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A Daunting Journey

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Many refugees to the U.S. travel thousands of miles to a safe harbor, but once here, find that adjusting to linguistic and cultural differences is an equally daunting journey, according to new research to be presented by two University of Dayton sociologists Monday, Aug. 20, at the American Sociological Association meeting in Denver.

"In one or two weeks, some refugees find themselves going from a place like a Burundian refugee camp to a Midwestern city like Dayton," said sociology professor Theo Majka. "The journey from a rural environment in a developing country to a post-modern urban world causes all sorts of crises."

Theo Majka — with co-author, fellow sociology professor and spouse Linda Majka — researched the experiences of refugees from six ethnic or cultural groups who have resettled in Dayton over the past 20 years. The work is an extension of similar research conducted by the Majkas in 2005 on immigrants and decades of work in diversity studies.

"In the new study, we wanted to see how the experiences of refugees differed from those of people who came here by choice," said Linda Majka. "We weren't sure what we would find."

They found that the challenges facing both groups are much the same, refugees, who often come directly to the U.S. from traumatic environments with vast cultural differences, experience significant mental health issues and need more education about Western cultural norms and expectations.

"We found that this is a major difference from immigrant groups. Many refugees may be suffering from post-traumatic stress stemming from experiences in their home countries," Linda Majka said. "They have seen violence, massacres, and even watched family members killed in front of their eyes."

The Majkas with other sociology faculty and students interviewed people who work with refugees through local organizations as well as leaders of refugee communities in the Dayton area, and conducted focus groups with six refugee populations: Sudanese, Burundian, Rwandan, Congolese, Iraqi, and Meskhetian (or Ahiska) Turks, an ethnic Turkish population originally from the Meskheti region of Georgia in the former Soviet Union. A broad cross-section of refugees, ranging from the well-educated and credentialed to those barely literate and unfamiliar with Western norms and culture, were included.

Not surprisingly, the greatest obstacle to better integration into the Dayton community was language, which affected virtually every aspect of their experience, the Majkas said.

While the refugees said the quality of English as a Second Language classes offered in the area is generally good, they encountered major obstacles in trying to take the classes, Linda Majka said.

Refugees said classes are held at inconvenient times and places; child care is an issue; and the classes too often group together learners at vastly different levels of English, she said. Language also affects refugees' ability and comfort in accessing health care, she said.

"For some who are coming from countries where they were detained or suffered persecution, they are very troubled by signing papers they can't read and don't understand," she said.

Finding jobs that pay living wages for their families is also a major source of stress and worry, the Majkas found.

"Many can only find dead-end service jobs, although they have good educations and skills," Theo Majka said. "We found two Iraqis who have engineering degrees and computer skills who are sweeping floors."

The refugees praised the churches, mosques and faith-based organizations such as Catholic Social Services that offer help and support and said they had few problems with police and emergency services. They had high praise for Dayton Public Schools — especially teachers — and found the Dayton Metro Library very accommodating.

The Majkas said that since refugee needs in language fluency, employment prospects, success in school and housing options all are interrelated, improvements in one area will have a positive impact on the others.

Their recommendations include: better coordination of social services, more access to interpreters, more information about available services and housing options, better education about cultural norms and expectations for newly-arrived refugees as well as their rights as refugees and legal residents, and greater awareness of mental health issues and strategies to address them.

The Majkas are already involved in Dayton-area programs to ease the transition for refugees and immigrants. They assisted with the city of Dayton's Welcome Dayton ([url: http://www.welcomedayton.org/](http://www.welcomedayton.org/)) plan launched in 2011, an initiative to help the city become more inviting to immigrants and attract groups to help grow jobs, businesses and population.

They are spearheading the region's third forum on immigration Nov. 16 at the University of Dayton. "Engaging Refugees, Building Community, Becoming Citizens: Refugees in a New Community" will bring together scholars, mental health providers, human services agency personnel and others involved with immigrants to explore local level-strategies that can help refugees integrate into their new communities more effectively.

The Majkas' paper, "Refugees in a Mid-Sized Midwestern Urban Area: Circumstantial and Institutional Challenges to Incorporation," will be presented at 10:30 a.m. Monday, Aug. 20, at the American Sociological Association's 106th Annual Meeting in Denver.

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