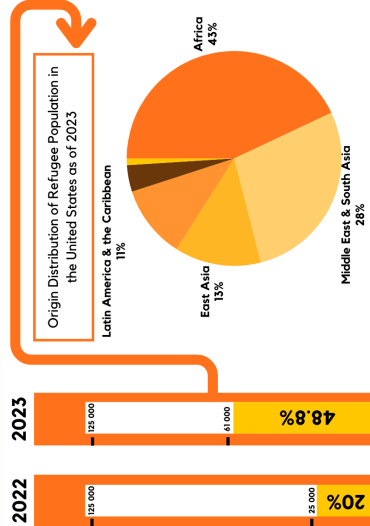


# THE UNIQUE BARRIERS OF SUPPORTING YOUTH AFRICAN REFUGEES IN HARTFORD

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## Background

The graphs below show the percentages of admitted refugees into the United States in comparison to the ceiling set by the US government in 2022 and 2023 respectively. In both years, this ceiling was 125 000.



## Main Takeaways

**10** African youth refugees make up the biggest percentage of youth refugees in the United States.

**03** Community organisers receive roughly \$2,275 per resettled refugee client. In Hartford, for housing, the average cost per month per person is approximately \$1042. This means that the government provides an estimated two months of rent, with little left over for groceries and clothing. The effect of this is that newly resettled refugees face a significant amount of pressure to completely establish themselves financially within the first two months, in addition to re-orienting themselves socially.

Despite the United States admitting less refugees than their annual ceiling, a 2015 study by the Migration Policy Institute revealed that the few individuals who are admitted are still socially underserved.

**Social reintegration becomes a secondary priority.**

This is particularly harmful to youth members because they are:

- At a vulnerable age bracket during which experience into greater society does not occur.
- Do not have the ability to financially integrate or participate in society and consequently, social acclimation becomes the sole determinant of integration.

## Research Questions

- What are the unique barriers of social acclimation faced by youth African refugees (between the ages of 12 and 18) in the Hartford community?
- How do existing social systems seek to improve or eliminate these challenges? To what extent are these systems effective?
- What are the facilitators of social acclimation in relationships between youth African refugees?

**Aim:** To develop a youth mentorship program aimed at the specific empowerment of African youth refugees.

## Methodology

### Research Process

#### Literature Review

#### Create Research Plan with the SCC and IRIS

#### IRB Application Process

#### Participant Outreach with the SCC and IRIS

#### Host Interactive Sessions

#### Synthesise Findings into Empowerment Program

The research model was carried out in a cyclic manner, in which each progression included revisiting and analysing both previous literature and previous sessions to address any gaps. The methodology of this project also had a huge emphasis on rapport-building. Examples of this include visiting the families of prospective participants to explain the project and mitigate transportation issues, as well as translating documents in Kiswahili and having a Swahili translator present at the sessions.

## Findings

### Barriers of Social Acclimation

#### 1 LINGUISTIC INTEGRATION

English as a medium of:

Education Social Interaction

#### 2 SELF EXPRESSION

Here we can wear our own clothes to school but we cannot wear Congolese clothes if we want to be taken seriously

#### 3 PROXIMITY AND FREQUENCY

Seeing each other more frequently would help with support, but difficulty of finding clothes to one another to meet regularly

### Interactive Sessions

#### 1 School

Figure 1. Participants after focus group.



- Discussion on relationships with peers or teachers, and barriers or facilitators of educational integration.

#### 3 Community

Figure 3. Participants participating in a dance workshop taught by artist Sam-G Dile.



- Inspired discussion about the African community in Hartford, and the extent to which participants feel that they are supported or supported from them and from one another.

#### 2 Home

Figure 2. Mural Participants created their conceptions of home at the Underground Center.



- Participants wrote down the words they associated with the notion of home. These words were discussed, and then visualised as a group painting.

#### 4 Aspirations

Donuts and Debates Session (A donut for your thoughts)

- Spectrum Game** - Participants were given 5 prompts and asked to position themselves between Agree and Disagree on a spectrum. Example: "I have a job as one of my family members."
- Group Discussion** - Do participants have personal goals currently, and how have their existing support systems have played a role in that?

## Implications

**What are the unique barriers of social acclimation faced by youth African refugees (between the ages of 12 and 18) in the Hartford community?**

- The Youth Mentorship Program needs to:**
- Organise for the expansion of academic resources available to youth African refugees to facilitate educational linguistic integration.
  - Facilitate spaces which allow students to interact socially in English, but separately also create spaces which encourage students to interact socially in Kiswahili, i.e. emphasize that acclimation does not require assimilation.
  - Promote interactions with the broader African community in Hartford with an emphasis on sharing culture, and affirming identity and place in community.
  - Aid youth mentors in finding opportunities to connect with their mentees for mutual support which address issues of proximity.

**How do existing social systems seek to improve or eliminate these challenges? To what extent are these systems effective?**

- Opportunities for academic and social enfranchisement currently facilitated by IRIS and the SCC are limited by issues of transportation and budget;
- Organising for the expansion of public transportation routes and subsidised bus passes.

**What are the facilitators of social acclimation in relationships between youth African refugees?**

- Participants befriended other participants on the basis of sex and age. Secondly, participants were able to other participants who had arrived in the United States at approximately the same time as them.
- Youth Mentorship Program may match mentors and mentees based on the data.

## Limitations

### Timing

- Due to the time it took to receive IRB approval, the sessions were condensed quite tightly together. It is possible that the participants did not have adequate time to digest each session and reflect on their opinions on a deeper level which could have led to more in-depth findings.
- Limited time to reflect on each session and tweak the structure to better reflect findings on address gaps in research.

### Sex and Gender

Ratio of participants was 5 Males to 8 Females;

- Either sex may have participated differently if the group was not co-educational, specifically in terms of speaking about their impacts of gender and sex on their experiences.
- Findings may not necessarily be inclusive of their experiences. However, gender-diversity is still heavily stigmatised within African diasporic communities, so including gender-diverse participants would likely have had a higher risk to their safety than the mentorship program. Would be equipped to address at this initial stage.

### Applications for Future Research

- To address possible gaps in research:**
- Diversify sampling methods to create focus groups with multiple members of origin
  - Interview participants or hold sessions with a unisex group
  - Identify intersected refugee identities, e.g. queer refugees
  - Extend the sample population beyond the SCC and IRIS
- General extensions to research:**
- Extend the number, length, and complexity of the sessions to better reflect findings
  - Collect qualitative data, e.g. through a survey

### Nationality

- All participants in the project were refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, so the findings may not reflect of youth African refugees. However, 76.74% of African refugees in the United States are from the DRC.

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## References

This project aimed to establish a youth mentorship and empowerment program at both IRIS and the Swahili Community Center. A copy of the program manuscript, developed from the findings of this research, is available upon request.