Worcester is state’s top destination for refugees
By George Barnes TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — With more than 2,000 refugees from 24 countries settling in Worcester during five years surveyed, Worcester is the state’s leading destination for people escaping persecution in their homelands.

A report issued this week funded by the Clark University’s Mosakowski Institute for Public Enterprise looks at the refugees moving to the city from 2007 to 2012 and their situations, in comparison to all foreign-born residents and residents native to Worcester.

Anita Häusermann Fábos, a Clark University professor of international development and social change, will deliver the report today at a program at the university presented by the state Office of Refugees and Immigrants.

The report is an effort to define the city’s refugees and offer caution that the unique circumstances of refugees can easily be overlooked in the broader conversation about Worcester’s overall foreign-born population, which numbers nearly 40,000.

“The report demonstrates, we hope, that the available information gives us a tantalizing and quite positive snapshot of the refugee settlement process,” Ms. Fabos said. “We believe the report will set the stage for more research into longer-term refugee integration into Worcester.”

Ms. Fabos said the report can only speculate about refugee participation in the labor force because data on part-time and temporary jobs for foreign-born workers is not readily available.

“The needs of refugees are somewhat different from those of the overall foreign-born population, as are the experiences and cultural knowledge that refugees are able to share with their host community,” she said.
The city saw 2,196 refugees move here during the five years surveyed, more than any other community in the state. Although the refugee population arriving during that period is only 1.2 percent of the city's current population, it is nearly 26 percent of all refugees arriving in the state during the five years.

According to the report, refugees tend to depend on public support less than non-refugee immigrants. Also, overall foreign-born households supported themselves significantly more from earnings and less from public assistance than native-born residents.

Foreign-born residents received less in Social Security and retirement income, a little less in Supplemental Social Security income and about the same in food stamps and other public assistance.

Another finding of the report indicates more foreign-born Worcester residents are employed than native-born residents, by 8.6 percent, and they have a lower unemployment rate by 1.8 percent.

Earnings are a different story.

Native-born men have 22 percent higher annual earnings than male immigrants. Native-born women who are full-time employees earn an average of $8,832 more per year than those who are foreign born.

Surprisingly, a higher percentage of Worcester’s native population, 21 percent, live below the poverty level than foreign-born. Only 16.9 percent of foreign-born residents are below the poverty level.

“This may be due to the foreign-born population having more people working per household,” the report said.

Exactly how well refugees are doing in assimilating into Worcester society as opposed to other immigrants requires more research, Ms. Fabos said.

“Research about refugee populations in other parts of the country has demonstrated a high motivation for success overall, but I think it is impossible to generalize since each refugee group and each immigrant group may have wildly
different characteristics, opportunities and resources that influence integration in different ways,” she said.

The employment figures collected from the U.S. Census reflect full- and part-time workers. The earnings figures reflect only full-time workers. In Worcester, 39-percent of the workers are considered to be part-time or part-year.

Worcester has a higher percentage of foreign-born residents, 21 percent, than Massachusetts as a whole. Of Worcester’s 181,473 residents, 37,498 were born outside the United States and 143,975 are native. Statewide, the total foreign-born population is 995,692, or 15 percent of the total population of 6,646,144.

Ms. Fabos said part of the reason the city has become a destination for refugees is its previous success with populations that have arrived as the result of war. It also offers affordable housing, availability of jobs that do not necessarily require English spoken as a first language and affordable healthcare.

“Worcester is developing a good reputation for thoughtful, innovative programs for refugee newcomers,” she said, adding that more research is needed. “We hope that this report can highlight some of the gaps in what we know to help identify opportunities for strengthening and improving services for refugees as well as their settled neighbors in Worcester.”

Where the refugees come from is constantly evolving depending on political situations around the world.

“There have been shifts in the face of immigrants in Worcester, with new populations of refugees coming from places that did not previously have connections here,” Ms. Fabos said.

As an example, she said there were no historic populations of Bhutanese in this country before refugees were resettled from Bhutan in 2004.

“The U.S. government accepts refugees from quite a diverse range of places for humanitarian reasons,” Ms. Fabos said. “I think there are initial challenges for cities due to unfamiliarity with a group’s language and cultural background. The numbers of refugees that we’re talking about may be very small, but the variety of new languages and ways of life can provide challenges for service providers.”
During the five-year period, 2,196 refugees came to Worcester. Of those, the largest number, 837, were from Iraq. The second largest population was 617 from Bhutan, 272 from Burma, 112 from Burundi, 101 from Somalia, 45 from Liberia, 38 from Vietnam, 34 from the Democratic Republic of Congo, 29 from the Central African Republic and 11 from Ethiopia. The other 100 refugees came from 14 other countries.

The peak for Iraqi refugees arriving in the city was 2010, when 245, or just over 29 percent of the 837, arrived from that county. The numbers tapered off in 2011 with 159 arriving, and 134 in 2012.

Burma showed a similar trend, with its peak year 2009, which is also the peak year for total numbers of refugees arriving in Worcester.

Refugees from Bhutan, the second largest population to come to Worcester in the five years, saw a different pattern, with a peak reached in 2009 but reasonably consistent numbers after that.

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