



Refugees and Food Experiences: New Research From Buffalo, NY

Local governments can build capacity of individuals and networks in refugee communities to improve access to culturally preferred, nutritious foods in resettlement cities.

Foreign-born residents are important to the economy, culture, and social fabric of Buffalo, New York, a city with just under 260,000 people located along the U.S.-Canadian border. Buffalo's foreign-born residents enrich neighborhoods, the local workforce, and entrepreneurial landscape with new businesses, talent, and cultural diversity.

Refugees account for a growing number of foreign-born residents or immigrants in Buffalo. Refugees are in the U.S. seeking safety from persecution based on their race, nationality, religion, or political beliefs. While living in the U.S. offers refugees opportunities to improve their lives and well-being, integrating into the U.S. and adopting an American diet can also have unanticipated dietary and health consequences.

The typical American consumes over 1,000 more calories each day than the average consumption of calories per person in Burma, where a large number of refugees in Buffalo are from. Americans consume twice as much meat, fat, and sugar, as a share of their daily diet. While resettlement of refugees in the U.S. may protect them against severe food deprivation, residence in a new food environment may expose them to a higher risk of diet-related chronic diseases such as diabetes.

Refugees may find it challenging to maintain a nutritious diet as they adjust to life in a new community, with new neighborhoods, new schools, new markets, and new foods. Supermarkets can be far from home. Fast food and processed food is often cheap, widely available, and highly marketed. Food safety nets can be weak and difficult to navigate.

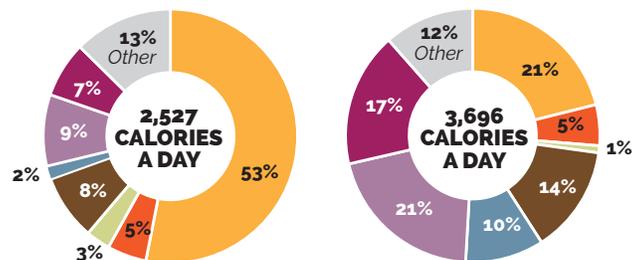
Past research into these challenges commonly highlights the individual choices that refugees make but overlooks the role of equitable policy and the food environment, which is the focus of the new research study published in the journal *Built Environment*, with findings that are translated in this brief. The new study reports on the experience of refugees resettled from Burma, living in Buffalo. It suggests that refugees face unique challenges in their new food environment. With the support of local governments, refugees have the ability to thrive in their new cities, as well as be active in reshaping their new food environments. Partnerships between refugee communities and local governments can foster social cohesion, improve public health through better food systems, and promote economic security. Such partnerships must be built on trust and must view refugees as agents of transformation.¹

Comparison of diet and dietary outcomes



54M POPULATION, 2014 323M

Share of diet, per capita



62g Daily supply of fat 163g

17% % of population who are overweight, age 18+, 2014 70%

3% % of population who are obese, age 18+, 2014 35%

6.6% % of population who have diabetes 9.1%

¹ Includes milk and milk products, excluding butter.

² Includes vegetable oils and animal fats.

Data Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Food and Nutrition in Numbers, 2014; World Health Organization, Diabetes Country Profiles, 2016.

BACKGROUND

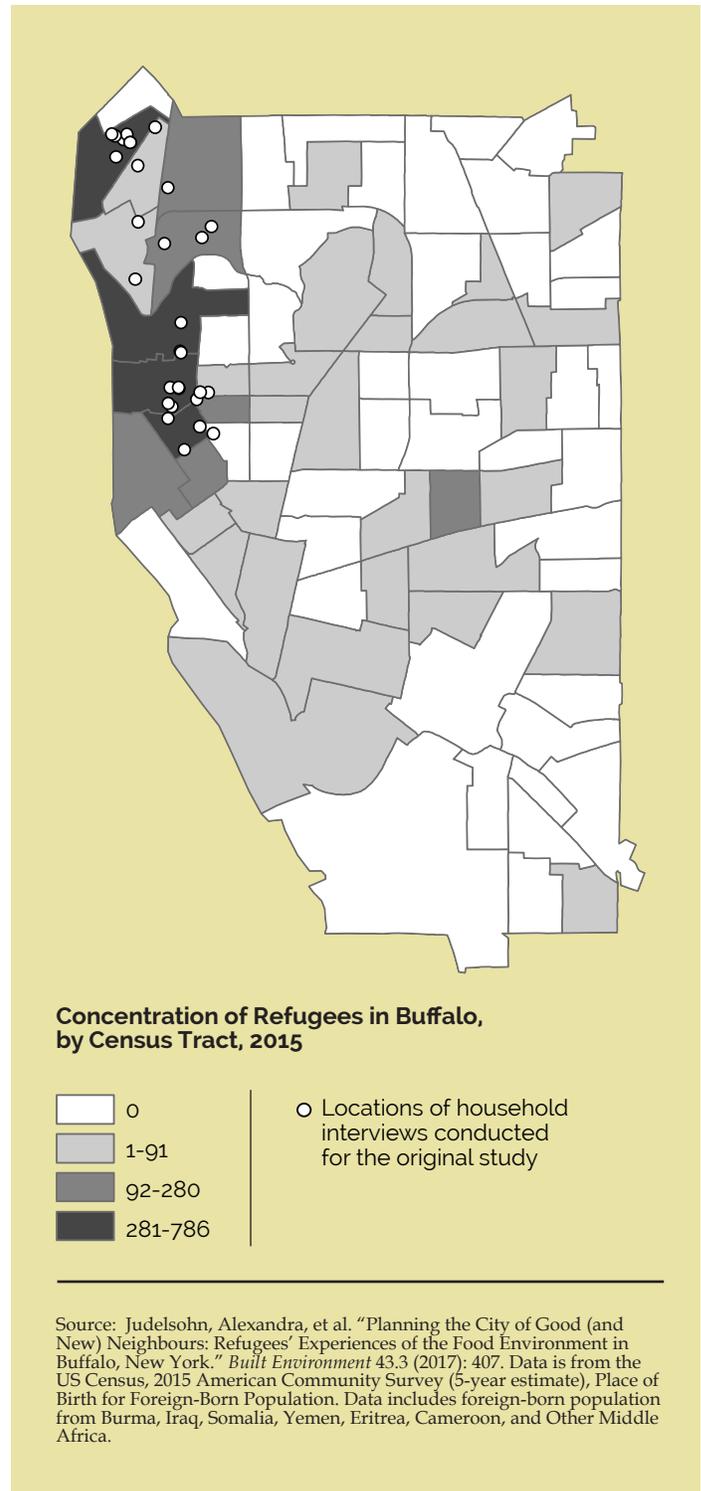
The City of Buffalo is an international gateway with an industrial history that immigrants contributed to, as they fueled growth of industries dependent on steel and grain. Buffalo's population reached 580,132 in 1950. Today, it is less than half that, a result of large industries shedding jobs. Flight to the suburbs and racial redlining contributed to population loss as well. Vacancies, derelict housing, and poverty are current challenges facing Buffalo and its people.

Yet Buffalo is experiencing a resurgence, boosted by an influx of refugees. Over 14,700 refugees resettled in Buffalo between 2002 and 2016.² This number represents over a quarter of refugees resettling in New York State over this period.² Nearly half of these refugees arrived over the past five years.² In 2016, Buffalo ranked among the top 10 settlement cities in the U.S.² Buffalo was the smallest of these top 10 cities and had the highest number of refugee placements as a share of its total population.³

Most refugees in Buffalo and Erie County settle here from Bhutan, Central Africa, Eritrea, Iraq, Myanmar/Burma, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. Over a third of refugees resettling in Buffalo over the past decade are from Burma (currently Myanmar), a higher percentage than across the U.S. where one-quarter of refugees originate from Burma. Burma is a diverse nation with over 100 ethnicities, including Arakanese, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Mon, Shan, and Zo (or Zomi). Once here, refugees commonly reside in neighborhoods on the western area of the city. A smaller but notable concentration is present in eastern areas of Buffalo.

The city of Buffalo and surrounding region have many food assets. Farmland is abundant. Numerous dairy farms, apple orchards, and vegetable crops exist in close proximity to the city. The Niagara River and Lake Erie lie on the west of the city and offer an ample supply of water and fish. Urban farming has become more common, and helped to repurpose vacant lots while supplementing the community's local supply of fresh food. People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH) Buffalo and Grassroots Gardens of Western New York (GGWNY) are two non-profit organizations identified in the original study that promote gardening to refugees and other residents. PUSH Buffalo rents beds to residents on land it owns and manages, while GGWNY supports community gardens on city-owned, vacant private property that engage and benefit the surrounding community with access to low-cost nutritious food.

While Buffalo has resources and assets that create a welcoming and supportive food environment for refugees, challenges also exist. Varying income levels across the city contribute to neighborhood disparities in access to nutritious food. Retail stores have limited offerings in lower-income neighborhoods where refugees commonly live. Gardening in older urban settings like Buffalo poses health risks too. Soil may be contaminated with lead used in paint decades ago when over 90% of homes in Buffalo were built. Fish from area water bodies also contains contaminants. Children and women of childbearing age are advised to limit their fish intake from Lake Erie because of mercury levels. Although outreach strategies warn residents of risks, this information may not be easily accessible to refugees whose first language is not English.



KEY FINDINGS

Little is known about how refugees from Burma experience the food environment: how they obtain food, the challenges they encounter, and how these challenges are overcome. Research conducted for the original study that is translated for this brief explores how refugees in Buffalo adapt. The study team interviewed 28 adult refugees from Burma, an ethnically diverse and multilingual nation. Interviewees ranged in age from 23 to 72, and 79% were female. Most were married. All lived in the U.S. for at least six months. Forty percent described their sub-ethnicity as Karen. Interview questions explored how refugees purchase, transport, prepare, and eat food. Interviews were also conducted with representatives of local government and civil society groups to understand how they support refugees' access to affordable, healthy food and the challenges they face in this role. Summarized here are key findings from the original research.

Cultural and demographic distinctions can impact food needs, but refugees perceive disadvantages and barriers as minimal compared to the challenges they faced before resettlement.

Household income, educational attainment level, household size, and housing circumstances can affect access to adequate wholesome food and/or contribute to food insecurity. Refugees from Burma have a number of risk factors that increase vulnerability. Low income is one. Respondents reported an average annual household income of \$20,362. This is less than the 2017 Federal Poverty Level for a household of four.⁴ It is also lower than the citywide median annual income of \$31,918, which is almost two times above the 2017 Federal Poverty Level for a household of two.⁵

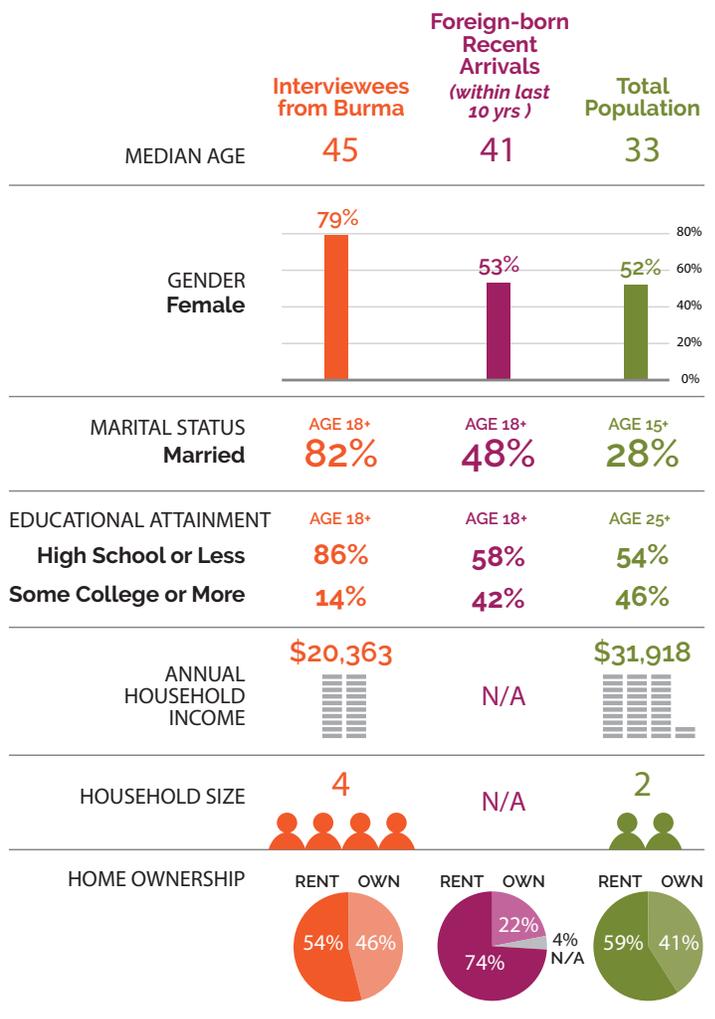
Low education levels limit job options and income for refugees from Burma. Most interviewees (86%) had no education beyond high school, and nearly half (43%) reported completing no more than elementary school.

Despite these factors, refugees from Burma describe life here as generally enjoyable. They perceive socioeconomic challenges and cultural variation as minor compared to what they dealt with before coming here. One interviewee recounted how she was essentially confined to her home in Burma, afraid for her personal safety if she ventured outside. Refugees' view of Buffalo is shaped by these greater struggles and past trauma. Refugees may also be hesitant to communicate about non-life-threatening challenges in an interview setting.

Refugees acquire, cook, and eat food that reflect traditional preferences and practices.

Refugees in Buffalo commonly maintain a traditional diet. Rice and fish are core foods. Many shop for culturally

Study Sample Characteristics: Comparison with foreign born and total population in Buffalo



Data Source: Interview data from refugees from Burma ages 18+ was collected by the Food Systems Planning and Healthy Communities Lab at the University at Buffalo School of Architecture and Planning using a Community Member Interview Tool. Data for foreign-born recent arrivals (middle column) is from IPUMS, 2015 ACS, 5-year estimates. Data reflects individuals ages 18+ arriving within the last 10 years. Data for Buffalo's overall population is from the 2010 U.S. Census and the 2015 and 2016 ACS, 5-year estimates.

preferred food at ethnic markets. Most also acquire food at supermarkets. To purchase the highest quality meat, a small number of interviewees buy it directly from local farmers. Buffalo's relatively large concentration of refugees from Burma supports a variety of ethnic retailers and the availability of culturally preferred food.

Culturally preferred food tends to be readily available but is more expensive than in Burma, particularly healthy food such as vegetables. Government-based nutrition assistance programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) are important to helping some refugee families make ends meet, in terms of their family budget.

In keeping with the agrarian culture many refugees

come from, some grow their own food. One interviewee described saving money during summer months by growing food. Others expressed mental benefits, describing how gardening helps them process past trauma in a constructive way.

A small number of refugees forage for food, a practice that is frowned upon by the city, according to at least one respondent. Parks outside the city and local bodies of water are common destinations for foraging, which is common in many areas of the world and described as enjoyable by local refugees from Burma.

Limited transportation options, English proficiency, information, and land are the most common food-related challenges.

Not having a car creates barriers to grocery stores and other food destinations for refugees, especially the city’s recent arrivals from Burma. To overcome this, refugees carpool for grocery shopping, traveling with family or individuals from their ethnic group.

Limited familiarity with the English language is a compounding challenge for many. Being unable to speak or read English well (or at all) limits their ability to read public transportation and related signage to reach markets in distant neighborhoods. It also limits their ability to use nutrition labels to select the most nutritious food products while grocery shopping.

Many refugees fish for enjoyment, and limited multi-language information about water and fish safety creates challenges, although recent efforts by local environmental groups are raising awareness. Some interviewees know Lake Erie is polluted and they say that they do not eat fish from the waters because of this.

Limited access to land is another barrier that makes it more challenging for refugees to access healthy food. Over half (54%) of interviewees from Burma were renters, and a number of them indicated that they don’t have land to garden. Only one interviewee noted using a community garden, and another indicated concerns over soil quality.

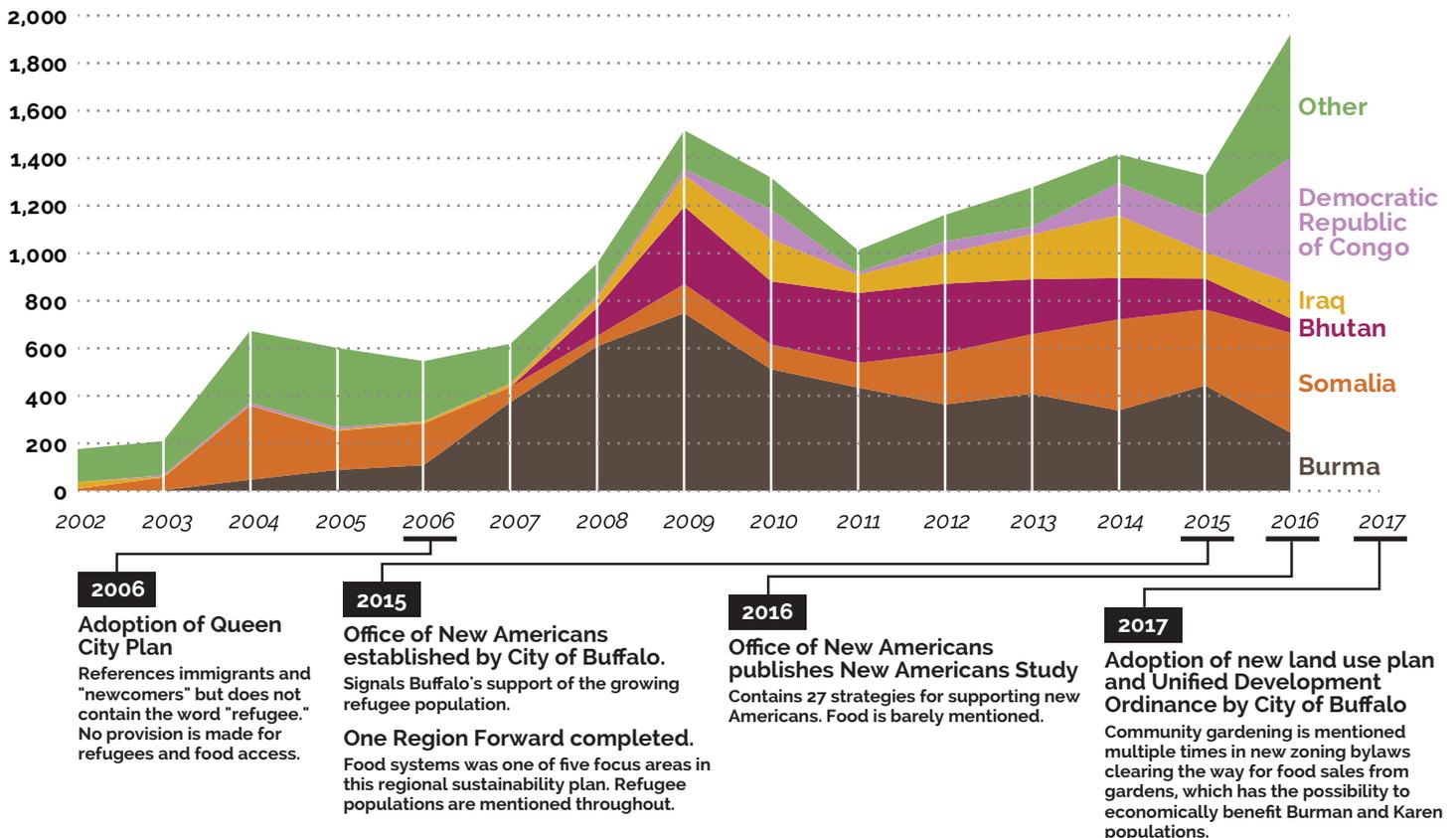
Poor quality housing, challenging economic conditions, and social isolation are additional factors that work indirectly to hamper food access and refugees’ ability to navigate the food environment in Buffalo.

Until recently, local government planning processes have largely overlooked refugees.

Formal comprehensive and strategic plans adopted or prepared by the City of Buffalo have fallen short in directly addressing the needs of refugee populations and the opportunities created by their presence, until recently. The city’s comprehensive plan, *Queen City Plan*, adopted in 2006, is mostly silent on refugee issues. While the plan refers to immigrants and newcomers, it does not contain the word “refugee” even though over 500 refugees settled in Buffalo that year and over 1,600 arrived in Buffalo

Refugee Arrivals in Buffalo by country of origin, 2002-2016, vs. public policy readiness and response

Data Source: UBRI analysis of data on refugee arrivals by destination from the Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration for calendar years 2002-2016.



during the preceding four years. However, the plan did offer a foundation for a *Unified Development Ordinance* (UDO), adopted by the city in 2017. This combines updated zoning bylaws with a land-use plan and the plan specifically mentions community gardens as a strategy for dealing with vacant land.

In the two years preceding the City's adoption of the UDO, local government began to recognize the growing number of refugees. During 2015 and 2016, over 3,200 refugees arrived in Buffalo. The City of Buffalo established the Office of New Americans (ONA) in 2015. The next year, ONA released the *New Americans Study* outlining over two dozen strategies for welcoming refugees and supporting them through improved services and access. The document mentions food, but its strategies do not meaningfully address refugee food needs.

One Region Forward addresses the food system head-on. Completed in 2015, this regional sustainability plan for Buffalo Niagara engaged multiple levels of government and sectors. The plan's strategy for the regional food system, *Growing Together*, contains many references to the region's refugee population and concerns, including fishing in contaminated waters, connections between local farmers and ethnic retailers, and access to agricultural opportunities.

Refugees value civic agencies and the welcoming environment they foster, but local government planning processes commonly exclude civic agencies.

Civic agencies and social networks help refugees adapt to the local food environment in Buffalo. In Buffalo, they offer resettlement services, language translators and interpreting services, a multilingual hotline, service referrals, access to community gardens, environmental awareness and information, community support centers and more. Refugee resettlement and local experiences are commonly viewed as a worry of the federal government and nonprofit agencies. Yet these agencies do not have the capacity to serve on an ongoing basis the 1,000+ refugees that arrive in Buffalo annually. Nor do they alone have the bandwidth to address broad structural barriers that compromise refugee ability to navigate the food environment and access healthy food such as interpretation and language services, public transportation, poverty, and access to good-paying jobs. Interviews conducted for the original study suggest that civic agencies could be more meaningfully engaged in planning processes that would enable them to better support and provide services to refugees.

Seven organizations and individuals are part of a Community Advisory Group that offered guidance and input on this brief and the original study:

Community Leaders

Chan Myae Thu (*community health worker at a neighborhood health center*)

Win Min Thant (*works with Buffalo State Community Academic Center*)

Civil-society groups with programming for refugees

Burmese Community Services, Inc., Steven Sanyu (*assists newest arrivals from Burma with referrals and applications for services*)

Journey's End Refugee Services, Jeff Ogilvie (*provides refugees with resettlement, education, employment, immigration and interpreting services*)

Karen Society of Buffalo, Daniel Lawd (*unites and offers assistance to the Karen population through partnership building with other local groups*)

WASH Project, Zaw Win (*offers a laundromat, community support center, and hub for human services for refugees on Buffalo's west side*)

Civil-society groups with programming for multiple populations, including refugees

Grassroots Gardens of WNY, Melissa Fratello (*promotes collaborative community gardens on 300,000+ square feet of land across Buffalo and Niagara Falls*)

MODELS TO CONSIDER

New Roots for Refugees

This agricultural training program provides refugees in Kansas City with the skills and tools needed to support farmers. Participants begin training at the Juniper Gardens Training Farm where they learn skills needed for growing crops, running a business, and marketing.⁶ Juniper Gardens is located at a public housing site in Kansas; the land is leased to New Roots by the local HUD office at no cost. Catholic Charities of Northeast Kansas and Cultivate Kansas partner to provide this program, which is funded through the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement's Refugee Agricultural Partnership Program (RAPP). RAPP supports agricultural projects that help resettled refugees adjust to life in their new homes, while promoting a sustainable income, improving health, and supplying healthy and culturally preferred foods. Forty percent of participants start their own farming endeavors.

For more information:

<https://catholiccharitiesks.org/new-roots-for-refugees> and

http://growingfoodconnections.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/10/Wyandotte-Case-Study_2016.09.29.final-1.pdf

Missouri University Extension

Missouri University Extension (MUE) addresses a variety of challenges facing the Town of Noel's growing refugee population. An increase in automobile accidents is an example of one major problem MUE tackled through driving courses. Deeper relationships with the refugee community led to expanded programming around health and nutrition. MUE started a garden with refugees from Burma, as well as grocery store tours, a "Stock Healthy, Shop Healthy" program, and youth nutrition programming. MUE partnered with local government to obtain grant funding and conduct research to identify refugees' needs. Because the goal of many resettlement programs is for refugees to become self-sufficient as quickly as possible, food and nutrition education is not a priority concern of caseworkers. Extension offices in counties across the country have responded in flexible and creative ways to the needs of newly resettled refugees.

For more information: <https://extension2.missouri.edu/>

RECOMMENDATIONS

Planners and researchers can create places for refugees that support their food experience and strengthen the food system. Three recommendations for accomplishing this work emerge from the key findings in the original study that are translated for this brief. Strategies and models to consider listed here offer examples to spur thought and action.



Amplify the voices of refugees in planning and policy processes

- Foster the creation of culturally inclusive policies by diversifying local government leadership
- Commit to hiring diverse populations, including refugees, for government positions
- Recognize and understand the diversity of experiences, challenges, languages, religions, practices, power structures and needs within refugee populations, even within groups from the same country



Increase access to land for gardening and urban farming skills

- Consider public access to community gardens as part of strategies for urban and neighborhood greening
- Identify underutilized city-owned land for community gardens in and near neighborhoods where refugees are concentrated
- Prioritize garden access for refugees living in rental housing
- Maintain gardens through neighborhood engagement
- Encourage growth of traditional fruits and vegetables, as the local climate allows
- Secure rights to community gardens/land through community land trusts and/or long-term leases
- Raise awareness of community gardens and their health benefits



Promote civic-public and cross-sectoral collaboration

- Engage refugees, civil society groups, and resettlement agencies as part of local government planning processes
- Enact policies that support services provided to refugees by civic agencies relating to food, housing, work, training, language, health and more
- Through policy and planning, reduce broader structural barriers facing refugees such as access to land, availability of public transportation, and access to quality food retail outlets

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This brief is designed for food systems practitioners, local government leaders, planners, and policy makers. It extracts research from a qualitative case study of Buffalo, New York published in the journal *Built Environment*.

The original case study drew from multiple sources of primarily qualitative data. Research methods included open-ended interviews with 28 refugees originating from Burma, local government leaders, and representatives of civil-society groups. It also included a review of policy documents adopted or prepared by the City of Buffalo and analysis of secondary data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Preliminary results and drafts were reviewed by a Community Advisory Group comprised of representatives of refugees from Burma and civic agencies providing refugee services. All errors and omissions are the responsibility of authors.

Additional research conducted for this brief includes analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, identification of models to consider that support recommendations and strategies, and a comparative analysis of diet and dietary outcomes between the U.S. and Burma.

For details, read the original research article: Judelsohn, Alexandra & Orom, Heather & Kim, Isok & Bay Na Sa, Aye & Khan, Hijab & Devito, Rosie & O. Diaz Del Carpio, Roberto & Raja, Samina. (2017). Planning the City of Good (and New) Neighbours: Refugees' Experiences of the Food Environment in Buffalo, New York. *Built Environment*. 43. 402-416.

¹ Khojasteh, Maryam, and Samina Raja. "Agents of Change: How Immigrant-Run Ethnic Food Retailers Improve Food Environments." *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* 12.3 (2017): 299-327.

² Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugee and Migration, Office of Admissions - Refugee Processing Center, <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>

³ Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugee and Migration, Office of Admissions - Refugee Processing Center, <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/> and US Census 2016 estimates (1-year)

⁴ US Department of Health & Human Services, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/2017-poverty-guidelines>

⁵ US Census, 2015 estimate (5-year); US Department of Health & Human Services, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/2017-poverty-guidelines>

⁶ For more information about New Roots for Refugees and Juniper Gardens, see "Growing a Local Food Economy for a Healthy Wyandotte" in *Exploring Stories of Opportunity: Growing Good Connections*, http://growingfoodconnections.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/10/Wyandotte-Case-Study_2016.09.29.final-1.pdf

ABOUT THIS SERIES

This series of briefs brings original and published research on food systems planning to the attention of a broad audience of food systems practitioners, local governments, planners and policy makers.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Entress, Sharon, Alexandra Judelsohn, Brenda Stynes and Samina Raja. "Refugees and Food Experiences: Insights from Research in Buffalo, NY." *Translating Research for Policy Series. Growing Food Connections Project*, 2018.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Dr. Heather Orom, Associate Professor and Assistant Dean for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and co-principal investigator on the original study, who reviewed and offered insightful comments on a draft of this brief. We also gratefully acknowledge members of the Community Advisory Group for their cultural guidance, insights, and feedback that informed the development of this brief.

GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS PARTNERSHIP

PROJECT LEAD



PROJECT CO-LEADS



cultivating
healthy
places



JOHN GLENN SCHOOL
OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS
glenn.osu.edu

PROJECT PARTNERS



American Planning Association
Making Great Communities Happen

GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS APRIL 2018

AUTHORS

Sharon Ana Entress
University at Buffalo Regional Institute
Alexandra Judelsohn
Samina Raja
*Food Systems Planning and Healthy
Communities Lab
University at Buffalo*

SERIES EDITORS

Samina Raja
*Food Systems Planning and Healthy
Communities Lab
University at Buffalo*

DESIGN, PRODUCTION AND COORDINATION

Brenda Stynes
Laura Quebral
University at Buffalo Regional Institute
Alexandra Judelsohn
*Food Systems Planning and Healthy
Communities Lab
University at Buffalo*



Growing Food Connections is supported by Agriculture and Food Research Initiative Competitive Grant no. 2012-68004-19894 from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture. UB Community of Global Health Equity (UB CGHE) provided additional support.



United States
Department of
Agriculture
National Institute
of Food and
Agriculture