

# Thriving Together: How ORR-Eligible Populations Contribute to Safer, Stronger Communities Through Housing Stability

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## Introduction

Using a housing-centered lens, this article provides an overview of how newcomers contribute to safe and thriving communities. It draws on academic research across fields showing that communities flourish when residents feel secure, supported, and connected to one another. Within this context, the article explores key newcomer social, economic, and engagement in community life contributions.

The article begins by defining what constitutes a safe and thriving community and then highlights newcomer contributions across three core dimensions: **social connection**, **economic participation**, and **engagement in community life**.

## Safe and Thriving Communities

Safe and thriving communities rely on social connections, economic stability, and community engagement. Scholars across disciplines stress that communities flourish when residents feel secure and connected. Research on social cohesion, the strength of relationships and trust among community members, shows that cohesive communities are better at solving problems and handling disruptions (Chan et al., 2006, Kawachi & Berkman, 2000). Studies on economic stability reveal that investing in housing, local jobs, and infrastructure boosts long-term well-being and adaptability (Batrancea et al., 2023). Research on community engagement suggests that volunteering contributes to higher personal and community well-being and strengthens community connections (Mellor et al., 2009; Vannier et al., 2021).

Safe and thriving communities emerge from a mix of social cohesion, economic well-being, and community engagement — areas where newcomers make significant contributions.

## Newcomer Contributions

Newcomers, including individuals eligible for Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) benefits and services, play a vital role — even while navigating limited housing options, unfamiliar systems, language limitations, and different cultural norms. Research shows that newcomers actively contribute to the social, economic, and civic foundations that make communities safe and help them thrive.

### SOCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Newcomers help build the social fabric that supports community safety and cohesion. Social cohesion does not simply “happen” in communities but is actively created through everyday interactions, and newcomers are central to that process. When newcomers feel welcomed, they form relationships that deepen trust, mutual support, and collective problem solving (Okamoto et al., 2020). Through neighborhood involvement, participation in local groups, and informal networks, newcomers enhance social integration and connectedness (Zhang et al., 2023).

Osirim (2008) finds that African immigrant women play a central role in strengthening urban communities, particularly in historically African American neighborhoods. Their research shows contributions range from opening businesses that support local revitalization, such as the African Market in Boston and Dahlak Restaurant in Philadelphia, to leading community organizations that provide essential services. Groups like the Coalition of African Communities, African Family Health Organization, and the Adbar Ethiopian Women's Alliance offer health care access, education, economic development, legal assistance, literacy training, and other support, helping families navigate complex systems while also building connections across the Black diaspora. Through this work, African immigrant women enhance community well-being, expand availability of resources, and contribute to the social and economic vitality of the neighborhoods they call home (Osirim, 2008).

Research also shows that a wide range of social networks strengthen collective efficacy, the shared belief that residents can work together to improve neighborhood conditions, which is a key predictor of community safety (Sampson, 2012).

## ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Newcomers support local economies. Studies show they stabilize housing markets, support neighborhood renewal, and strengthen local labor forces (American Immigration Council, 2023). Research finds that immigrant entrepreneurship boosts job creation and stimulates local commerce (Fairlie & Lofstrom, 2015). Many newcomers start businesses, fill workforce gaps, and contribute economic benefits for their communities (American Immigration Council, 2023; Clemens, 2022).

A study on the economic effects of immigrants in the United States from 1994 to 2023 shows that the immigrant population "generated more in taxes than they received in benefits from all levels of government" for each year of the studied period, creating a "cumulative fiscal surplus of \$14.5 trillion in real 2024 US dollars, including \$3.9 trillion in savings on interest on the [nation's] debt" (Bier, et al., 2026). The authors recognized that these findings represent the "lower bound" of immigrants' positive contributions to the American economy, writing: "Even by this conservative analysis, immigrants may have already prevented a fiscal crisis."

Evans and Fitzgerald (2017) find that during the first eight years in the United States, refugees in particular may generally receive more in public benefits than they pay in taxes. However, this pattern reverses after year eight, with taxes paid exceeding benefits received (p. 6). Using an accounting approach, adding all taxes paid and subtracting public benefits received, they estimate that refugees who arrive between ages 18 and 45 contribute, on average, \$21,000 more in taxes than they receive in benefits over their first 20 years in the country.

Their study underscores the importance of providing holistic support to newcomers as they enter the job market, ensuring they not only achieve short-term self-sufficiency but are also able to match their skills and qualifications to higher-paying jobs. Scholars emphasize that meaningful, well-matched employment is central to successful refugee integration. Szkudlarek et al. (2021) highlight the importance of securing work that aligns with one's professional background, while Lee et al. (2020) argue that refugee employment should reflect individuals' qualifications, career aspirations, and financial needs, as well as offer opportunities for advancement. This alignment strengthens their long-term economic mobility and deepens the economic contributions that help communities thrive.

Economic well-being is closely tied to housing stability. When newcomers have secure, affordable homes, their economic contributions can expand, improving employment stability, increasing local spending, and supporting long-term financial mobility. Stable housing also reduces the economic costs associated with displacement, overcrowding, and unsafe living conditions, enabling newcomers to invest more fully in their communities.

## CONTRIBUTIONS TO COMMUNITY LIFE

Newcomers also strengthen the everyday functioning of community life. Through volunteering and participation in community organizations, newcomers help address local challenges and expand collective capacity. Research shows that helping others strengthens individuals' sense of community and expands their social and human capital, both of which support integration (Hoffman et al., 2007; Handy & Greenspan, 2009 in Weng & Lee, 2016).

Immigrants participate in community life in myriad ways, including volunteering with organizations, churches, or sports programs; tutoring or coaching; helping neighbors navigate services; and organizing cultural events (Jensen, 2008; Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Stepick et al., 2016). Sattar and Strunk's (2025) study of resettled refugee youth from Asian, Latinx, and African backgrounds found a strong culture of volunteering shaped by personal choice, cultural norms, and community expectations. While some youth engaged in formal service through churches, mosques, food pantries, and school clubs, most also described regular, informal support such as interpreting for family members, helping with appointments, cooking, childcare, and assisting other newcomers. Participants emphasized that these practices were modeled by parents and reinforced in religious and communal settings, describing helping others as a meaningful, everyday part of life. For example: "For me, it is just how I grew up. That's how my culture is, people are always willing to help each other, and it just makes you feel good to be helpful" (Sattar & Strunk, p. 11).

Research also shows that a major barrier to immigrant volunteering is simply not knowing how to get involved (Scott et al., 2006), but ethnic congregations, for example, can help bridge this gap by offering familiar, welcoming environments where immigrants already receive support (Handy & Greenspan, 2009). Formal volunteer programs that intentionally recruit immigrants can strengthen under-resourced nonprofits while building newcomers' skills for employment and daily life in the United States. (Weng & Lee, 2016). Scholars call for shifting from viewing immigrants primarily as service recipients to recognizing the unique value they contribute when civic engagement opportunities are available and culturally responsive (Weng & Lee, 2016).

Participation in community life, such as through volunteering, also enhances community safety. Neighborhoods with higher levels of resident engagement, regardless of immigration status, experience stronger collective efficacy, and lower crime rates (Sampson, 2012). Such participation is both a pathway to belonging and a driver of community wide safety and prosperity.

## Housing and Wrap-Around Services: The Foundation for All Three Dimensions

Affordable, safe housing is crucial for social, economic, and participation in community life. Secure housing reduces instability, allowing newcomers to focus on work, education, and community involvement. It supports continuity in schooling and relationships, which are vital for long-term well-being. Wrap-around services, like case management and childcare, help newcomers navigate unfamiliar systems.

Housing is a core component of successful resettlement. Carter et al. (2009) show that stable, adequate housing gives newcomers the foundation they need to pursue employment, language learning, and other essential services; without it, families are more likely to experience poor health, disrupted education and work, and strain on family life. Rose et al. (2019) likewise describe housing as a starting point for the entire resettlement process, highlighting its role in creating early stability. Research also connects housing quality to broader well-being: Bratt et al. (2002) found that affordability, stability, and security are key conditions that support families' ability to focus on work, school, and community participation.

Wrap-around services reinforce this foundation by helping newcomers navigate complex systems and supports. Walsh et al. (2015) recommend coordinated services across health, housing, and immigration programs to address the needs of newcomer women facing housing insecurity. These supports improve connections to resources and help newcomers build relationships and networks that contribute to long-term stability and engagement in community life.

## **In Practice**

Newcomers strengthen communities by building networks through schools, faith groups, and cultural organizations, and through volunteer activity that deepens their sense of belonging. Support services help newcomers navigate complex systems, secure stable housing, and access pathways to employment.

Housing partners can advance this process by prioritizing placements that offer stability and proximity to essential services, coordinating with local organizations for language and mental health support, and connecting newcomers with community groups that foster participation. They can also expand partnerships to improve housing availability, integrate newcomer needs into planning through culturally responsive communication, and create opportunities for tenant leadership that encourage engagement in community decision making.

At the federal level, housing partners can reinforce these efforts by investing in affordable housing and funding wrap-around services, while promoting collaboration across the housing, health, education, and workforce sectors to strengthen community well-being and newcomer participation.

## **Conclusion**

Newcomers strengthen the social, economic, and community foundations that make neighborhoods safe and thriving. Their everyday contributions, including building relationships, supporting local economies, and engaging in community life through volunteering, expand collective capacity and deepen social cohesion. Research shows that when newcomers have access to stable housing and coordinated wrap-around services, they are better able to participate fully in community life, pursue meaningful work, and build the networks that support long-term well-being. By investing in affordable housing and supportive services, communities create the conditions for everyone to flourish.

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