

In these Rust Belt cities hit by population decline, refugees are bringing revitalization

In some of America's smaller Rust Belt cities, refugees once piecing their own lives back together have helped boost struggling economies.

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About 1%.

That is how many [refugees](#) see a final resettlement on average, after violence tears them from home and refugee camps fill with families escaping torture, sexual assault, murder and other persecution.

A record-setting 82.4 million people were displaced worldwide by the end of 2020 alone, according to the United Nations. Roughly 3 million refugees have been resettled in the United States since 1975.

Along with over 20 other countries, the U.S. assists refugees through the process laid out by the Refugee Act of 1980. These individuals and families qualify due to persecution, or well-founded fear of the same, owing to their race, religion, nationality or social group. They have all fled their homes. Many languished for years in dangerous refugee camps, waiting to return. They do not choose their final destination.

The efforts reflect in layers of human geology molding many U.S. cities over generations, as waves of people have settled across all 50 states. But some landing grounds can go unconsidered. It's not New York City, and it's not Miami Beach.



It's America's smaller cities — where refugees, still piecing their own lives back together, have helped boost economies.

Rust Belt cities such as New York's Buffalo, Syracuse and Utica, which have suffered population declines for decades, have seen those trends reverse in the latest census.

More than 80% of refugees who've come to New York since 2002 arrive upstate, according to numbers kept by the U.S. Department of State.

And by 2017, one small Pennsylvania city had settled 20 times more refugees per capita than the rest of the country. The city of Lancaster alone carries 14% of its state's resettlements [since 2002](#).

Affordable rent and fallow infrastructure in these smaller Rust Belt cities have made them attractive places to settle new Americans, allowing diverse populations to bring new culture, new food, new ideas and higher rates of entrepreneurship.

Today, the world watches an unprecedented resettlement operation following the withdrawal of U.S. military in Afghanistan. The more than 70,000 Afghan evacuees will exceed the total welcomed in the U.S. during the last two years of the Trump administration.

The total still remains far below historic levels — a little more than half the number of refugees the U.S. welcomed in 2016 — and the Biden administration has already shared a fiscal year 2022 admissions goal of [125,000](#). Refugee agencies that shrank in the previous administration, as admission levels were limited, must now ramp back up and re-forge old relationships with landlords and employers.

While these efforts in rebuilding may be daunting, the blueprint already lines city streets.

Four small locales embody these changes in real-time: [Buffalo](#), [Syracuse](#) and [Utica](#) — all in New York — and [Lancaster](#) in Pennsylvania. These cities not only show growing, diverse populations and economies, but hold well-established networks of refugee resettlement.

Stories of both their newcomers and solidified communities reveal lessons for any place seeking revitalization through open doors.