

EVIDENCE SUMMARY

January 2024¹

What strategies improve the outcomes of refugee women in employment programs?

Limited but growing evidence shows positive impacts of national policies on the employment rates of refugees.

- Canada's Educational Credential Assessment requirement for economic migrants and private sponsorship programs has shown positive impacts on employment rates, the latter especially for women with lower educational levels.
- Denmark's 2016 work-first policy for refugees had a significant positive impact on men's employment rates one year after arrival, but the impact on women appeared to be limited and potentially negative.

Systematic reviews identified no robust studies for refugees specifically and limited evidence for low-income populations.

- A 2015 comprehensive systematic review of the effects of interventions on refugees' labor force participation rate, employment rate, use of cash assistance, income, job retention, and quality of life identified no studies for inclusion due to methodological weaknesses. Consequently, the review, which included programs serving both women and men, did not find any evidence for or against any intervention.
- Several interventions have been found to be effective at improving labor market outcomes of low-income adults in general. The strategies that appear most effective are financial incentives and sanctions, education, work experience, and training. Interventions that combine several strategies to help low-income workers find and keep jobs appear more effective than any single strategy.

Largely suggestive evidence provides some guidance on what could work for refugee women entering the labor market.

- Extended case management is associated with higher household incomes and job satisfaction, in addition to significantly higher employment rates at six months and one year post-resettlement. However, benefits for women are not as clear as those for men.
- Supporting women in developing skills and meeting educational attainment goals can lead to higher employment rates.
- Opening opportunities for women to engage in the workforce in non-traditional ways, such as through entrepreneurship or gig work, could help overcome potential barriers surrounding traditional workplaces.

¹ This evidence summary updates a Switchboard summary first published in October 2020.

Purpose of this summary

This document summarizes the state of available evidence regarding strategies to improve the employment rates of refugee women in employment programs.

Historically, within the first five years of arrival in the U.S., refugee women have been employed at lower rates than men.² This may be due to a variety of factors, including child care responsibilities, transportation barriers, and differing roles and expectations.

What is meant by “employment programs”?

Refugee employment programs assist refugees in finding employment in order to attain self-sufficiency. Employment specialists work to find a match between the needs, abilities, and goals of refugees and the hiring needs of employers. Refugee employment programs are frequently federally funded and may also be funded by other public and private sources.

What does the evidence show?

Limited but growing evidence shows positive impacts of national policies on the employment rates of refugees.

- Banerjee et al. (2021) looked at the impact of a programmatic requirement for an Educational Credential Assessment (ECA) on economic immigrants to Canada. Introduced in 2013, the ECA requirement authenticates foreign credentials and identifies equivalent Canadian credentials for immigrants pre-migration. An independent company assesses a principal applicant's (PA's) degree credentials and transcripts and sends a report to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. Most Federal Skilled Worker Program (FSWP) PAs who arrived in 2015 were required to have an ECA. Their outcomes were compared to FSWP arrivals from 2010–2012 and arrivals during the same time periods through three other programs that do not require an ECA. **Results indicated that having an ECA is associated with “improved employment rates and earnings for both men and women after two years in Canada”** (p. 370). Separating PAs who already had some work experience in Canada before applying for immigration showed that the ECA requirements' positive effects were almost exclusively for those with no previous employment experience in Canada, especially in raising incomes. However, when looking at the area of origin, the authors discovered that earning disparities were not improved for immigrants from Africa or Western Asia. ECA requirements only apply to applicants with post-secondary education, so applicants with a high school or lower level of education were excluded from the study.
- Arendt (2022) investigated the effects of a work-first policy on refugees' participation in the labor market following its adoption by Denmark in 2016. Work-first policies emphasize quick entry into the labor market as compared to train-first policies that emphasize investments in language or education first. This particular policy includes two components: (1) a requirement that refugees post their CV and document their job search in a public database and (2) a requirement that on-the-job training should start within one month of arrival and gaps in training should not exceed six weeks. When participating in job training, immigrants are only required to work at least 15 hours per week, and their municipality is required to offer language classes on a flexible schedule. The

² Office of Refugee Resettlement. (2017). *Annual report to Congress*.
<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/report/office-refugee-resettlement-annual-report-congress-2017>

program also overhauled its process of declaring a refugee as job-ready, with the share increasing from 5% to 60–80% from the time of arrival. (Previously, immigrants could be declared not job-ready due to language barriers or if they could not post their CV and job search to the public job database as required.) **Overall results indicated success in expediting entry to the labor market for men, with a 10 percentage point increase in the share of men who were employed one year after arrival, but results for women showed a small and insignificant negative effect.** The only positive effect for women was an increase in participation in classroom training by more than a week in the first year after arrival. The work-first policy also did not positively affect men's wages until 15 months post-arrival. Additionally, there is a lack of diversification of industries that are hiring refugees after the policy adoption, with the most common continuing to be hospitality, property services (i.e., cleaning), and retail.

- Kaida, Hou, and Stick (2020) investigated the long-term economic outcomes of refugees who arrived in Canada as privately sponsored refugees (PSRs) compared to government-assisted refugees (GARs). The authors utilized data from the Longitudinal Immigration Database and considered initial levels of human capital (language skills, education, employment history, etc.) in their analysis. GARs and PSRs hold the same legal status in Canada but differ on some general resettlement factors that could potentially contribute to their long-term labor market success. For example, GARs are generally resettled into smaller cities than PSRs and often have lower educational levels and official language skills. After analyzing data on refugees in their first 15 years post-resettlement, **results showed that the first year post-resettlement had the greatest difference in employment rate, with PSRs being 17 and 24 percentage points higher than GARs for men and women, respectively.** This difference dropped drastically after the first year and gradually decreased over time. For women specifically, the initial employment rate for PSRs was 71%, which dropped to 66% and then stabilized around 70%. At 15 years post-resettlement, the difference was much smaller but still higher for PSRs. Reported earnings for PSRs rose steadily post-arrival, with the difference over GARs stabilizing at around \$1,000 annually. When breaking down differences by human capital characteristics, the authors found that **“less-educated female PSRs’ relative advantage was far greater than their more-educated counterparts”** (p. 17). The authors note that other non-measurable factors could have contributed to some of the reported differences. Government selection may favor refugees with higher needs, making it harder for them to find employment. Sponsorship may also facilitate a more welcoming entrant community since arrivals have clear local advocates, which may help overcome some societal barriers.

Systematic reviews identified no robust programmatic reviews for refugees specifically and limited intervention evidence for low-income populations.

- A 2015 comprehensive systematic review of the effects of interventions on refugees’ labor force participation rate, employment rate, use of cash assistance, income, job retention, and quality of life identified no studies for inclusion due to methodological weaknesses (Ott et al., 2015). Consequently, the review found no evidence for or against any intervention. This review included programs serving both women and men.
- Although there are few studies of employment programs for refugees in particular, several interventions are effective at improving labor market outcomes of low-income adults in general. Most strategies are associated with modest positive effects. The strategies that appear most effective are financial incentives for working and financial sanctions for not working, education, work experience, and training. Interventions that combine several strategies to help low-income workers find and keep jobs appear more effective than any single strategy (Vollmer et al., 2017).

One impact evaluation and several suggestive studies provide some guidance on what could work for refugee women entering the labor market.

- Shaw et al. (2022) analyzed the impact of extended case management (ECM) on employment rates and income levels for refugees resettled in Salt Lake City compared to those resettled in Tucson who received standard employment services. ECM in Salt Lake City included up to 24 months of case management services with a consistent case manager that included “regular contact and assistance to households as they navigated health, education, and social service networks” (p. 915). Employment status, income source, and household income were measured in four waves (six months, one year, two years, and three years post-arrival). Job satisfaction was also measured at waves 3 and 4 (two and three years post-arrival). Results showed that employment rates were significantly higher at waves 1 and 2 for Salt Lake City. The difference became non-significant at waves 3 and 4. **Total household income and level of job satisfaction were higher for Salt Lake City at each point measured. While Tucson participants experienced positive growth in employment and income over the period of measurement, reported job satisfaction decreased over time.** Women, in particular, were less likely to be employed, rely on salaried labor, or have a higher income than males at baseline, and their rates increased more slowly than men over time. **The authors suggest that ECM could be a particularly well-fitting program for women, as it allows for greater support for a longer period.**
- Other studies have examined refugee women’s entrepreneurial activities. One examination of entrepreneurial programs concluded that it was too early to evaluate outcomes (Desiderio, 2016).
- A study of Syrian refugee women in Jordan found that **the gig economy offers some promise** to provide work to these women, especially by providing broader markets to women who are already economically active on a small scale. **Home-based work may be an attractive option** for many Syrian women refugees in Jordan. Yet evidence also suggests that the gig economy work can be insecure, low-paid, and lacking in protections (Hunt et al., 2017).

What are the implications for practice and research?

- Several national policies have shown significantly positive impacts for refugees and immigrants upon arrival to their new country. However, **the benefits for women are not as clear or consistent.** For example, extended case management’s results are promising for increasing employment rates and job satisfaction, but the reported results for women were not as robust.
- Early employment and other resettlement programs may help refugee clients enhance their **education and linguistic proficiency.** Supporting women in developing skills and meeting educational attainment goals can lead to higher employment rates, as evidence shows **these skills are associated with improved economic outcomes.**
- **There is a clear gap in the research on interventions that address the challenges refugee women face when entering the workforce.** Although many studies addressed outcomes for women in some context, they were not the target population for any of the more robust evaluations. As ORR reports show women have lower rates of employment, identifying barriers and supports specific to this population could be particularly impactful.

“More research with rigorous designs, such as prospective, controlled studies, is needed to determine which interventions affect the economic self-sufficiency and well-being of resettled refugees.”

(Ott et al., 2015)

How did we identify evidence for this summary?

Included Studies

The Switchboard evidence database includes the following types of studies, categorized by their strength of evidence:

Strong Evidence

Meta-analyses: systematic analyses of sets of existing evaluations of similar programs.

Systematic reviews: syntheses of the best available evidence on specific research questions that use narrative synthesis focused on evaluations of the impacts of at least one specific policy, program, or intervention.

Moderate Evidence

Published individual **impact evaluations** using randomized controlled trials (RCTs/C-RCTs), natural experiments, quasi-experimental techniques such as difference-in-difference (DID), instrumental variables (IV), regression discontinuity design (RDD), propensity score matching (PSM) or other forms of synthetic matching, as well as fixed effects techniques with interaction terms.

Suggestive Evidence

Published studies using methods including non-systematic literature review, uncontrolled before and after tests, post-test only, interrupted time series (ITS), cross-sectional regressions, longitudinal panels, cohort and case-controls, as well as purely qualitative techniques.

Excluded Studies

The Switchboard evidence database excludes case studies, unpublished suggestive research, opinion papers, descriptive studies, and unpublished literature reviews.

Search Protocol

Studies included in the database focused on high-income or upper-middle-income countries, including but not limited to the United States. Studies included must have been published since 2000. To identify evidence related to employment outcomes among refugees, we searched the following websites and databases using the following population, methodology, and target intervention terms:

Websites and	Population Terms	Methodology Terms	Target Intervention
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Databases			Terms
Campbell Collaboration	refugee	evaluation	(women or female)
Cochrane Collaboration	OR	OR	OR
Mathematica Policy Research	asylee	impact	employ*
	OR	OR	OR
Evidence Aid	T-Visa	program	“job readiness”
	OR	OR	OR
Urban Institute	U-Visa	intervention	work
	OR	OR	OR
Migration Policy Institute	Cuban	policy	“self-sufficien*”
	OR	OR	OR
HHS OPRE	Haitian	project	“workforce development”
	OR	OR	OR
ASSIA	Amerasian	train*	“job development”
	OR	OR	OR
Social Services Abstracts	immigrant	therapy	OR
	OR	OR	“career”
Social Work Abstracts	low English proficien*	treatment	
		OR	
ReliefWeb		counseling	
		OR	
Sociological Abstracts		workshop	
		OR	
Policy File Index		review	
		OR	
PAIS		meta-analysis	
		OR	
GenderWatch		synthesis	

For databases or websites that permitted only basic searches, free-text terms and limited term combinations were selected out of the lists above, and all resultant studies were reviewed for relevance. Conversely, for databases or websites with advanced search capability, we made use of relevant filters available. All search terms were searched in the title and abstract fields only in order to exclude studies that made only passing mention of the topic under consideration.

After initial screening, Switchboard evidence mapping is prioritized as follows: First priority is given to meta-analyses and systematic reviews, followed by individual impact evaluations when no meta-analyses or systematic reviews are available. Evaluations that are rated as impact evidence are considered before those rated as suggestive, with the latter only being included for outcomes where no evidence is available from the former.

Studies Included

Database and website searching identified 1,811 studies. After removing duplicates, 1,545 studies were then screened. Of these, 1,451 were determined to be irrelevant to this search. Ninety-four full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, and 85 of them were excluded due to not meeting one or more of the inclusion criteria pertaining to resettlement country, year of publication, population, methodology, or target problem. Eight studies were eligible for inclusion.³ A list of studies included may be found below, with hyperlinks to the abstracts or full text (when available).

³ Due to the paucity of relevant studies specific to refugees, one additional recent, comprehensive meta-analytic study on general low-income populations was included (Vollmer et al., 2017).

Meta-Analyses and Systematic Reviews

Ott, E., & Montgomery, P. (2015). Interventions to improve the economic self-sufficiency and well-being of resettled refugees: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 11(1), 1–53. [Full text.](#)

Vollmer, L., Mastri, A., Maccarone, A., & Sama-Miller, E. (2017). *Which employment strategies work for whom? A meta-regression* (OPRE Report #2017-40-A). Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [Full text.](#)

Impact Evaluations

Shaw, S. A., Rodgers, G., Poulin, P., & Robinson, J. (2022). Extended case management services among resettled refugees in the United States. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 32(8), 912–924. [Abstract.](#)

Suggestive Studies

Arendt, J. N. (2022). Labor market effects of a work-first policy for refugees. *Journal of Population Economics*, 35, 169–196. [Full Text.](#)

Banerjee, R., Hou, F., Reitz, J. G., & Zhang, T. (2021). Evaluating foreign skills: Effects of credential assessment on skilled immigrants' labour market performance in Canada. *Canadian Public Policy*, 47(3), 358–372. [Abstract.](#)

Desiderio, M. V. (2016). *Integrating refugees into host country labor markets: Challenges and policy options*. Migration Policy Institute. [Full text.](#)

Hunt, A., Samman, E., & Mansour-Ille, D. (2017). *Syrian women refugees in Jordan: Opportunity in the gig economy*. ODI Reports. [Full text.](#)

Kaida, L., Hou, F., & Stick, M. (2020). The long-term economic outcomes of refugee private sponsorship. *Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series*, 443. [Full Text.](#)

Supplemental Resources

The following studies did not meet the criteria to be included in the evidence summary but may provide additional context, guidance, or understanding of the topic.

U.S. Departments of Labor, Commerce, Education, & Health and Human Services. (2014, July 22). *What works in job training: A synthesis of the evidence*. <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/legacy/files/jdt.pdf>

Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation. (n.d.). *Career pathways research portfolio*. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/career-pathways-research-portfolio>