

Religion

B1 THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2017

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Are refugees a threat or blessing to America?

Douglas Kindschi
Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU



First, we must acknowledge that nearly everyone who came to America was an immigrant, and many were refugees from oppression and religious intolerance. Our ancestors came here to find freedom and to seek opportunity that was not available to them in the land they left. It was not an easy passage, but the hope and promise of a new life was a powerful motivator, and the willingness to work hard in a new land was key to their success.

It is not much different for today's refugees. They leave oppression and intolerance and seek freedom and opportunity for themselves and, especially, for their children. Many are leaving war-torn lands where they have lost their homes and were in constant danger of losing their lives. They are willing to work hard, learn a new language and fit into our society. They also hope to preserve many of their own practices and traditions as they settle into our communities. We welcome the diversity and enriched culture their contributions bring.

But, are refugees a threat to our country's safety? Much has been written and many studies have been conducted with a significant conclusion: refugees are not bringing violence, but are highly motivated to escape the violence that has driven them away from their homes.

In the 40-year period for which we have data (1975-2015), America has admitted more than 3.2 million refugees. A recent Cato Institute study points out only three have been involved in terrorist activity leading to death, and those three came from Cuba in the late '70s, prior to the current law passed in 1980 that established a rigorous vetting procedure. Not a single person admitted as a refugee from a Muslim country has been involved in a fatal terrorist attack.

Of the 19 terrorists who were involved in the terrible 9/11 event, none were refugees and none of them were from countries that are included in President Donald Trump's refugee ban. Refugees are, in fact, people trying to escape violence and war. They seek entrance to our country because they want to raise their families in peace and despise the criminal and violent acts that drove them out of their homes.

Refugees also provide valuable insight and intelligence, having often come from areas where there is significant conflict and activity by terrorist groups such as ISIS. They are especially motivated to help defeat the very groups that drove them out of their homes.

Criminal statistics show that refugees in particular and immigrants in general have a significantly lower criminal and incarceration rate than the native-born population. It led New York Times columnist David Brooks to remark that if we want our streets safer, we should admit more immigrants.

There are other ways refugees and immigrants are an asset to our communities. Michigan's immigrants were more than three times as likely as U.S.-born Michigan residents to start a new business. Nearly one-third of all high-tech startups in the state between 1990 and 2005 had an immigrant founder.

What are the characteristics of a successful entrepreneur? Dissatisfaction with the status quo and a willingness to take risks and work hard. This also describes a refugee or immigrant who is willing and motivated to leave home and take the risk of starting a new life in a strange land. Motivation to work hard is also strong. No wonder they are a significant part of a growing economy.

The church we attend is working with a family that recently arrived from Iraq. In spite of the fact that they already had a brother, father, and sister and her family already living in West Michigan, it took two years in a refugee camp in Jordan before the thorough screening and vetting allowed them to enter the U.S. and join their family. Both parents have bachelor's degrees in the sciences and their three children are highly motivated to be in school and succeed.

They are not only an asset in our community, but also a blessing to all of us who have had the privilege to work with them.

From the religious perspective, we also are doing precisely what has been commanded where in the Jewish Scripture it says: "When a stranger lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat him. The stranger who lives with you shall be treated like the native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Leviticus 19:33).

Likewise, Jesus said: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in." (Matthew 25:35).

Let us welcome the refugee. They make us safer, add to the richness of our community and are indeed a blessing.

interfaith@gvsu.edu