



# **EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT AMONG U.S.-BASED NORTH KOREANS**

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## **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**



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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States accepts tens of thousands of refugees each year from every corner of the globe. With very few exceptions, refugees face the difficult task of attaining self-sufficiency while simultaneously adjusting to an entirely new way of life. For refugees from North Korea – one of the most repressive and isolated countries on earth – the experience of resettling in the United States is one filled with great promise and hope, despite truly daunting challenges.

In 2014, the George W. Bush Presidential Center commissioned InterMedia to conduct a study of North Koreans who had resettled in the United States. The objective of the research was to identify and better understand the challenges they faced, 10 years after the passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004, which provided a clearer path to resettlement in the U.S. for North Korean refugees. While the research uncovered a number of areas in which refugees confronted difficulties, education and employment were among the most important factors contributing to refugees' prospects for a successful long-term resettlement.

To identify opportunities to contribute to the educational and career successes of North Korean refugees in the United States, the Bush Center commissioned a follow-up qualitative study with U.S.-based refugees, as well as staff members of organizations that provide refugee resettlement services to North Koreans in the United States.

While refugee interviewees universally underscored the importance of English-language acquisition and education generally to successful resettlement, a number of obstacles significantly complicated educational pursuits, including:

**Direct Costs.** Education, from English as a Second Language (ESL) to college-level coursework, can carry with it significant financial costs, which can be very difficult for refugees to bear even if they consider education a top priority.

**Opportunity Costs.** Refugees are expected to

become financially self-sufficient soon after arrival in the United States. They must often forego pursuing educational opportunities in favor of earning money to support themselves and their families.

**Learning Environment.** The process of adjusting to a new and entirely unfamiliar cultural and social environment can be overwhelming. Finding an environment in which one can focus on educational pursuits, sheltered from the demands of life as a refugee, can be a very difficult task.

Although there is no easy path to financial stability and a smooth resettlement, a career trajectory, once established, is a highly determinative factor. Some younger refugees with college potential have the ability to follow whatever career paths they choose, and a number of interviewees were actively pursuing advanced degrees in fields ranging from development economics to cross-cultural education. However, for a majority of refugee interviewees who arrived in somewhat later stages of their lives, and faced greater financial and family burdens, there was a demonstrated need for jobs that entailed technical skills acquisition and had the potential for career advancement without requiring advanced English skills or a college education.

Refugee services providers reinforced the notion that amidst their struggles to assimilate and thrive, refugees often deal with mental health issues and manage a complex relationship with the country they left, some simply as they navigate a new identity and others more concretely as they attempt to send material support back to relatives in North Korea.

Overall, this study finds evidence that, for those concerned with the long-term resettlement prospects of U.S.-based North Korean refugees, there is a role to play in supplementing the educational and employment assistance they receive.

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

Between March and May of 2016, InterMedia conducted 20 in-depth interviews with North Koreans living in the United States. The research was commissioned to gain a better understanding of the educational and employment challenges North Korean refugees face, and what opportunities are available to help them overcome these challenges.

The interviewees represent a diverse cross section of North Koreans in the United States. While most were refugees who were directly resettled in the United States after fleeing North Korea, three interviewees had resettled in the United States only after first defecting to South Korea, and, therefore, have South Korean citizenship. Demographic details of the North Korean interviewees are as follows:

	State of Residence	Date entered the U.S.	Sex	Age	Education	Employment
1	VA	2006	F	34	Four years at community college, wants to pursue nursing	Runs a family restaurant
2	VA	2010	F	27	Took ESL (English as Second Language) and general studies courses; wants to study business	Works at a university
3	UT	2015	F	30	Taking ESL classes through VOLAG*; wants to continue after her help period is over	Works part time as a waitress
4	VA	2010	M	48	Working towards high school diploma at a transitional high school	Worked various odd jobs (hotel laundry, grocery store); now works as a pastor
5	IL	2014	M	49	Taking ESL at a college; wants to go to seminary when English improves	Handles transactions for wig-making company
6	CA	2008	F	54	Enrolled in seminary	Sample maker at a clothing factory
7	VA	2008	M	45	ESL classes through VOLAG	Runs an alterations business
8	VA	2007	F	35	Dropped out after one semester at a community college	Helps husband run his franchise business
9	IL	2007	F	38	Wants to work towards GED and eventually study psychology	Runs a florist shop
10	TX	2008	F	55	Went to seminary in South Korea	Works as a pastor and missionary to NKs in U.S.
11	CA	2012	M	21	Studies coding at Coding Dojo and wants to go to college for computer science	Uber driver
12	CA	2007	M	29	English lessons with an NGO	Works at a bank; hopes to advance internally rather than go to college
13	MI	2012	F	26	Began college in South Korea before coming to the U.S.; graduating college this spring	Works in the school library
14	MD	2013	M	53	None in the U.S.	Unemployed due to back injury
15	MD	2013	M	18	Attends high school	Works part time at a car wash; helps out at a restaurant where his mother works
16	VA	2011	M	20	Attends high school; wants to go to military afterwards and study electrical engineering	Works part time at a laundry and restaurant
17	CA	2009	F	48	Attending seminary free of charge now but wants to go to cosmetology school	Works at a restaurant
18	CA	2010	F	34	Received high school diploma	Stay-at-home mom but wants to go to school and become a social worker
19	VA	2008	F	24	Attends community college, wants to study IR or nursing	Has held various office jobs; runs a defector organization
20	VA	2011	M	32	Studies economics at George Washington University	Has a part time job on campus

\* In the U.S., voluntary agencies, or "VOLAGs," are organizations contracted by the U.S. State Department to provide initial placement and other services to refugees. VOLAGs receive both government and private funding for their work.

In addition to resettled North Koreans, InterMedia interviewed members of organizations that provide services to North Korean refugees either exclusively, or as part of a larger portfolio of general U.S. refugee resettlement activities. Those organizations that provide general refugee resettlement assistance utilize government funding to conduct their programs; the North Korean-specific organizations are, largely, privately funded nonprofits. The services provider interviewees included representatives of:

- Kentucky Refugee Missions
- Prayer Service Action Love Truth for North Korea (PSALT NK)
- Emancipate North Koreans (ENoK)
- International Rescue Committee (IRC)
- Liberty in North Korea (LiNK)
- Human Rights Foundation (HRF)
- State Coordinators of Refugee Resettlement

## NORTH KOREANS IN THE UNITED STATES

As of November 2016, approximately 200 North Korean refugees have been resettled in the United States. In addition to those with refugee status, a number of former North Koreans have relocated to the United States after being initially resettled in South Korea. While the size of this latter population is much more difficult to estimate accurately, one social worker who works closely with North Koreans in the United States estimated the number to be on par with the number of legal refugees. That would put the total population of North Koreans living in the United States at approximately 400 individuals.

The absolute number is very small in comparison with many other refugee populations in the United States. However, this small group of North Korean refugees represent a unique case, with unique challenges, as they try to resettle in the United States. This is not only due to the particular nature of their home country, but also because they are as distinct from the large Korean diaspora as they are similar to this population.

Due to the divided nature of the Korean peninsula, those who flee North Korea for South Korea are eligible for immediate citizenship and substantial material benefits upon arrival. These reasons, in addition to a shared language and similar culture, make South Korea the naturally preferred destination for the vast majority of North Korean refugees – currently there are more than 28,000 North Koreans resettled in the South.

Yet for some, the potential for resettlement in the United States holds great appeal. While individual motivations vary, many who choose to resettle in the United States do so because of their belief that, despite the obvious language and cultural challenges, the United States provides prospects for rapid economic and social progress that are unrivaled in South Korea.

*At the U.S. consulate, they suggested that [resettling in] South Korea would be much easier because of culture and race, and they questioned why I am choosing to go to America. But ... I want to experience other cultures, and I had the ambition to live in another culture. If I go to America, I can learn a different language and culture and live with people of different races. ... if I'm going to start from zero, it's better to start in a place where I'm not familiar with the culture ... if I go to South Korea, then I'll be expected to know the culture and then it will be that much more stressful to adjust because people have expectations of me.*

-Male, 29, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2007

*I would have to adjust to a new country in any case, but I would be able to learn English if I go to America. Today, I'm so glad that I decided to come to America. Since arriving here, I've never thought that I don't want to live here because of the challenges that I face.*

-Female, 27, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

Those who chose to follow the United States government's more bureaucratically difficult and lengthy path to resettlement, rather than go to South Korea, generally express a relatively greater tolerance for risk and hardship. However, most interviewees recounted shock at the conditions they encountered, and the expectations placed upon them, when they initially arrived in the United States after being accepted as refugees.



*The day I arrived I felt kind of bitter because I was expecting housing because that's what I got in Thailand, and the U.S. is a very wealthy country and they are supposed to give us an apartment. But when I arrived, there wasn't a room prepared for me and I had to sleep in the living room with other refugees.*

-Male, 32, KY/VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2011

In line with findings from a previous qualitative study of North Korean refugees in the United States, conducted on behalf of the George W. Bush Presidential Center, the quality and level of specifically targeted services provided by initial resettlement services providers varied widely between interviewees.

Some resettlement services providers were ill-equipped to deal with the needs of North Korean refugees and did not have the luxury of large, engaged Korean American communities nearby.

*I was quite shocked because on top of not knowing English, there were no Korean caseworkers. Even if someone asked me what I needed, I wouldn't know. I didn't even know that I was supposed to ask for help if I needed it. I just took what they gave me. ... I was so grateful to them for just helping me come to America.*

-Female, 34, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

Other organizations were able to expertly respond to the basic needs of Korean refugees and leverage local Korean diaspora communities for both material and cultural support.

*Yes, when I first came to Arizona, the refugee assistance organization actually had everything prepared for me like a house, and the day after, at 8:30 in the morning, I went to the organization's office. They brought in a Korean speaker. ... That person turned out to be a pastor, and, after he helped me with translating and going here and there to take care of resettlement matters, he brought me to his church. ... They had Korean food! Because I was in Thailand for three years, I really missed Korean food. When I went to the church it turned out they had many things already prepared for me and that moved me to tears. I just ate and ate soybean paste stew and kimchi. But then I felt so embarrassed because I ate so much. But they said no, it's OK, take it as a blessing. Afterwards, they helped stock my refrigerator with ... soybean paste and such and they asked if I needed anything. And, that's how I began my resettlement.*

-Female, 48, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2009

Even those interviewees who reported less positive experiences with the initial services providers quickly understood that resettlement services providers face the daunting task of providing services to many refugees from around the globe and, as such, were unable to provide tailored services to underrepresented groups such as North Koreans.

*They said that since they have to take care of refugees from all over the world and not just me, it's up to me to try and make it here. I think that if it wasn't up to me, I wouldn't have the ambition to try to do something here. But since I'm alone, I needed to live and survive. Since there was no safety net, I had no choice but to survive.*

-Female, 54, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2008

Unlike refugees who are resettled through the Ministry of Unification system in South Korea, which generally allows for a much longer period of time to achieve financial independence, most interviewees in the United States were working and supporting themselves within just a few months of their arrival.

*They helped me for a bit in resettlement, and, then afterwards, I had to live independently. So after a month, I ended up living on my own.*

-Male, 29, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2007

*At first, the [VOLAG resettlement organization] helped me out with housing, public transportation, food stamps, etc., so I thought all that I needed was taken care of. I lived without knowing what I needed. But as you live, you realize that you need money. The [VOLAG resettlement organization] helped me for three months and that period was like living in a fantasy. But after three months, all assistance was cut off. I had to find a job within those three months. Of course, the government helped me find a job, but the hard part was that I didn't speak English. So I worked minimum wage jobs that were physically demanding like at a hotel laundry room. As I worked [these types of jobs] the hardest part was paying for my living expenses like rent and transportation. During my commute, I would carry around an English book to learn English, but that was insufficient. Since living was hard, I became lonely.*

-Male, 48, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

Beyond the short timeline afforded to refugees to achieve financial independence, the language barrier proved extremely daunting for the majority of

interviewees. What had seemed like a rare opportunity to learn English, by resettling in America, quickly turned into an insurmountable burden for many participants.

*I can't really think of what I needed, per se, but I did think, "Is there no one who can teach me English?" I needed English the most. When I was taking the English classes, there was no one to teach me how to get the information that I needed. Even Korean immigrants just talk about their own experiences. Their experiences cannot compare to what North Koreans have been through as refugees. So their resettlement advice simply isn't helpful. We have to make breakthroughs for ourselves. For example, we don't know the culture and laws of this country. So we don't know how to go to the bank, we don't know restaurant culture, and we don't know about the post office. There was no one who sat me down and taught me about such things.*

-Male, 48, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

Yet, as they did with other resettlement challenges, some of the interviewees found strategies to surmount the language barrier as quickly as possible.

*I tried to do everything by myself because it was an opportunity to improve my English and adjust to life faster. I went to an American church, and I only knew a few Korean people [in Louisville], and other than [getting some help from] one Korean pastor, I didn't seek much help from the Korean community. As soon as I arrived here, I tried to do things on my own and learn English as that's the fastest way to settle down. Assimilating felt very slow, but after learning for a couple of years, I found there was a big difference between people who studied English and those who never studied English.*

-Male, 32, KY/VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2011

## EDUCATION

There was a broad consensus among all the refugees interviewed for this study that, with the exception of personal drive and a willingness to work hard, education was the single most important factor to successful resettlement in the United States. This was true regardless of precisely how individual interviewees described their vision of a successful life in America. This was also largely consistent no matter what the individual's education prospects were. For older refugees with more immediate financial burdens

and fewer opportunities to devote themselves fully to their studies, success was gaining command of functional English skills; for younger refugees with greater opportunities and educational ambitions, college, and sometimes even post-graduate education, was the key to economic and social self-determination.

*Most important to success in America ... first, it's English, ESL [English as a Second Language] programs. Then, [it is] college and technical skills. Skills can vary. Personally, I wanted to learn computer programs. ... You need a certain set of skills so I wanted to learn computers. I'm even attending a transitional high school to learn English in the evenings.*

-Male, 48, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

*Some friends have dropped out of school. But, if I quit school, what can I do in the future? There will be nothing for me to do. So even though graduating ... is the most difficult thing for me right now, I would say that it is the first duty that I have in America.*

-Male, 20, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2011

Even those who acknowledged that their circumstances most likely predicted their English would always be limited believed that even a slightly longer time to acquire some basic functional English could be extremely important.

*I would tell them [other North Korean refugees] to find a business that they like, like hairdressing in my case. I would also tell them to learn English as quickly as they can no matter how much they emphasize getting a job and earning a living. It's OK if your English is not perfect, as long as it's enough to do business in the field that you want.*

-Female, 48, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2009

Some refugees had a clear idea of the course of study they ideally would like to pursue.

*There are so many things I could do in America. I could work as a Korean teacher or a Korean-speaking social worker, looking back at my experience with my social worker. There are so many things that I want to do. I really want to learn. ... I'm really bored at home. [It costs] \$16 an hour to put both of my kids in day care, so it makes more sense to stay at home since I won't make that kind of money if I go out and work. But, if I could put them in day care full time, I really want to study.*

-Female, 34, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

Others, as one refugee services provider related, hoped that education might open up greater opportunities for discovery and expose them to new paths to achievement in the United States.

*I know, culturally, [Koreans] have an expectation [that you are supposed] to know what you want to do. But that's not really what America is supposed to offer. It's where you try different things and explore your own potential.*

-Refugee Services Provider

Particularly among slightly older interviewees, there was a desire to begin work immediately upon arrival, and many saw focusing on technical skills, over higher-level general education, as the most realistic path to success in the United States. Yet even this group emphasized the importance of basic education and English-language acquisition.

*What is a 45-year-old going to do at school? Going to school is good, but for me, I think running a business is much more practical since I'm not going to catch up to the [English] level of an educated person. ... For me, as long as I know the lingo for my business, I'll be fine. Yes, I did have the feeling [that I faced trade-offs between education and employment]. But I didn't think studying would be as useful since I was almost 40 years old at the time. So I set out to take on the challenge of establishing my own business by saving up money.*

*My English is about the level of a kindergartner. When I was working, I would carry around a dictionary, learn English from interactions with people at work and only watch American television shows. It was all through my own efforts. In a capitalist society, you have to figure things out yourself. I think you need English to live in America, 90 percent of the time. If you know English, then you can interact with people better. I don't ask anyone else for help. I just do it myself with a dictionary. There is no one that I can depend on. Even if there were other Korean Americans who can help me, if I don't understand something, you can't just depend on them for everything. You'll never learn English if you are only around other Koreans. You have to interact with Americans.*

-Male, 45, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2008

An important related factor, according to multiple resettlement services providers, is the dependency on local Korean American communities the lack of English language skills can foster. Although these communities

were an extremely vital source of support for a large majority of interviewees, those refugees who do acquire English-language skills are likely to be more successful and have broader horizons.

*I can't have a conversation in English. My English isn't improving because everyone I interact with is Korean. When I go to the market, the people are Korean. When I go to church, the people are Korean. I am studying English by myself, but I don't have much time to study English because I'm working and going to seminary. [English language] is important since I am in America, even though I live in a Korean community here in LA. I can't communicate if I leave LA.*

-Female, 54, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2008

While many refugees acknowledged some benefits to the American resettlement system's emphasis on fast-tracked self-sufficiency, nearly all felt that having the option to focus exclusively on studies for a longer period of time upon arrival could significantly improve their medium and longer-term educational or employment prospects. The challenge of pursuing studies on the margins around full-time, often low-paying work was extremely difficult to surmount. This was particularly true for the majority of interviewees who were attempting to learn English starting from scratch.

*I came here when I was 43 years old. When I came, my goal was to study. ... Age didn't matter to me. I thought, "Now is the beginning." As long as I had the chance to study, I was going to. ... But the issue is the opportunity. ... If your living situation is not good, then you don't have the chance to study. How can you study when you are worried about living?*

-Male, 48, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

*There is no way to get help because we don't have a big network and communication with Korean Americans is hard. We don't even know who to ask for help. Korean American immigrants all have busy lives. Rather than a Korean American, it would be better to receive help from an American. Even if there is a language barrier, it helps in learning English. A Korean American would just start speaking in Korean.*

-Male, 49, IL, Arrived in the U.S. 2014

This study also included several North Korean refugees

who came to the United States after first resettling in South Korea, and, thereby, obtained South Korean citizenship. While refugees living in South Korea receive educational support and other benefits from the South Korean Ministry of Unification, those who move to the United States do not receive those benefits and thus must fund their own studies.

*I went to college in South Korea for three semesters and then had an opportunity to come to the U.S. as an exchange student for six months. During that time, I visited American universities and I sat in the classroom with American students and I really liked the learning environment. In South Korea, the learning environment was always passive, in the U.S., learning was really active. Students were all involved in the class discussion and weren't afraid to ask questions. [From then on] I had a fascination and hope that I would come back to the U.S. to study.*

*I looked for colleges that would more likely give me scholarships since I was not able to support my own education. That was the main thing for me. I didn't care about the college's name or brand or what I was going to study, even though I was interested in studying education. The matter of whether I could afford it or not was the biggest concern for me.*

*Because I spent my childhood in North Korea, when I came to South Korea everything was so different. Since North Korean defector students like me had to adapt to South Korean culture, [I] had to abandon what I learned personally and absorb the new culture, new learnings, new teachings. I thought when reunification happens, if and when it happens, there should be some kind of bridge that fills the gap between North Korean and South Korean education, and I saw myself as bridging the gap. That's why I want to study education.*

-Female, 26, MI, Arrived in the U.S. 2012,  
Immigrant via South Korea

The myriad pressures of trying to acquire English skills and prioritize education while adjusting to a completely new way of life is evident in the remarks of recently arrived refugees.

*Of course English is hard. I cannot process the words when I listen to it. There is no one who speaks Korean at my school. When studying, it is difficult to focus because I am consumed by living [financial] concerns. I wish to continue*

*attending the school, but the government is urging me to stop school and start a full-time job. However, I wish to learn English and work part time even if it means that I will not be working a full-time job any time soon. The government will finance my education for three months and then I am on my own. After this three-month period is over, I plan to use the money I earn at my part-time job to continue attending school since the school is not that expensive. I am in the process of telling them that. ... It is one's individual choice whether to go to school or work. ... But, as of now, since going to school and learning is fun, I am following my desire to continue attending school. ... However, if it becomes unrealistic to go to school due to financial issues, then I should find a job.*

-Female, 30, UT, Arrived in the U.S. 2015

## THE PROVISION OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEW INTERVENTIONS

North Korean refugees and refugee services providers alike were clear in identifying both the importance of education, on multiple levels, to successful resettlement, as well as the challenges that refugees struggling to get by financially must overcome to pursue educational attainment, after the very brief initial resettlement window has passed.

Nearly all interviewees acknowledged the sharp trade-offs refugees face between the immediate need to support themselves financially and their long-term prospects if given the opportunity to pursue education.

*I think a lot of us are having difficulty balancing work and school. Even if we do get scholarships, how are we going to come up with living expenses if we focus on school? So we can't study properly and we can't work properly either. A lot of us are stuck. I think help in terms of allowing people to study without any burden would be really good for the North Koreans in America.*

-Female, 27, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

The primary challenges to educational attainment might be categorized broadly as direct costs, opportunity costs and learning environment.



## **DIRECT COSTS**

After a brief window in which English language lessons were provided as part of initial VOLAG<sup>1</sup> resettlement service offerings, many refugee interviewees said there was a direct and, often, a relatively significant cost to pursuing language or substantive studies.

While some found opportunities for free language lessons or were able to identify scholarships to cover the costs of course studies, many more were faced with the prospect of paying for studies out of their already meager budgets.

*Ever since I first arrived in America I wanted to study. Also, since I already knew how to make clothes in North Korea, I wanted to learn more technical aspects of the craft such as making patterns. But the tuition fee was \$900/month, and if I were to pay that much then I would only have \$270 left over each month. So I couldn't study because I didn't have money. That was the most difficult part of being here.*

-Female, 54, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2008

The concept of taking on debt, such as student loans, to pay for higher education, was both foreign and a frightening concept even to many of the students who were academically qualified to pursue higher-level studies. A better understanding of the costs and benefits of all available educational resources could be helpful to prospective students in making more informed decisions about their educational paths.

*I chose the school because it has good name value but also because it gave me good financial aid. Without financial aid I probably could not have gone there. For tuition, it is covered by [a] scholarship but [to cover] living costs I took loans. I tried to keep working instead of taking loans, but it was impossible.*

-Male, 32, KY/VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2011

## **OPPORTUNITY COSTS**

Even more daunting than the direct costs of school were the opportunity costs. ESL courses were

frequently offered after business hours but many refugees with significant financial burdens or dependents were inclined to look for further income-generating opportunities even after normal business hours.

For high school and college-aged refugees attempting to balance substantive coursework and support themselves financially, the trade-offs were often even more logistically fraught. Many of the most attractive programs are meant for full-time students, and were difficult for refugees to attend while maintaining the level of meaningfully gainful employment that was necessary to meet financial obligations.

One interviewee credited an evening high school program in Virginia, which had not been available in Washington or Alaska where she had previously resided, with her ability to finish high school while still contributing to her family financially. Educational opportunities that are structured to minimize the opportunity costs to pursuing studies is an extremely important feature for many refugee students.

*I started working in an office at a health care company because my mom's health was poor and we needed an extra income. But working in the daytime I could no longer attend high school. So after about a month the school detention officer asked me very bluntly, "Simple question, are you going to drop or transfer?"... So I asked ... if there were night high schools where I could work in the day and attend classes in the evening. After being introduced to many different schools, I finally found one in Virginia. ... I was so excited!*

-Female, 24, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2008

## **LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

Beyond costs, for many refugees, the task of assimilating into life in the United States proved nearly all-consuming. Finding the ability to focus on language or course studies in the midst of navigating and learning American culture, and attending to family and other obligations was difficult for many interviewees.

<sup>1</sup> A variety of NGOs based in Asia and the United States provide services to refugees. In China and Southeast Asia, NGOs provide shelter, help refugees with basic needs, and assist with passage to South Korea or the U.S. In the U.S., "voluntary agencies," or "VOLAGs," are organizations contracted by the U.S. State Department to provide initial placement and other services to refugees. VOLAGs receive both government and private funding for their work. Other U.S.-based NGOs and many church-affiliated organizations supplement and expand on the initial assistance provided by VOLAGs. Those interviewed for this study did not necessarily distinguish among the various types of NGOs active in the field.

*At first, I was going to study. I would go to school during the day and work at a factory at night. I actually studied up to ESL level 2. But after getting married and having a child, I had to earn more money. So after thinking about it, I just ended up starting a florist business. I would like to study, but there just isn't enough time. I'm actually studying English by myself at home, but it's so hard. I was going to take my GED test last December, but there just isn't enough time to study. I only sleep three hours a night.*

-Female, 38, IL, Arrived in the U.S. 2007

Some younger refugee students were able to attend school with American students relatively soon after they arrived in the United States, which is the quickest path to language proficiency and academic advancement.

*Studying with American students helps me improve my English the most. Of course, speaking English with my friends helps me learn English, too, but I find that studying with American friends helps me learn the most.*

-Male, 20, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2011

But for many refugees this was not feasible given their ages, financial responsibilities and level of English.

## **OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT**

Refugee services provider interviewees unanimously agreed that the more targeted services were vital to minimizing barriers to educational opportunities and optimizing educational attainment. Yet, many also acknowledged the small number of North Korean refugees, and the burden on VOLAG resettlement organizations, necessarily means that North Korean refugees could not expect most services to be tailored to their backgrounds, ages or educational goals.

In response, a number of nonprofit organizations that work to provide services to North Korean refugees, at the point official resettlement assistance ends or cannot meet the refugees' needs, have created programs specifically focused on the educational needs of North Korean refugees in the United States.

For instance, one organization has attempted to address the educational challenges faced by North Korean refugees by creating a boarding-school model, in which students' studies and living expenses are funded, and efforts are made to create as complete a learning environment as possible by having the students

live at the school. Through its design, the program attempts to address, simultaneously, the direct costs, opportunity costs and environmental challenges to English-language learning.

*Then we met this particular person who had a lot of yearning for getting an advanced degree but she was working full time and multiple part-time shifts on the weekends and had adult school at night. The things we were doing for her were not sufficient because she simply didn't have enough time to do what we wished she could do. So then we started thinking about what to do to overcome this challenge. We came up with a small boarding school for refugees [in 2014] so that they won't have to worry about finances and we could help them get their GED, college [application] process, and get on their feet. The biggest thing about this program was that we wanted them to be able to access all the information they needed themselves. If we were to give them some information one time, then they won't be able to help themselves again. So we wanted them to have language skills and know the right people who can help when needed. So I thought being immersed in a college setting and being close to people who are [at] the same ... stage (not in terms of age, but still in the same position of looking for a job), that can help them get ready for American society. That's the faith we had and probably education was the most important thing.*

-Refugee Services Provider

The organization's founders acknowledge that this model is primarily meant to serve a particular segment among North Korean refugees, namely, younger, unmarried refugees with relatively high academic aspirations and relatively fewer family obligations.

Participants in the boarding-school program, who were interviewed separately, acknowledged the benefits of the model.

*The model is perfect. It's really well organized and fits the students very well. Because they took care of housing and food, and other small expenses, I could really focus on my English. We studied for eight hours a day and then we kept studying. The boarding school was great but even partial education support could be really helpful. Before I went to [the boarding school program] I tried three times to pass my ESL exams. ... That was my last test for high school, but I failed. However, after nine months at the boarding school, I passed with a high score.*

-Female, 24, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2008

Some questions remain about the scalability and sustainability of a boarding school model, and the number of students that have passed through the program to date is not large enough to draw definitive conclusions, but there are some clear advantages over other available educational resources.

While such an immersive program would not be feasible for many refugees, the experience does suggest there is room to innovate in the provision of educational opportunities to North Korean refugees beyond the remit of VOLAG resettlement services providers.

*So if I were to boil down my thoughts here, it's tough because of limited English proficiency and then the dependency issue is concerning to me. ... I don't want to give up on our North Korean refugees, but now I'm thinking it may be better to send them where the agency would provide services, and then you have a nonprofit staffed by young, idealistic college graduates. We have ultimate responsibility for our clients based on our contract with the State Department, and we have confidentiality considerations. So we do the case management ourselves and we have our own interpreters. So the issue is that there are parallel services between the standard State Department agencies and then Korean American nonprofit agencies. How can these two types of organizations partner and collaborate for the benefit of North Korean refugees without being proprietary?*

-Refugee Services Provider

*Maybe have [VOLAGs] conduct the initial services and then have the Korean American nonprofits provide the long-term services. But I don't know if that would best benefit the client, particularly with the ones with limited English proficiency. They are in culture shock, for the lack of a better word, and they need help upfront immediately to make them feel comfortable. There are gaps, we can't be with our clients 24/7, not by a longshot. We only see them a few hours a week for English classes and other things. They are sitting in their apartments alone a lot, and they are navigating the city a lot. So I think there is a lot of space even during initial resettlement for other nonprofit entities to assist.*

-Refugee Services Provider

Efforts to alleviate the financial and environmental challenges, and soften the trade-offs related to educational pursuits, could significantly contribute to

improving North Korean refugees' longer-term resettlement prospects.

*I do want to study, and I do study when I get the chance. But there just isn't enough time. I actually haven't thought about scholarships yet. The school that I wanted to go to was Wheaton College so I met with a counselor there. They said that they do have programs for refugees like me. But the problem is that I still need an income. I would need to find someone who can manage my business in my stead if I were to go to school. I also need to get my GED. The problem with getting a GED is that it would be free if I physically went to class, but I would have to pay if I wanted to do it online. [She implies that since she already doesn't have much time, it is tough to even work towards her GED.] But if there were a place that says that they will give me a scholarship to study, I will take the opportunity.*

-Female, 38, IL, Arrived in the U.S. 2007

To this end, considered experiments with tailored scholarships, alternative school models and personalized educational offerings might be considered.

## **EMPLOYMENT**

A great deal of North Korean refugees' early assimilation into American life happens on the job. Healthy refugees of working age are generally expected to secure employment just months after their arrival in the United States, and the experiences they have in the workplace significantly determine the long-term course of their resettlement.

Most are extremely happy to be able to earn living wages for hard work and were grateful for assistance that was provided to help them secure employment.

*First of all, because Korean American people exerted their efforts, I was able to get a good job. Second, I thought the most important thing I could put my effort into was to take care of my family. To quickly establish my family ... it's actually easier to work in the U.S. than in North Korea ... I can take care of everything with the pay. Of course, it isn't enough to be well-off, if you look at it from an American standard, but from the North Korean standard, it is enough.*

-Male, 49, IL, Arrived in the U.S. 2014

*Work is difficult. However, in North Korea there is no concept of earning a salary from working. Even if I work as a kindergarten teacher, the money that the government paid me was really not much. So there was a lot of illegal bribing of the parents. I was able to earn a living that way, but really, the money that the government paid me was simply useless. In contrast, in America, if you work hard you can earn a salary fairly. In North Korea, so many people are unemployed so they are living without purpose. Everyone would go out and work if there was a place that would pay them.*

-Female, 30, UT, Arrived in the U.S. 2015

However, upward mobility can be very difficult to achieve. Due to the nature of initial employment opportunities available to newly-arrived refugees, which generally provide few prospects for internal advancement and do not significantly build new marketable skills, and barriers to entry into technical fields, many have struggled to find a path forward in their careers.

*I went to LA to go to cosmetology school but the tuition is \$14,000. I just cannot wrap my head around that kind of money. I enrolled, but I haven't been able to attend because of the tuition. I thought that cosmetology would be the most practical. But I'm unable to study because tuition is so expensive.*

-Female, 48, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2009

Looking across interviewees' experiences, a clear opportunity gap for refugees exists between low-skilled jobs with little potential for upward career mobility and high-skilled, white-collar jobs, which will only be attainable to younger refugees who have the potential to attend college. Jobs requiring a technical skill or entrepreneurial drive most often resulted in the most fruitful career paths for refugees who came after their school years and faced more immediate financial burdens.

Tied firmly to the previous discussion of education, the role of the Korean diaspora community is extremely important as most refugees' employment opportunities, at least initially, are confined to the Korean American community.

*Currently I live in LA because I couldn't find a job in Seattle due to the language barrier. I heard that you could live in LA even if you didn't know English because*

*there are so many Koreans. ... There was a group called Pyongyang Arts Center based in LA, and they came to Seattle to perform. The group leader told me that since I already knew how to make clothes, there would be many opportunities for me in LA.*

-Female, 54, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2008

Depending on where refugees were placed, some were able to much more fully leverage this resource than others.

*Well, the American immigration office is supposed to provide jobs for refugees... But the jobs that were provided [don't pay enough] to sustain a family. ... I mean, I came here thinking I would do anything, but firstly ... I asked why everyone else was getting placed in jobs except for me. Turned out everyone else had people of the same race around them. So even if they didn't speak English, because they had people of the same ethnicity around, they were getting jobs. So I proposed to refugee agency to place me at a job where there are Korean people. But they didn't find me a job where there were Koreans. I asked them to place me in a Korean company, but I waited and waited and nothing came about.*

-Male, 49, IL, Arrived in the U.S. 2014

Matching refugees' existing skills and interests with industries that provide opportunities for advancement or skills acquisition in a forward-looking manner could help them establish a more promising career trajectory. This will likely require interventions beyond the career placement assistance provided by VOLAGs, and require personalized assistance and mentoring.

## **MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS**

One form that more personalized career guidance might conceivably take is mentorship programs. Interestingly, most requests for mentorship on the part of the refugee interviewees seemed to seek a more reliable window into American culture and society. Resettlement organizations were focused on basic financial needs and advanced mentorship programs are often career specific. However, many felt that a program that helped them navigate the subtle and complex waters of cultural assimilation was very important.



*North Koreans have no foundation of American culture and language, so it is difficult for us to follow along in studies. A personal teacher is really needed. If you have no such things, even if you do homework from school it is really difficult. A personal guide is very much needed.*

-Male, 48, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

*That would be really great because North Koreans like me leave North Korea without knowing much about the outside world. I personally didn't have much experience in China either. So I don't know Chinese, and I always knew America as the enemy, not as such a great country. So coming from a place where you don't know anything and meeting South Koreans for the first time in my life, I was very naive. I slowly learned that in certain situations I should be grateful, and in other situations, I should keep some distance. What I really want is that if such a good program existed, I want to try very hard.*

-Female, 34, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

It was equally clear that mentorship programs could play an extremely important role in providing career advice and helping refugees to advance along a career path. From the basics of interview skills, necessary for many service jobs or employment outside of the Korean community, to more specialized career mentorship for refugees with certain sectoral interests, there was a desire for a range of mentorship services.

*It would be great if they could help me prepare for job interviews especially if they ask where I'm from. If I tell them I'm from North Korea, they won't understand my background. They don't know what kind of country North Korea is so it will be hard for them to understand me. Then they wouldn't be able to hire me because they wouldn't be able to trust me.*

-Female, 27, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

*Mentorship in terms of a certain field will definitely be helpful. We've had people come for a year to learn English but we weren't able to help with finding better employment, so I think a mentorship for employment in a certain field would be really beneficial.*

-Refugee Services Provider

Several interviewees were quick to caution, however, that great care has to be taken in setting realistic expectations and establishing comfortable connections between mentors and mentees. Having witnessed some less successful attempts at mentorship programs

for North Korean refugees, a refugee services provider also stressed the importance of long-term commitment and easy availability on the part of the mentors. This reinforced the notion that, in addition to the need for basic career guidance, many refugees will need someone they feel they can trust and rely on for general advice and support.

*The issue is that sometimes the prospective mentors are successful people with higher-level jobs while the refugees have entry-level skills with limited English. So the mentor cannot really help much. I'm not sure what kind of scheme would work.*

-Refugee Services Provider

## **NOTIONS OF SUCCESS**

Just as every refugee's background and particular circumstances in the United States are different, so too were the visions they had of what it meant to resettle successfully in America. For some, basic material and financial security was the primary gauge of success. For others, educational attainment and assimilation into American society were key. For still others, the ability to use the advantages afforded them by life in America to help those still in North Korea was an important component of a new life in the United States.

*I have not given that much thought, but I hope to set practical goals in proportion to my circumstances while gradually assimilating to life here in the U.S. As a woman, I hope to have a happy family, and I look up to those who have resettled well and have a house of their own.*

*As a mom, I want to be a really good mom to my daughters. It's such a blessing for my daughters to have been born in America. I want to study and be able to help my kids in their studies and help them with their homework. Also, I want my kids to see me and my husband living so diligently having come to America as refugees. I really don't like being at home. I want to learn diligently, and do something. When my kids turn five, school is free since they'll be going to kindergarten. But, by that time, I think I'll be really old, almost 40. So I really want to tell you that I wish that more programs to help North Koreans would exist. I want to be a mom ... my kids can be proud of.*

-Female, 34, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

A sense of personal achievement and transcending the disadvantages of one's background were strong themes in many refugees' ideas of a successful life in America.

*I think resettling well and living well. By "resettling" I mean, rather than getting an education or opening a business, it's living seamlessly in America and doing what you want to do as you raise your kids. It's being able to live on your own power rather than relying on someone else. I want to become someone who is able to help others instead of [someone who keeps] receiving help from others.*

-Female, 34, CA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

*My idea of success is simple. As a refugee, it would be success to confidently graduate college, work at a company, have a family, basically live like a normal American because even though you come as a refugee, you can't continue living like a refugee. You have to try to advance. Living like a normal American is success.*

-Male, 48, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

*I hope to graduate high school and go to college. I wish to study nursing. However, since there are so many mountains I need to overcome right now, that is not in the immediate horizon. I want to become a nurse because I worked with kids as a kindergarten teacher, and I am interested in helping sick people. I cannot pinpoint a specific reason. It is just something that I hope to work towards.*

-Female, 30, UT, Arrived in the U.S. 2015

## **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES AND OTHERS**

While nearly all of the refugee interviewees believed that despite the difficulties they faced in North Korea or harrowing experiences they underwent in escaping, they did not face a significantly greater set of challenges than refugees from elsewhere in the world.

However, services provider interviewees who work with refugees from around the world did suggest several features relatively unique to North Korean refugees in America that could have an impact on their resettlement experience.

First, despite a large Korean-speaking diaspora, the North Korean refugee population is extremely small, and while, as noted previously, the Korean diaspora in America is a great source of support for North Korean refugees, Korean Americans are generally very different than larger refugee diasporas.

*For most countries, I would say it is sort of a continuum. For example, we have resettled some Somalis over here. So now there is a Somali mall, grocery store, restaurants, etc. ... They, basically, are what I call refugee communities. But with Korean Americans and North Koreans, a lot of them [Korean Americans] are fairly affluent and living in the suburbs, whereas the North Koreans are not. So they are not living in the same community. ... For all the commonalities, the differences cannot be bridged. That is kind of what I'm seeing with the Korean Americans and North Koreans. Of course, they are all Koreans, but there are some massive differences there.*

-Refugee Services Provider

Furthermore, one refugee services provider believed that there are some specific and relatively unique mental health challenges that North Korean refugees may face because of the circumstances of their escape from North Korea and those of family members left behind. Additionally, since much of the support provided to refugees by the Korean American community is through the church, he believed that mental health issues sometimes were addressed through the church rather than through medical means.

*I think there is a mental health component. I think mental health provisions for North Korean refugees from the beginning would be very beneficial. Even that decision to leave North Korea is very fraught because family members can face repercussions. So I'm sure there is a lot of guilt. [There are] a lot of factors that can lead towards substance abuse or mental health issues. [This is more pronounced] among the North Koreans. Let's take for example our refugees from the Middle East. Everybody was forced to leave. There was no choice. It wasn't a conscious decision. But for North Koreans, there was an individual choice to leave North Korea and leave your family behind. So it's just a different situation that a lot of our refugees have had. To find somebody who can discuss that with them in a comfortable, trusting environment [would help]. If the North Korea refugees are in a religious milieu like the church, there might be a religious response to the mental health issues (like fellowship, prayer), but there may be some professional mental health counseling in Korean, [that would be] supplemental to the faith-based help.*

-Refugee Services Provider

A number of refugee interviewees' comments echoed the feelings of guilt and pressure.

*I personally have many difficulties from being apart from my family. It makes me lonely and breaks my heart. I would definitely call that a reason for stress and mental health issues. I think a lot of others have mental difficulties for the same reasons. I am currently just enduring it. Truthfully, my family in North Korea cannot live safely because of me. I know that they are constantly being watched. When we talk on the phone, we have to be extremely careful and can't talk that much. Things like this give me a lot of mental stress. I don't think it is my service provider's responsibility to help me with mental health issues since I made the choice to leave my family and come to America. Their priority is to take care of my material needs, and they are simply doing what the government tells them to do.*

-Female, 27, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

Finding ways to identify and address mental health issues that go beyond the scope of VOLAGs initial resettlement services in a way that is not perceived as stigmatizing by refugees, or the broader communities they are a part of, could help alleviate some of the underlying difficulties during the resettlement process.

*But I want to come back to mental health issues. There is some stigmatization of mental health so they do support groups that are not even labeled mental health [to remove the] stigmatization. For example, with the Iraqi women, they have a support group talking about beauty. [Beauty might not seem like an obvious topic of choice] but it provides a comfortable environment to start talking about the more serious issues. I know there is not a critical mass of North Koreans here to get something like that started, but ... we could maybe start something like that in where there is a greater concentration of North Korea refugees. You could bring some Korean American professional to facilitate. You know, ideally, ... you could have some group activities amongst North Koreans so there is some self-support so that they don't have to appeal entirely to Korean Americans and don't become dependent. And then for their cultural needs - the need to be in a Korean milieu - if you could give them a little base among themselves so that when they venture out into the Korean community, they will have a base to come back to.*

-Refugee Services Provider

## CONNECTIONS WITH NORTH KOREA

Like most refugee communities, despite the immediate challenges and concerns with resettlement in the United States, the home they left behind loomed large in their lives in both large and small ways.

While not all refugee interviewees were in contact with relatives in North Korea, many were and they felt a burden to support their families and loved ones in North Korea, even as they struggled to establish their own lives in America.

*There are different classes in society but when I first came to America, I came with not even a penny in my pocket. So I think being able to rise up the ladder and fulfill a goal is success. My goal was to prevent my family in North Korea from starving so that's success to me, not education. They're not starving because of me. [I contact them] about three times a year.*

-Female, 35, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2007

*[The local college] charges \$800 a month for English classes but I still have to support my family in North Korea so that's difficult to balance.*

-Female, 27, VA, Arrived in the U.S. 2010

Beyond the more acute financial burden of supporting relatives in North Korea, many felt a broader longer-term calling to help those in North Korea through their career pursuits and achievements in America.

*I want to study psychology and counseling because I want to be able to counsel North Korean women. They experience a lot of pain in China (liked forced marriage). A lot of them end up having to leave their children in China and can't call them even if they wanted to. The children are also traumatized ... because they don't have their mothers. So they get depressed. So rather than a financially lucrative major, I want to study something that will let me counsel them.*

-Female, 38, IL, Arrived in U.S. 2007

*If and when Korean unification happens there will have to be someone who is able to help bridge the gap between the education system in the North and that in the South. I saw myself as able to help bridge the gap between the two systems. So, that's why I wanted to study education.*

-Female, 26, MI, Arrived in the U.S. 2012

*I am studying economics with a focus in international development. The reason I want to study that and go to graduate school is the preparation for unification. That's not for my family, but for the country, because I am one of the few candidates who can study relatively easily in the United [States] and have a background in North Korea so I have a kind of commitment and responsibility to prepare for and contribute to unification and economic development after unification. After I finish I wish to work at an international organization so I can understand experiences from other countries that could be used in the case of Korean unification.*

-Male, 32, KY/VA, Arrived in U.S. 2011

## CONCLUSION

A small but growing number of North Korean refugees seek to create a life for themselves and their families in America. The challenges they face are significant. Refugee resettlement service providers cite the lack of a true North Korean diaspora and the particular circumstances of escape of many North Korean refugees as unique sources of potential stress even when compared with other refugee communities in the United States.

The vast majority of North Korean refugees interviewed for this study did not believe they faced greater hurdles to resettlement than other refugee groups. They more commonly expressed a desire and resolve to quickly transcend the status of refugee to that of self-sufficient citizen.

Interviewees saw education as the primary means through which financial well-being, social acclimation and, ultimately, greater life satisfaction could be achieved. Despite being faced with often stark choices between the immediate need to support themselves and pursuing education for improved long-term prospects, interviewees almost unanimously underscored the vital importance of education to successful resettlement, regardless of how they chose to personally define success.

To that end, both the refugees and service providers interviewed were keen to find new ways forward in addressing the resettlement needs of North Korean refugees without undue burden on refugee resettlement organizations. Refugee interviewees

generally praised the work of VOLAG resettlement organizations and their case managers. However, given the small number of North Koreans in the United States and their somewhat unique backgrounds, North Korean refugees can prove difficult for some VOLAG resettlement organizations to assist beyond the provision of the most basic resettlement services, especially given that VOLAGs provide assistance to large numbers of refugees from around the world with limited budgets.

Increasingly, organizations with mandates to specifically assist North Korean refugees are exploring ways to better tailor services and opportunities. These organizations, many of which have ties to the Korean-American community and are led by members of a younger generation who are less burdened by Cold War-era politics and take a wider view of North Korean issues, are attempting to pick up where official resettlement assistance ends.

The research conducted for this project is a reminder that the needs of North Korean refugees in the United States are great and challenges to meeting those needs persist. Yet, it also reinforces the notion that those who come to America are generally a self-selected group of motivated individuals determined to succeed in their new adopted home, and there are promising signs that a community of interest in the United States is emerging to find new ways to help them do so.



# FREEDOM IN NORTH KOREA



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