

Study: Refugees in Tennessee contribute more than they consume **Findings indicate they pay twice as much in taxes as they receive in state-funded services**

More than 50 people attended a legislative hearing Tuesday in Nashville to hear the findings of a new Fiscal Review Committee study of state spending on services for refugees, as well as tax revenues raised from refugees.

By **Tony Gonzalez**, [The Tennessean](#)
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A new study of foreign-born refugees who live in Tennessee has found they contributed almost twice as much in tax revenues as they consumed in state-funded services in the past two decades.

But limitations of the study — an unprecedented research effort by the state — left the state lawmakers who asked for it with questions on Tuesday.

A committee of House and Senate lawmakers requested the study last summer to try to understand the impact of refugee services on the state budget. They were especially interested in whether there has been a shift in how those costs are covered by state and federal funds.

The federal Refugee Resettlement Program operates in 49 states to give politically and religiously persecuted refugees a fresh start in the U.S. and a path to citizenship after five years.

Researchers with the legislature's Fiscal Review Committee reported a number of first-time findings about refugees in the state. Their report estimates some 57,000 refugees live in Tennessee, a number that has doubled since 1990 but which still represents less than 1 percent of the population.

Making "conservative estimates," researchers said that since 1990, the state has spent \$753 million on services for refugees — including for schooling and health care — and received almost twice as much, \$1.3 billion, in tax revenues from them.

Seeing the numbers for the first time, Holly Johnson, state coordinator for the Tennessee Office of Refugees, said they appeared to prove what she had already believed: "that refugees bring a lot more than they consume."

Study limitations

Researchers couched their analysis with caveats about the data collected, prompting lawmaker questions on Tuesday.

The researchers said both in the study and in answers to questions that they struggled to get some federal data and found most state agencies don't track whether the people they serve are refugees.

There was no mechanism for tracking which services refugees used, said Krista Lee, senior fiscal analyst, requiring researchers to make certain assumptions. For example, they had to assume that refugees enroll in public schools, government assistance programs and TennCare, the state's Medicaid program, with the same frequency as the general population.

"From the information we could find, there wasn't anything substantial stating they wouldn't be in a similar standing as current citizens," Lee said.

That assumption left some lawmakers skeptical about the study's findings. Rep. John Ragan, R-Oak Ridge, said a major impetus for the study was to tease out whether refugees are more likely to rely on government assistance.

Rep. Joe Carr, R-Lascassas, asked how the report could be trusted if researchers could not determine whether refugees pay taxes in the same way as native-born residents. The researchers told the panel they found no studies indicating that refugees contribute any more or less than others.

'We're here for jobs'

One Nashville refugee who spoke to the panel Tuesday challenged lawmakers to look beyond whether refugees use a "normal" amount of government aid, and to see them as a positive force.

"We're not here for the government programs or any welfare; we're here for the jobs," said Mohamed-Shukri Hassan, 27, a Somali naturalized in 2009.

He said many refugees work multiple jobs. He called it "heartbreaking" to hear questions about the possible cost burdens brought by refugees.

"I feel there's unfairness and marginalization of refugees in Tennessee," he said. "They're not taking into consideration the contribution the refugees are making."

The committee chairman, Rep. Judd Matheny, R-Tullahoma, defended the research efforts but said he may press federal officials for better data.

"What I don't trust is the fact that the federal government has not been forthcoming with the information (researchers) need," he said.

More federal dollars have come to Tennessee since a change to the refugee program in 2008. The state gave up managing the program that year, establishing the Tennessee Office for Refugees, run by Catholic Charities of Tennessee. From 1991 through 2007, the state never received more than \$2.3 million each year. The number jumped when Catholic Charities took over, rising to \$8.9 million last year.

About 1,500 refugees arrived in Tennessee last year.

By the numbers: TN refugees

57,869
refugees in Tennessee

0.9%
of state population

9,259
K-12 refugee students

10,892
refugees on TennCare

Source: Estimates from the Tennessee General Assembly's Fiscal Review Committee report

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