

Refugees in Nashville: A Closer Look at Kurdish, Sudanese, and Latin American  
Refugees in Middle Tennessee

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My learning goal this semester has been to learn more about the refugee communities that are prevalent in the Middle Tennessee area. It is a knowledge-based goal that I chose because I believed it would help me become more in touch with the city of Nashville and the communities that are struggling within it. I have learned much of it by working at my site, the Nashville International Center for Empowerment (NICE), but I have also relied on my coworkers to guide me and give me suggestions for my independent research on the topic. Though there are many refugee communities in Nashville, I will spotlight Kurdish, Sudanese, and Latin American refugees. The reason behind this narrowing of my learning goal is that these are groups of people that are particularly prevalent among NICE's client base, and in conversations with coworkers, including Brandon White, my supervisor, these are the groups that have relatively long histories in the region which will provide ample material to study.

In recent years, Nashville has become a home to many groups of refugees. This is part of a trend of refugees coming into smaller cities in the American South rather than population centers near New York or Los Angeles. This is partially because in 2001, the US Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) chose three non-traditional locations in the South as new targets<sup>1</sup> for incoming refugees. The idea was that new refugee communities could be built in these cities and have a relatively larger political influence in smaller cities rather than large ones. The three cities chosen were Nashville, TN; Portland, OR; and Lowell Massachusetts. Refugee resettlement has particularly added to the diversity of Nashville's landscape, and the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2014/04/06/nashvilles-international-refugees/7339881/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14649360600715151?journalCo>

primary refugee groups are Sudanese, Somali, Kurdish, Bosnian, and Hispanic. Nashville has been a popular destination for the Latin American immigrant community in the US for decades now, and there is already a thriving immigrant neighborhood in Nashville because of this. It is partially because of the growing immigration to Nashville that it is considered to be a “New South<sup>2</sup>” city beginning to look larger, more urban, and more diverse every year<sup>3</sup>.

Sudan is a country that has had a very troubled recent history. Because of numerous civil wars and widespread ethnic cleansing, many of the refugees from Sudan and the relatively newly formed South Sudan are women and children<sup>4</sup>. There are also environmental reasons for this refugee crisis in Sudan; global climate change has caused the Sahara Desert to expand south into Sudan, and the majority of Sudan’s poor population is not equipped to deal with the adverse environmental conditions this causes.

Though most Sudanese refugees are either internally displaced (meaning they stay in their home country removed from their homes) or in neighboring nations such as Ethiopia and Chad, some are placed in the US by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). For the Sudanese refugee population in Nashville, hardship is still a reality. Refugee children who walked out of South Sudan into neighboring countries eventually came to be known as the “Lost Boys,” and after one of these refugees was killed in a Nashville nightclub, photographers

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14649360600715151?journalCode=rscg20>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/2014/04/06/nashvilles-international-refugees/7339881/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/south-sudan/>

and other volunteers set up the Lost Boys Foundation<sup>5</sup> of Nashville to try and set up a living complex for many of these refugee children, many of them now adults in a foreign nation with many of its own issues with violence and poverty.

One of the “Lost Boys” was a young man by the name of Gatluak Ter Thach, a child soldier who escaped South Sudan and eventually came to America. He was living in the US for some time before he met his wife, another Sudanese refugee, and began teaching her English. He eventually settled in Nashville, where there was already an active Sudanese community. Word spread in the community that Dr. Thach knew English, and he began teaching it to others around Nashville. This is how NICE was formed. The Sudanese refugee community is very deeply involved with NICE, and the organization employs a few individuals from this community. Dr. Thach (known around the office as “Gat”) is personally involved in forming the bridge between our organization and the Sudanese community, and their story is why the organization is so committed to helping refugees resettle in the US.

No discussion on Nashville’s refugee populations would be complete without mentioning the city’s substantial Kurdish population. Nashville is home to over 15,000 people of Kurdish origin, many of whom are refugees. What I soon learned upon beginning my work with NICE is that this is the largest community of Kurdish people outside of Kurdistan. I sat down with Brandon White, a member of NICE’s Adult Education program, to talk about this population as he has served numerous Kurdish clients with NICE. What he told me was that Kurdish people have been in

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thelostboysfoundation.org/about/>

Nashville for over 40 years, and the community was essentially formed because a few individuals were resettled here in the 1970s during a civil war in Iraq and begun to help their friends and relatives resettle here as well.

The Kurdish are a people without a state, as the region is split between Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. They have their own language, and consider themselves a distinct ethnicity despite never having home rule. In Iraq, Kurdistan is partially self-governing, but over the years, civil wars and ethnic cleansing in the region has forced many Kurds to seek refuge elsewhere<sup>6</sup>. Though the situation between the Kurds and the Iraqi government is not as contentious as it used to be, the Syrian civil war is now displacing many more Kurdish people, and many relocate to Middle Tennessee. In Nashville, there is a so-called “Little Kurdistan” and Kurdish people have typically had good relations with the local government<sup>7</sup>.

Latin American populations are growing all over the United States, partially due to the large number of immigrants from Mexico that are now slowly becoming American residents. Central American countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras are currently some of the most dangerous countries in the world due to the persistence of organized crime<sup>8</sup> in the region. Though these governments have attempted to curb the violence that is all too common in the region, many Central Americans feel unsafe in their homes, and thus seek asylum in the United States. This has recently become a political issue because of President Donald Trump’s

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/local/2017/06/23/who-kurds-and-why-they-nashville/97706968/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/local/2017/06/23/who-kurds-and-why-they-nashville/97706968/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2018/06/01/451474/still-refugees-people-continue-flee-violence-latin-american-countries/>

demonization of certain refugees in the region forming a caravan heading for the US border, even though it is technically well within their rights to at least seek asylum in the US. What is a humanitarian crisis in Latin America is being perceived as a military threat. Though Nashville is not particularly high in Central American refugees, it is like many Southern US cities in that it is home to many Cuban refugees, who are often in the US in political asylum from an unfriendly Marxist government.

Hispanic refugees to Nashville often find a place in the city's large Hispanic neighborhood south of downtown on Nolansville Pike. This is where the NICE office is located, and many of NICE's clients are Latin American immigrants. The Hispanic community in Nashville contains a long-established group of Cubans, as well as ever-growing groups of Mexicans, Central Americans, and Colombians<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup><https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2018/06/01/451474/still-refugees-people-continue-flee-violence-latin-american-countries/>