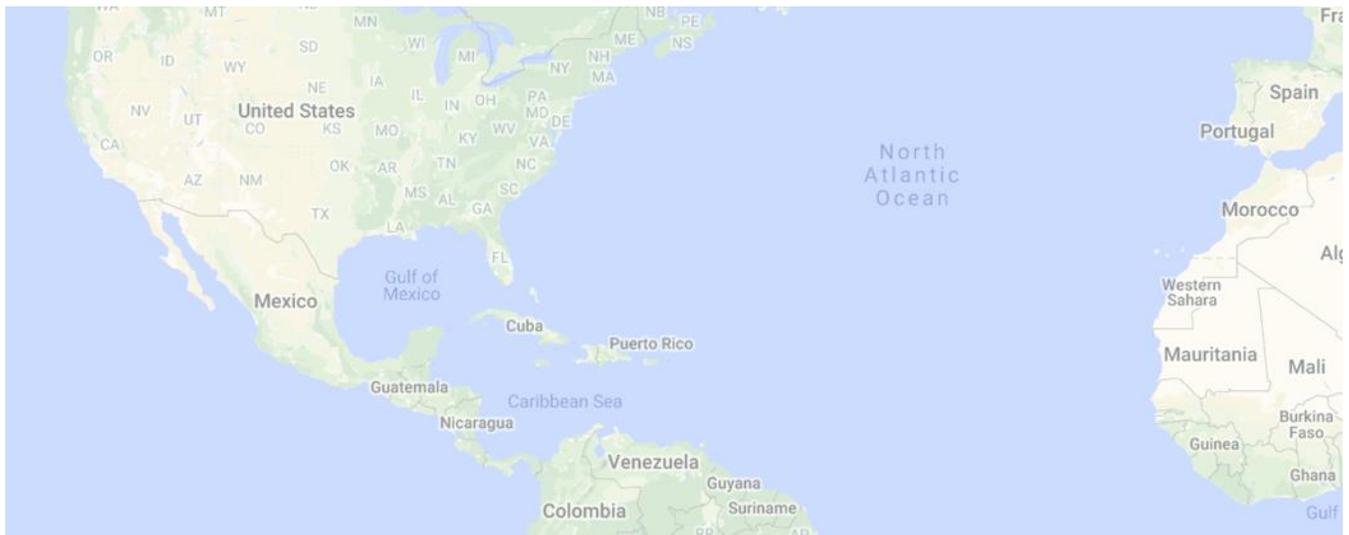
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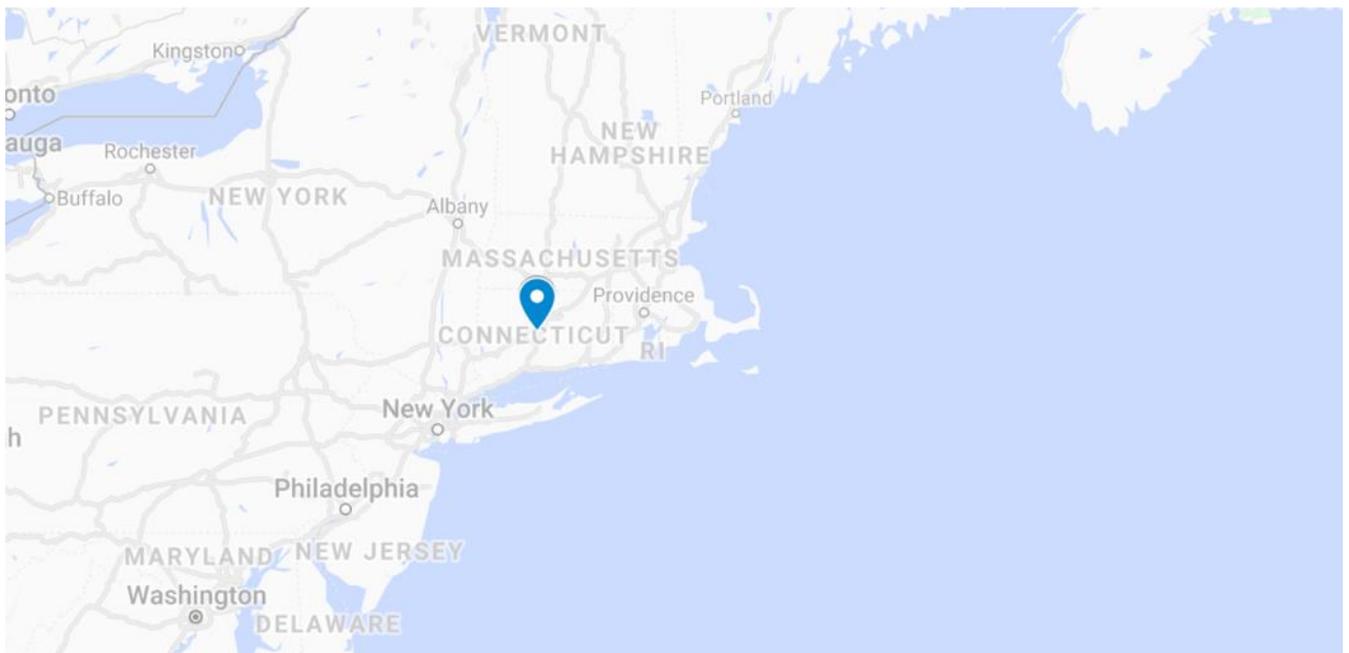
Cover Photo by Maha Abdullah, taken at the Islamic Association of Central Connecticut’s Taste of Ramadan event in New Britain.

# Location

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The United States' cities are sites of complex mixed migration, with formally resettled refugees integrating alongside numerous other new arrivals of a range of statuses from around the world. For more on the [Americas Route](#), visit the RIT website.



New Britain is a small city in the northeast of the United States, home to some 70,000 residents according to the [latest 2018 Census estimates](#). Base map imagery © Google 2019.

**For more background on refugees in the United States and New Britain, continue to the appendices.**

# Introduction

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New Britain, Connecticut has a long history of immigration. This report focuses on the experiences of newly arrived Arabic-speaking immigrants and refugees from Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Yemen, and Morocco. The Arab population of New Britain has increased faster than other migrant populations over the last eight years, from 161 in 2010 to 733 in 2017.<sup>1</sup> As of December 2018, there were approximately 260 Arabic-speaking families living in New Britain.

The services in the city have taken notice and are starting to make changes to meet the needs of New Britain's Arabic-speaking populations. Educators and employees of nonprofits told us that their organizations are still collecting data about New Britain's Arabic-speaking community and trying to understand the specific needs of Arabic-speaking immigrants and refugees.

Our research focuses on the organizations involved in the resettlement process and individuals' experiences with the resettlement process. New Britain is a city with a well-documented history of welcoming immigrants, and the ways in which that history is remembered affect how refugees and immigrants adapt today.

## A Note on Terminology

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We refer to "recently arrived" immigrants and refugees as those who arrived in the U.S. within the past five years. We recognize that "recently arrived" is defined by resettlement organizations as within the past eight to twelve months, but we prefer a definition that includes a wider time period because we found the challenges that immigrants and refugees face during their first year persist well beyond that period.

According to the United Nations, "a refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group."<sup>2</sup> The label of refugee, however, is not an inherent or stable part of anyone's existence. It is a label that is applied to individuals by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) through an administrative process. During our research, we met several people who identify with part or all of the preceding definition yet were not labeled refugees. In this report, we refer to individuals as immigrants or refugees according to their legal status. We discuss the experiences of both groups, however, because they overlap and resonate with each other in important ways.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, n.d., 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; U.S. Census Bureau, n.d., 2006-2010 American Community Survey.

<sup>2</sup> USA for UNHCR, n.d., What Is a Refugee? [www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/](http://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/).

# The Authors' Positions in New Britain and Experiences Researching this Case

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Each author has their own relationship to New Britain: Maha Abdullah is a teacher who has spent ten years helping Arabic speakers to navigate the New Britain school system; Emily Goldman is a West Hartford native who speaks Arabic and co-founded a language and cultural exchange program in New Britain called Jiran: The Arabic Community Action Summer; Joy Al-Nemri and Ian James participated in Jiran.

Ian James is from San Francisco, has studied Arabic for five years and lived in Amman, Jordan for eight months. Ian and Joy conducted most of the interviews referenced in this report and assembled the final document. Ian is a white male who had not been to Connecticut before coming to New Britain. While conducting this research, he kept his own position as a temporary visitor in mind, with an awareness that ethnographic methods have been and continue to be an instrument for Orientalizing the experiences and identities of Arabic speakers.

Joy Al-Nemri is an Arab-American anthropologist from the Hudson Valley, New York. Joy's Arab background and ties to the language, culture, and ancestral homeland informed the way that she approached her research, what she paid attention to, and the kinds of questions that she asked. Joy's shared experience as an Arab woman with some of her interlocutors offered them a vantage point from which to forge relationships and open up to one another. Joy might have brought bias to her study as the daughter of a displaced Palestinian and Arab immigrants to the U.S.

Emily Goldman grew up in Connecticut and worked for Middlebury's Arabic immersion program in Jordan for one and a half years. She also spent four years working in humanitarian aid and intercultural education in the Middle East. As a white female from suburban Connecticut trained in development studies and emergency aid, she views the issues that immigrant and refugee communities face through a lens of comparative development, both regionally and internationally. Her academic training in ethnographic research influenced our decision to focus on systemic factors that shape the immigrant experience.

Maha Abdullah is originally from Syria and has lived in Connecticut for 24 years. She has worked with the Arabic-speaking community in New Britain for 10 years as an English Language Development teacher and an intercultural competency trainer in the public school system. She also teaches English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) to women who live in New Britain.

From 2017 to 2018, Maha conducted focus groups and individual interviews with newly-arrived, Arabic-speaking families and found that those who no longer receive or never received federal aid struggle particularly with the sociocultural, educational, and financial aspects of life. Maha partnered with Emily to found Jiran: The Arabic Community Action Summer, a program that connects college-level Arabic students with recently resettled families in New Britain. Ian and Joy came to New Britain as participants in the program.

For more on the methods used for this report, continue to Appendix A.

# Immigrants and New Britain: An Ongoing Relationship

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Immigrants have been prominent actors in New Britain since the city's establishment. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immigrants from Europe, predominantly Poland and Italy, worked in the factories that earned New Britain its moniker "the Hardware Capital of the World." This was an era of economic and political clout for the city, one that is still celebrated through plaques, statues, and the New Britain Industrial Museum. In a post-World War II urban renewal project, a highway was constructed through downtown New Britain, splitting the city and destroying many historic buildings. Many descendants of pre-World War II immigrants moved out of the city to the suburbs, and immigrants from Puerto Rico and Latin America moved in. By the end of the 1960s, the decline of the manufacturing industry in the Northeast, misguided urban renewal projects, and white flight had led to the economic decline of the city.

The blame for New Britain's economic decline was partly put on Puerto Ricans and post-World War II immigrants. Today this argument survives but is being challenged by an alternative narrative that celebrates all of New Britain's immigrants and refugees. There are new monuments such as a statue dedicated in 2018 to the Borinqueneers, a segregated army unit of Puerto Rican volunteers who served in World War I, World War II, and the Korean War.

Immigrants and refugees from the Middle East and North Africa make up just 1% of New Britain's population, so their presence is small compared to other sub-populations, and their impact on the city is not as noticeable. Their impact is largely on the city's education systems and on the local economy: New Britain's city government uses cultural diversity as a selling point to attract technology companies and research institutions to the city.<sup>3</sup>

## Adult Education

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Arabic-speaking immigrants and refugees of all ages use New Britain's education systems to acquire the skills and certifications they need to find jobs and navigate their surroundings. New Britain has several well-established organizations that provide opportunities for adult education.<sup>4</sup> The New Britain Public Library (see Figure 1), for example, began its foreign language collection in the 1880s by buying

<sup>3</sup> Skyler Frazer, 2017, Plan Envisions New Britain Area as Hub of Innovation, Entrepreneurship, *New Britain Herald*, October 12. Accessed March 12, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> These organizations offer literacy classes, GED programs, and associate degree programs.

German language books for German immigrants in the area. The collection grew to include books in French, Vietnamese, Spanish, and Polish. The library has not, however, added Arabic language books to its collection. While discussing staffing, a librarian told us, “We try, and we certainly look for people that speak Polish or Spanish. Arabic is a big plus, but there’s just not that many.” Although they may want to provide services in other languages, doing so requires both expertise and money.

**Figure 1: Spaces for Adult Education**



New Britain's Public Library. Photo provided by the New Britain Public Library.

On the other hand, some organizations have resources and curriculums that require little adaption for Arabic speakers. Literacy Volunteers, New Britain Adult Education, the Family Literacy Center, and Capital Community College all offer classes conducted exclusively in English. Some minor cultural adaptations are made, such as Literacy Volunteers matching female Arab students with female teachers to create a more comfortable environment. Those tweaks do not require money. Literacy Volunteers offer one-on-one tutoring in reading and writing to over 450 students a week of all ages, around 80% of whom do not speak English as their first language. However, to use this service, people must already have a certain level of language proficiency. The wait list for a tutor at Literacy Volunteers is 100 people, which translates into a year-long wait. With funding, space, and staff insufficient for serving everyone seeking educational opportunities, organizations in New Britain have had to work together to improve services. The Family Literacy Center has Literacy Volunteers teach General Educational Development (GED) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, while the YWCA provides childcare and New Britain Adult Education provides additional tutoring.<sup>5</sup>

One YWCA employee told us that many people in New Britain don't have high school diplomas or the GED, or don't speak English, and the biggest barrier for them is childcare. Only five adult education programs offer childcare in Connecticut. All the organizations listed in this section offer services to adult learners, specifically women, who are not refugees or immigrants. Increased demand from refugees and immigrants for educational opportunities has stressed limited resources but has also led to innovations that have strengthened the education system. Without the demand from refugees and immigrants, the Family Literacy Center may never have been founded, and Literacy Volunteers may not have survived as an organization.

<sup>5</sup> This program was started as a response to needs assessments done in 2008 and 2009 that found a correlation between the mothers' education and the academic success of their children and that childcare responsibilities are a major barrier for women seeking educational opportunities in New Britain.

## Public School System

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The New Britain school district student body is approximately 65% Latino, 17–18% Black, 2% Asian, and 16% White.<sup>6</sup> The “White” category includes students of Arab descent and has grown over the last ten years. There are 36 countries and 60 languages represented in the school system. The New Britain Public School System has a policy that a school should hire an instructor support assistant who is a native speaker of any language that is the first language of more than 20 students. However, it is difficult to find certified staff for native language support, particularly Arabic because of its diverse dialects. An Arabic translator familiar only with a dialect in Syria, for instance, is not able to effectively communicate with someone from Morocco. This poses challenges in relaying information from the school to parents.

## Refugees’ Experiences

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In the U.S., resettled refugees receive modest governmental support for eight months after arriving in the U.S. Then they are expected to be financially and socially independent. Non-refugee Arabic-speaking populations in the U.S., including asylum seekers and recent immigrants, do not receive federal support. Newly arrived individuals to the U.S. often do not know how or lack the means to communicate effectively in English, interact with English-speakers, find and acquire jobs, become mobile, access resources at local institutions, obtain legal representation and assistance, and navigate through the educational and healthcare systems. In New Britain, minority populations, including refugees and new arrivals, express fear of engaging with local resources because of the various degrees of anti-immigration sentiment they have faced.

## Informal Language Acquisition

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Refugees and immigrants learn English in formal and informal settings. Some of our interviewees improved their English through ESOL classes; others were more successful outside the classroom.

Some learn English through their work. A Syrian man in his thirties told us, “In the beginning, I went to a gas station with my friend. I worked with him just to learn a little language, to keep my life going.” After picking up some English at the gas station, he went on to open a tailoring store. This man had previously learned Turkish as a refugee in Turkey, and his talent for languages was crucial to his success in the U.S.

We also interviewed a Sudanese woman who arrived in the U.S. in 1995 with her children. She took ESOL classes as often as she could but could not develop conversational fluency until starting a job at a daycare: “[My co-workers and I] would talk about groceries...after working in the daycare, I learned English faster. I learned more about the community from this job.”

<sup>6</sup> Personal communication, January 4, 2019.

Finding jobs that require speaking English and developing relationships with fluent English speakers were the keys for successful language acquisition in both of these examples. A pre-existing grasp of English makes those tasks easier. Many of our interviewees missed opportunities for informal language acquisition because they lacked basic language competency to start with.

## Mobility

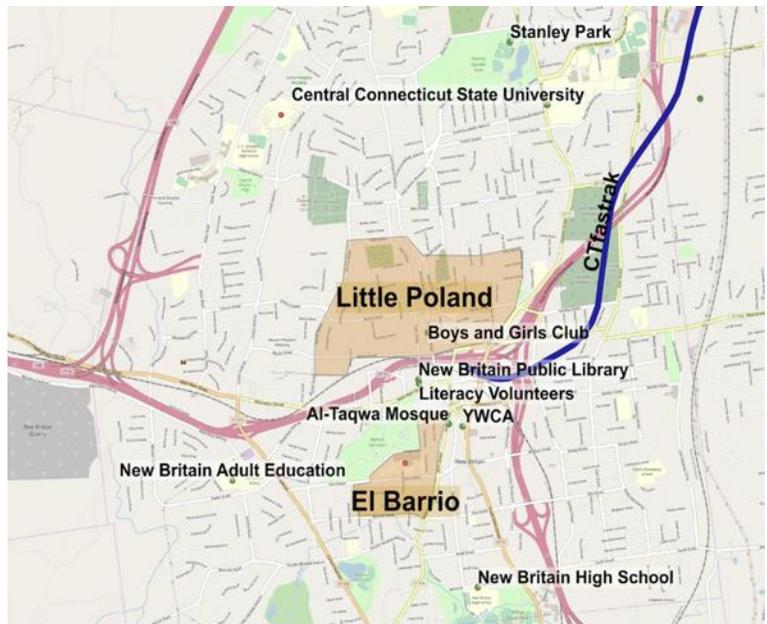
Adapting to the transit system in New Britain depends on English competency, money, time to explore the system, and someone to show the way. There is a gendered dimension to freedom of mobility among Arabic-speakers: women are often tied to the house with domestic duties, while men have more opportunities to leave the house for work and recreational purposes. Circumstances vary, however, between households.

Resources such as the public library, mosque, and YWCA are located in New Britain's city center, as shown in Figure 2. Arabic-speaking refugees and immigrants are able to live within a 10-minute drive because of the city's comparatively low rents. This means many immigrants and refugees buy cars once they have the money. Attaining a driver's license can be difficult, especially because many are not aware that the permit exam and study guide are available in Arabic. Teenagers use bikes as transportation, while some adults use Uber and Lyft. Women organize carpools or take buses.

Places on the outskirts of town, such as the New Britain Adult Education and New Britain High School, can be difficult to reach. One Syrian man without a car was taking English lessons but said, "There's no way to get there. There was so much snow, and it was far. I swear, I'd leave at 9 AM and arrive at school at 11 AM. And then the teacher would give me this look. She'd tell me, sit down, relax a little bit, have some water, and then go home." Many people who would benefit from services like English classes fail to utilize them because of transportation barriers.

Figure 3 shows that the refugee resettlement agencies and academic institutions that work with refugees are located mainly in Hartford. Many families in New Britain were initially resettled in Hartford, then moved to New Britain for affordable and safe housing and to be close to the city's large Arabic-speaking population. Using the CTfastrak, it takes about 25 minutes to get to Hartford from New Britain. Yet the cost of travel and limitations on time imposed by work and childcare add to the difficulty of the

**Figure 2: Map of Integration in New Britain**

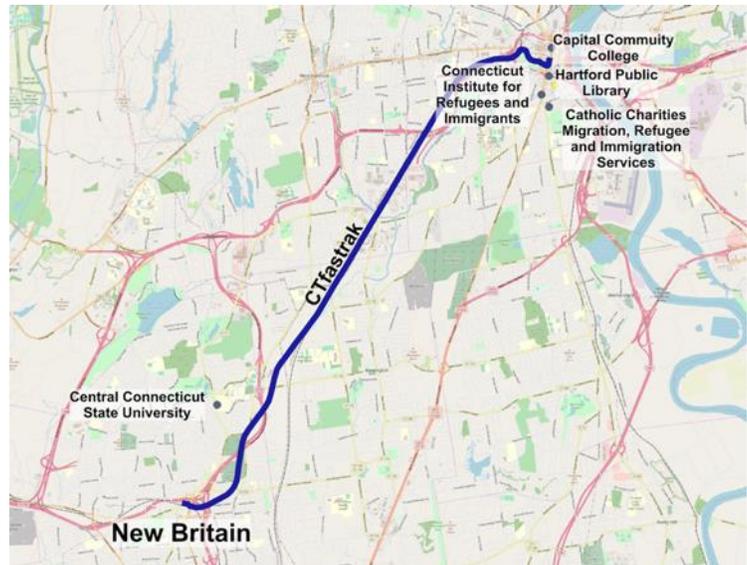


Relevant neighborhoods and resources in New Britain, Connecticut. Base map imagery © OpenStreetMap 2019.

trip. Some women refrain from taking the bus later in the day due to household responsibilities. Unanticipated delays, such as getting lost or, in the winter, dealing with snow conditions, also discourage public transportation use.

Describing his life before he bought a car, one Syrian man told us, “I’d always have to call my friend and say, ‘Come.’ But all the Arabs are working. They’re not necessarily free to take you. They want to help me, but I get embarrassed. I don’t like it.” Issues of mobility overlap with and multiply problems of independence, social integration, and language acquisition. Limited mobility can leave people feeling helpless and isolated. If more attention were directed towards developing new arrivals’ comfort with public transit or expanding their social networks to enable carpooling, it would benefit all aspects of integration.

**Figure 3: Transportation Obstacles**



The relationship between New Britain and Hartford, Connecticut. Base map imagery © OpenStreetMap 2019.

## Housing

In New Britain, the location of housing affects immigrants’ and refugees’ ability to access grocery stores, public transportation, educational opportunities, and social networks. Easy access to these resources contributes to successful integration. For larger families, however, the cost of housing near these resources can be a burden.

Arabic-speaking immigrants and refugees started to arrive in New Britain around 2009, joining Latin American immigrants and refugees who had been arriving since the 1950s. Both groups are mainly renters. New Britain today has one of the highest levels of foreclosures in Connecticut. Latin Americans and Arabic-speakers try to purchase foreclosed homes, however, because they often lack sufficient capital and are reluctant to borrow money from U.S. banks.

Refugees have to navigate systems that they do not fully understand to find safe and affordable housing. They are provided furnished housing upon arrival, and the first month’s rent is paid by the resettlement agency. But many find their apartment “cheap and not [in] a good neighborhood,” and some have mice, insects, or lead paint. Sometimes refugees sign lease contracts without understanding the legal language and are shocked to learn that they cannot move unless they break their lease. Tenants’ rights counseling is not provided by resettlement agencies, creating a service gap.

Housing stock in New Britain does not accommodate the needs of families from the Middle East and North Africa, many of which include many children and extended family members. In addition to legal

occupancy limits, landlords often prefer not to rent to that many people. As a result, refugee families with many family members either have to rent a house or rent two apartments in the same building. Both of these options increase the cost of housing. Some of these issues are out of the control of resettlement agencies; they are a reflection of the costs and conditions of the housing markets in New Britain and Hartford. Rents in New Britain are more affordable than in Hartford, but still are a considerable expense.

## **Volunteer Networks and Community Organizations**

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Networks of volunteers are an important resource for immigrants and refugees in New Britain. Many volunteers are immigrants and refugees themselves. In one notable case, a man from Iraq bought a house for his family that was in poor condition. “Everything was broken, there wasn’t electricity or water.” A Sudanese man at the Al-Taqwa Mosque found out about this and offered to use his skills as an engineer to fix up the house, free of charge. Common examples of support include providing rides to people and helping them find jobs and schools. Volunteers provide social connections to people who are dealing with feelings of isolation and abandonment.

A resettlement agency in New Haven runs a popular volunteer program that connects volunteers with resettled families in central Connecticut. Called a community co-sponsorship program, it provides training so that a community group can support one resettled family for a year. The volunteer groups help families get drivers’ licenses, learn English, go to doctor’s appointments, and find work. The program’s popularity surged among temple, church, and mosque groups with news coverage of the Syrian civil war. Our interviewees viewed the co-sponsorship groups very positively. Other organizations were sometimes seen as abandoning refugees, but volunteers from community co-sponsorship groups were considered friends. A young woman from Iraq shared:

When we first came here...we were sponsored through a church in Farmington and for the first year they were life-changing because they were so helpful...We didn’t know anybody, we didn’t know English...[The church group] helped us transition into this lifestyle, they’ve taught us about the programs offered, they taught us English.

Resettlement agencies intentionally limit the services community co-sponsorship groups are allowed to provide as part of a strategy to promote self-sufficiency. An employee of a resettlement agency in New Haven explained that their priority is “the ability for the family to do the next step on their own. So, whatever the scenario is, you don’t want to set them up in a way in which they can’t be self-sufficient.”

Self-sufficiency is embraced by many refugees we spoke with. A young man from Iraq who resettled in the U.S. as a young boy explained, “I’m a college student. I have to go work. The financial support is over. A college student has to depend on himself and work.” The emphasis on self-sufficiency, however, can hinder refugees from achieving successful integration. One Syrian refugee told us, “It was required that we go to school and prove we are looking for work. How are we supposed to look for jobs on the internet? We don’t even have internet. We don’t know English. Yet, we still are required to look for work. How?” This man was a successful carpenter in both Jordan and Syria but does not have the English proficiency to do work at a similar level in the U.S. Under pressure to find income, he took a job

making furniture in a workshop where he did not have to speak English. He now has neither the time nor the energy to learn English and find a better-paying job. Although he makes enough money to provide for his family, they have to navigate constant economic precarity. Although there is overlap between self-sufficiency and integration, families with the former and not the latter are left in a position of social and economic precarity.

New Britain is active in volunteerism because of retired seniors, who New Britain's many churches have engaged through the co-sponsorship program. Retirees volunteer through their churches then stay involved in refugees' lives past the program's end. They are valuable because they can help during weekdays. Older volunteers also stay committed because they benefit from and find meaning in volunteer work. Volunteers who come through the Al-Taqwa Mosque often have experiences of immigration themselves and speak Arabic.

The needs of immigrants and refugees extend beyond material goods. The social networks that volunteers, refugees, and immigrants co-create help refugees act independently. "We came here, and we lost our extended family. People here in America came to our house and we have to remember them because we felt that they were our family."

Another community-based organization supportive of integration is the YWCA of New Britain, where Joy led free bi-weekly fitness classes for Arabic-speaking women in 2018. The classes were around 30 women; some brought their young daughters. We covered the windows with sheets for privacy, which made attendees feel comfortable enough to change their clothes and/or remove their headscarves. At the end of the program, the YWCA arranged a special rate for these women to take fitness classes with one of the female trainers and provided a woman from the local mosque to translate. The YWCA also has programs for their children to play and interact with other kids while mothers are working out. Between 2018 and 2019, 11 women took part. Some were not able to continue because they could not afford the classes, even at a lowered price, and others could not get to the YWCA. However, the fitness program is a success story. One woman shares, "My English is better—slowly—from taking the classes at the YWCA. My oldest daughter takes them with me, and we love them. I made a new American friend. She talks with me and helps with my English." Sharing a gym with Americans gave these individuals more exposure to the English language and American ways of life and helped build a social life outside of the home with people not from the Arabic-speaking community.

**Figure 4: Dancing Across Cultures**



Volunteers and community participate in an event called "Dancing Across Cultures" hosted at the YWCA. Photo By Maha Abdullah.

## Overcoming Fears

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It is easier for refugees to integrate in New Britain than it used to be. An afterschool program provider told us, “A couple of years ago, it was difficult because I didn’t see as many support systems in place. Now there is a mosque in the center of downtown, they have literature in the school system in the Arabic language, [and] there are now more and more communities springing up.” However, Arabic-speaking refugees and immigrants in New Britain still tend to socialize in their homes with other Arabic-speakers much more often than they socialize with native English speakers in public spaces. The service provider attributed this to fear and apprehension among immigrants of partaking in afterschool activities and programs. Fears are a response to experienced and perceived anti-immigrant sentiment and concerns about children’s activities outside of parental supervision. As a response, the afterschool program provider engages through “mobile targeted outreach”—where he goes door-to-door, sends emails, and makes phone calls to establish a rapport with the guardians of the children whom his program works with. Maintaining rapport between communities and program administrators can help create credibility that will bring new individuals into these programs. Sensitivity to the precarities among refugees and immigrants, cultural awareness, and the avoidance of asking for documents are keys to fostering trust between resource distributors and receivers.

## Conclusion

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Resettled refugees in the U.S. have experienced traumatic upheaval, undertaken arduous travel, been selected out of a large pool of applicants, and gone through a lengthy screening process. When families arrive here, they face new challenges to integrate. Many live without financial stability for years. Immigrant families have access to even fewer resources. The needs of refugees and immigrants are not only material. They are looking to replace social networks they can rely on in case of unexpected challenges. Service providers in New Britain struggle to fulfill this need because of limits on resources and concerns about dependency. Tapping into the enthusiasm of volunteers from different backgrounds, such as churches and the local YWCA, is a promising way to develop services or social networks that are more enduring and holistic than one-off gifts.

Many of the barriers discussed here are not unique to immigrants and refugees. The issue of lack of affordable housing is endemic to low-income Americans.<sup>7</sup> Opportunities to reskill and recertify later in life are important for people of any background trying to adapt to the fast-changing economies of modern American cities. Childcare for adult education classes, targeted outreach for opportunities at youth clubs, and education on tenants’ rights are just some examples of services that refugees and immigrants need, and from which wider society would also benefit.

<sup>7</sup> Liza Getsinger, Lily Posey, Graham MacDonald, and Josh Leopold, 2017, The Housing Affordability Gap for Extremely Low-Income Renters in 2014, Urban Institute, Washington, DC.

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# Appendix A: Methods

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The report is based mainly on ethnographic methods and interviews, including 28 semi-structured interviews (16 female, 12 male). Fourteen interviewees were immigrants or refugees, and sixteen were service providers or facilitators in the resettlement process. The categories of host and immigrant overlap, however, and we found that the distinction between the two categories became increasingly unclear the longer that we were in New Britain. Immigrants and refugees who are acclimatizing to life in Connecticut help more recent refugees transition more easily, while advancing their own understanding of how integration should happen. While they are U.S. citizens, the Puerto Rican community in New Britain is often associated with New Britain's immigrant history because many Puerto Ricans face similar challenges as do immigrants and refugees, including racial discrimination and language barriers. We include references to New Britain's Puerto Rican community where it is necessary to understand broader conversations about migration and local identity. This report also draws on the authors' personal experiences living, working, and volunteering in New Britain.

Our interviewees range in age from early twenties to mid-sixties. Before coming to the U.S., they completed varying levels of education. Some worked in trades, some worked in service jobs, and some had university degrees. Once they arrived in the U.S., they encountered similar problems. They had limited knowledge of English and were not able to bring many assets with them. Many fled war zones and are dealing with ongoing trauma from their experiences. They struggle with language acquisition, recertification, and financial precarity. Syrians and Iraqis in particular struggle with these issues. The social networks that we accessed during our research included many people who were dealing with the effects of war, and this shifted our findings. The challenges that each person is facing, however, depends on their individual experiences.

Our interviews took place in the interviewees' homes or their places of work, and some were conducted over the phone. We identified initial contacts through Emily and Maha's social networks and with the help of Al-Taqwa Mosque. We then asked our initial contacts about other people to speak to. We asked for permission to record our interviews for transcription purposes.

Institutional Review Board approval was received from Middlebury College on June 19, 2018.

# Appendix B: Refugees in the U.S.

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The 1948 Displaced Persons Act was the first piece of legislation addressing displaced persons in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> The act authorized Europeans fleeing Nazi persecution entrance into the U.S.<sup>9</sup> The U.S. has not signed on to the United Nations' 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, although it is a signatory of the 1967 Protocol.<sup>10</sup> Between 1975 and 1979, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, more than 300,000 refugees arrived in the U.S. The majority of them came through presidential action, because the law at the time severely restricted the number of refugees that could be admitted. In order to be better prepared for crises in the future, the U.S. Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980.<sup>11</sup> The Act changed the definition of refugee in U.S. law to align with the United Nations' definition and established a set of procedures for raising the number of refugees admitted to the U.S.

Since 1980, the U.S. has accepted more than 3 million refugees, and its resettlement program is the largest in the world. Since the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, however, the U.S. government has also spent significant resources on developing infrastructure to regulate and limit the number of refugees that arrive in the U.S. Spending by the U.S. government on immigration enforcement and homeland security infrastructure has ballooned, and in 2014 Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement of the Department of Homeland Security had a combined budget of USD 18 billion.<sup>12</sup> The U.S. takes significant additional steps in screening refugees after they have been referred by the United Nations. This process includes three in-person interviews and five background checks, which are conducted with the participation of eight separate U.S. government agencies.<sup>13</sup> Along with other Western governments, the U.S. has also engaged in several strategies to prevent asylum seekers from reaching U.S. territory. These include denial of entry at borders, safe third-country requirements, and narrow interpretations of refugee and asylum standards.<sup>14</sup>

By many standards, the world is currently experiencing another crisis of displaced persons. At the end of 2017, there were 68.5 million individuals forcibly displaced worldwide, which is a record high. That number includes a record 25.4 million refugees. The largest forcibly displaced population is Syrian, with

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<sup>8</sup> Office of Refugee Resettlement, an Office of the Administration for Children & Families, n.d., Office of Refugee Resettlement History.

<sup>9</sup> Michelle Hinojosa, n.d., U.S. Immigration Legislation: 1948 Displaced Persons Act, U.S. Immigration Legislation Online.

<sup>10</sup> UNHCR, n.d., States Parties to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol.

<sup>11</sup> National Archives Foundation, n.d., Refugee Act of 1980.

<sup>12</sup> Donald Kerwin, 2015, Introduction: The US Refugee Protection System on the 35th Anniversary of the Refugee Act of 1980, *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 3(2): 1–50.

<sup>13</sup> USA for UNHCR, n.d., Refugees in America.

<sup>14</sup> Kerwin, Introduction: The US Refugee Protection System.

12 million people displaced at the end of 2016.<sup>15</sup> In terms of resettlement, the U.S. has been stepping back in the face of crisis. The U.S. resettled about 97,000 refugees in 2016, but that number dropped to less than 34,000 in 2017.<sup>16</sup> The most common country of origin for these refugees was the Democratic Republic of the Congo, followed by Iraq and then Syria. In FY 2018, a total of 22,491 refugees were resettled in the U.S., well below the ceiling of 45,000 set by President Trump. The FY 2019 ceiling of 30,000 refugees is the lowest since Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980.<sup>17</sup>

## Appendix C: Refugees in New Britain

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Nicknamed the Hardware Capital of the World, the history of New Britain is tied up with the fortunes of several large manufacturing companies. Factories belonging to Stanley Works, North & Judd, P. & F. Corbin, and other companies brought wealth and influence to New Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The city's first mayor was Frederick Stanley of Stanley Works. Many of the town's important institutions, such as New Britain Public Library and Central Connecticut State University, were brought to the town during this period. Demand for unskilled labor in the factories drew many European immigrants, most of whom came from Italy or Poland. By the 1850s, enough Polish immigrants had settled in New Britain for it to gain the moniker "Little Poland."<sup>18</sup> Immigration from Europe continued throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and in 1930 one-quarter of the city's population was of Polish ancestry.<sup>19</sup> In the 1970s, a large Cambodian community developed in New Britain, and over the last ten years Yemeni and Syrian immigrants and refugees have arrived in large numbers as well.

There are three resettlement agencies active in New Britain: Catholic Charities, Integrated Refugee & Immigrant Services (IRIS), and the Connecticut Institute for Refugees and Immigrants (CIRI). None of these agencies, however, have offices in New Britain. Catholic Charities and CIRI are both located in Hartford, which is 20 minutes by car or 40 minutes by train. IRIS is located in New Haven, which is not accessible by train and is a half-hour drive away.

There are several reasons for New Britain being attractive to Arabic-speaking immigrants and refugees. The Arabic-speaking population already in New Britain can aid them in navigating cultural and linguistic differences. For Muslims, New Britain's centrally located mosque meets many religious and social needs. Yet arrivals of new refugees into the Hartford area, which includes New Britain, have been dramatically affected by federal immigration policy. An employee from one of the three major

<sup>15</sup> USA for UNHCR, n.d., Refugee Statistics.

<sup>16</sup> Phillip Connor and Jens Manuel Krogstad, 2018, For the First Time, U.S. Resettles Fewer Refugees than the Rest of the World. Pew Research Center, July 5; Susan Fratzke, 2017, Top 10 of 2017—Issue #6: In Wake of Cuts to U.S. Refugee Program, Global Resettlement Falls Short, Migration Policy Institute, December 12.

<sup>17</sup> Nayla Rush, 2018, Refugee Resettlement Admissions in FY 2018, Center for Immigration Studies, October 1.

<sup>18</sup> Connecticut History.org, n.d., Late 19th-Century Immigration in Connecticut.

<sup>19</sup> Connecticut History.org, n.d., Witamy to Little Poland! – A Thriving Neighborhood in New Britain.

resettlement agencies told us that they are on track to resettle less than one-third as many refugees as they did only two years ago.

The total population of New Britain is 72,876, according to the Connecticut Economic Resource Center's Town Report. The poverty rate in 2018 was 22.9%, more than double the state average of 10.4%. The unemployment rate in 2018 was 7.2%, significantly higher than the state average of 5.1%. In 2016, healthcare and social assistance was the largest sector for employment in New Britain, providing 6,818 jobs. The Hospital of Central Connecticut and the Hospital for Central Care were two of the city's largest employers. The legacy of New Britain's industrial economy lives on as well, with 3,322 employees working in manufacturing. Together these two sectors account for 40% of New Britain's total employment.<sup>20</sup> Although some immigrants and refugees we spoke to were able to find jobs in manufacturing, the language and education barriers to entering the healthcare and social assistance sector are higher.

<sup>20</sup> [CT Data Collaborative, 2018, New Britain, Connecticut, CERC Town Profile 2018.](#)

# About the RIT Project

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

## Our goals are twofold

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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?

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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

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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](http://www.refugeesintowns.org)

# About the Authors

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**Maha Abdullah** is a multilingual educator, a published author, and public speaker who helps audiences bridge cultural and language differences. She was born and raised in Syria, where she received her BA in English Language and Literature. She received her MA from Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) in English and is a certified full-time teacher who has been working in the New Britain School District since 2010. She has taught Arabic at CCSU and Wesleyan University's high school summer program. She was awarded the "The Torch of Connectedness" by the New Britain Board of Education for her work. Maha speaks on behalf of the Islamic Network Group on topics including multicultural education, linguistically diverse classrooms, and cultural competency.

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**Joy Al-Nemri** received a BA in Anthropology with a concentration in Middle East Studies from Bard College in 2018. She volunteered in 2017 in a refugee camp in Samos where she established a refugee women's fitness program and a children's book circle program. In 2018, Joy worked with recently-arrived Arab refugees and immigrants to New Britain through Jiran: The Arabic Community Action Summer program. While volunteering in Greece and Connecticut, Joy conducted research with the Arab refugees and immigrants and presented to the American Anthropological Association's Annual Conferences in 2017 and 2018.

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**Ian James** is from San Francisco, CA and received his BA in Anthropology and International Relations from Tufts University. He is currently working as a research coordinator at the Western Regional Advocacy Project. In 2017, he worked at the Center for the Study of the Built Environment in Amman. In 2018, he participated in cultural and linguistic exchange with families who had been resettled in New Britain from the Middle East and North Africa through Jiran: The Arabic Community Action Summer. While there, he conducted research that was presented at American Anthropological Association Annual Conference.

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**Emily Goldman** is from West Hartford, CT and received her BA in Development Studies and Middle East Studies from Brown University. She is earning her MSc in Social Cognition from University College London as a Rotary Global Grant scholar for peacebuilding. Her research focuses on creative approaches to conflict negotiation. Emily studied Arabic at Middlebury College in Egypt and subsequently spent three years in Jordan working in emergency humanitarian aid and education. Emily has worked on conflict and forced displacement with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the International Rescue Committee, and Generations for Peace. She has also served as an interpreter for the U.S. Embassy in Jordan and a Resident Coordinator for Middlebury College's School in Jordan.

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

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

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