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# Attitudes Toward Refugees Entering the United States of America

Sarah M. Bullard

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The University of Southern Mississippi

ATTITUDES TOWARD REFUGEES ENTERING

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

by

Sarah Bullard

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Honors College of  
The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology

May 2015



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## **Abstract**

According to the estimates by the United Nations, there are nearly fifty-million refugees in the world. Because attitudes toward refugees could influence government refugee policies, it is important to study the attitudes people have toward refugees entering the United States. To learn more about attitudes toward refugees in the United States, a survey was conducted of over two hundred college students, asking how they defined refugees and who should be allowed into the United States as refugees. Survey respondents from all demographic groups were surprisingly accepting of all types of refugees. However, some refugee variables, such as gender and situation, and respondent variables, such as political orientation, were related to different attitudes toward refugees. Because people's attitudes toward refugees could affect whether a country will give refugees asylum, researchers should study people's attitudes toward refugees and the variables that influence people's attitudes on refugees.

**Key Terms:** Refugees, Asylum, Attitudes, Acceptance, Definitions

## **Dedication**

To Dr. Julie Reid, who tamed a hot mess to become responsible for a thesis

To Dakota, Katie, Lauren, and Samantha, who were there for the days with forty-four  
sunsets

To my seven stars, who make me laugh

## Table of Contents

	List of Tables and Charts.....	vii
I.	Introduction.....	1
II.	Literature Review.....	3
III.	Methods.....	7
IV.	Respondent Definitions and Estimates.....	11
V.	Refugee Variables.....	15
VI.	Respondent Variables.....	24
VII.	Conclusion.....	27
VIII.	References.....	30
IX.	Appendix I: Survey Questionnaire and Coding.....	32
X.	Appendix II: Survey Sample Demographics.....	37
XI.	Appendix III: Institutional Review Board Approval.....	39

## List of Tables and Charts

### Charts

Chart 1 : Respondents' Definitions of Refugees.....	11
Chart 2: Estimates of the Number of Refugees in the World.....	13
Chart 3: Estimates of the Number of Refugees the US Plans to Accept in 2014.....	13
Chart 4: Acceptance of Gender Refugees.....	16
Chart 5: Acceptance of Gender Refugees Continued.....	17
Chart 6: Acceptance of Religious Refugees.....	18
Chart 7: Acceptance of Persecution Refugees.....	21
Chart 8: Acceptance of Refugees Fleeing Various Situations.....	22

### Tables

Table 1: Mean Differences Between Religious Refugees.....	19
Table 2: Mean Differences Between Acceptance of Refugees from Various Situations..	23

## I: INTRODUCTION

The United Nations High Commission of Refugees (UNHCR) reported that more than forty-five million people were refugees or asylum seekers around the world in 2012 (UNHCR 2012). The UNHCR describes a refugee as a person forced to flee persecution (including religious, racial, and political persecution), war, or natural disasters in order to protect their life or their personal safety (UNHCR 2012). However, definitions of refugees affect estimates, with stricter definitions estimating approximately ten million refugees and wider definitions estimating nearly fifty-million refugees in the world (UNHCR 2012). No matter the exact definition and number of refugees, refugees need refuge from the terrors they are fleeing. However, refugee acceptance into a country can be affected by many different variables.

International studies have shown that the demographic and belief variables of natives, that is, people currently living in a country, as well as variables among refugees, affect natives' attitudes toward refugees in their country. In addition, studies have indicated that natives' attitudes toward and beliefs about refugees can influence natives' attitudes toward, and ultimately their voting decisions on, government refugee policies (Verkuyten 2004). Furthermore, history has shown that negative attitudes toward a particular group of refugees can influence governments to deny asylum to that group of refugees (Medoff 2003; Peck 1980). Ultimately, natives' attitudes toward refugees can affect the fate of refugees.

In 2014, the United States government planned to allow more than seventy-thousand refugees into the United States (Obama 2013). As more refugees are given asy-

lum in the United States, it is important for researchers to study the attitudes United States citizens have toward incoming refugees and what variables affect the citizens' attitudes.

While many studies on this topic have been conducted in other countries with large refugee populations, including the United Kingdom and Australia, few studies have been conducted in the United States. Because of this lack of research, little is known about the attitudes citizens of the United States have toward refugees entering the United States. The purpose of this research project is to learn how college students in the United States define refugees and to study college students' positive or negative attitudes toward refugees entering the United States and the variables—both among college students and among refugees—that affect those attitudes.

This research project includes three research questions. First, how do college students define refugees? Because many experts disagree on the exact definition of refugees, I hoped to learn how respondents defined refugees. From a sociological symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective, how people define—or give meaning to—people and things determines how they behavior towards them. Second, what variables among refugees (ex., gender, racial refugees, religious refugees) are related to college students' positive or negative attitudes toward refugees entering the United States? Third, what demographic and belief variables among college students (ex., gender, race, religion) are related to positive or negative attitudes toward refugees entering the United States?

## II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have shown that three types of variables affect natives' attitudes toward refugees entering their country. First, natives' demographic variables, including their race, gender, education, and income, are related to the different attitudes natives' have toward refugees. Second, natives' belief variables, including their political beliefs, their group beliefs, and their false beliefs, are also related to natives' attitudes toward refugees. Third, variables among refugees, including their situation and reason for becoming refugees, influence natives' attitudes toward refugees.

Natives' demographic variables are related to their attitudes toward refugees entering their country. For example, people with higher levels of education generally have more positive attitudes toward refugees than people with lower levels of education according to studies in the United States (Berg 2010), Australia (Morris and Heaven 1986), and across multiple nations (Mayda 2006). In addition, people with higher incomes and higher work skills also show more positive attitudes toward refugees than people with lower incomes or lower work skills (Mayda 2006; Millington 2010; Morris and Heaven 1986). Race and gender are also related to natives' attitudes toward refugees, with African Americans and females generally holding slightly more negative attitudes toward refugees than Caucasians and males (Berg 2010; Mayda 2006). Immigration status and contact with recent immigrants affect natives' attitudes toward refugees. According to research across multiple nations and in the United States, people with non-native or immigrant family members generally show more positive attitudes toward refugees than people from families without a recent history of immigration (Mayda 2006; Murray and Marx 2013).

Several studies have argued that natives' political and group beliefs, as well as their beliefs about refugees, have more influence on natives' attitudes toward refugees than their demographic characteristics (Morris and Heaven 1986). Meanwhile, other studies argue that both demographic and belief variables influence natives' attitudes toward refugees (Mayda 2006). Studies in Australia have shown that natives with authoritarian political beliefs (the belief that authoritative powers should be respected and obeyed, not individual beliefs and desires) generally have strongly negative attitudes toward refugees and immigrants (Morris and Heaven 1986; Nickerson and Louis 2008). In addition, Canadian and Australian natives with group dominate beliefs (beliefs that their group is superior to other groups) showed strongly negative attitudes toward refugees (Esses et al. 2008; Nickerson and Louis 2008). Moreover, according to research in Canada, natives with strong zero-sum beliefs (the belief that a group can only succeed if another group is exploited) also showed negative attitudes toward refugees (Louis, Esses, and Lalonde 2013). Natives with nationalist beliefs and identification were more likely to have negative attitudes toward refugees than natives with humanist beliefs and identification (Louis et al. 2013; Mayda 2006; Nickerson and Louis 2008; Verkuyten 2004). Finally, natives with many false beliefs about refugees (beliefs that refugees are dangerous terrorists or con artists seeking to exploit a country) generally hold negative attitudes toward refugees according to research in Slovenia (Lobnikar et al. 2002), the United Kingdom (Lynn and Lea 2003), Australia (McKay, Thomas, and Kneebone 2011; Pedersen, Watt, and Hansen 2006), and across multiple nations (Mayda 2006).

While most research studies on natives' attitudes have focused on the variables among natives, several studies have also researched how variables among refugees, in-

cluding their situation and social group, can also impact natives' attitudes. For example, Portuguese natives are more likely to express sympathy for people who belong to their social group and who are the same race or nationality as the native than for people from different social groups, races, or nationalities (Aguiar et al. 2008). In addition, United States citizens consider legal immigrants and refugees less threatening than illegal immigrants or asylum seekers (people who arrive in a country to seek asylum before they are granted refugee status) (Murray and Marx 2013). Natives of the Netherlands also express more positive attitudes toward political refugees (refugees fleeing political persecution) than toward economic refugees (refugees fleeing extreme poverty or economic persecution) (Verkuyten 2004).

The previous research studies show that natives' demographic and belief variables, as well as variables among refugees, are related to natives' positive or negative attitudes toward refugees. Additional research has shown that natives' attitudes toward refugees influence their attitudes toward government immigration and refugee policies (Verkuyten 2004). Moreover, many historians believe that negative attitudes toward Jews ultimately led to the United States government denying asylum to many Jewish refugees fleeing the German Holocaust (Medoff 2003; Peck 1980; Wyman 1992). Because of the impact natives' attitudes toward refugees can have on the fate of refugees, many countries with large refugee populations, including Australia and the United Kingdom, have conducted numerous research studies on the subject. However, few research studies have been conducted to measure the attitudes citizens of the United States have toward refugees or the variables that influence those attitudes. As more refugees enter the United States, it is important to understand the attitudes native citizens of the United States have

toward refugees and refugee policies. This research intends to research the impact that American college students' demographic and belief variables, as well as refugee variables, have on their attitudes toward and perceptions of refugees.

### III: METHODS

#### Methods

To study how different variables among natives and refugees affect natives' attitudes toward refugees entering the United States, I used an online survey questionnaire (Appendix I) to answer the three research questions posed in the first chapter. The survey questions thus included the following categories: The first category measured how respondents defined the word refugee. Respondents selected situations they considered valid reasons for a person to be considered a refugee. These reasons included situations such as fleeing environmental disaster, war, and persecution. The second category measured how many refugees that respondents estimated were in the world and how many refugees the United States planned to give refuge to in 2014.

The third category measured respondents' acceptance of refugees fleeing different situations. For example, respondents selected from a Likert scale if they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed whether people fleeing environmental disasters should be accepted as refugees into the United States. This category measured if respondents were equally accepting to admit refugees into the United States who are of different genders, different regional backgrounds, different religions, and different situations. The fourth category measured respondents' attitudes beliefs about refugees. For example, respondents selected from a Likert scale if they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed that refugees cheat to enter the United States. The fifth category measured respondents' attitudes on refugee policies in the United States. Using a Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, respondents selected their positions on policies such as the United States increasing the

number of refugees allowed into the United States. The final category measured respondents' demographic variables, including their race, gender, religion, and political orientation.

I recruited the survey questionnaire respondents through convenience sampling at a university in southeastern United States. Respondents were recruited through the university's honors college and university newsletter emails, announcements in an introductory sociology class and a globalization class, and announcements on my personal Facebook page. All announcements mentioned that respondents could enter a drawing for gift card prizes. In addition, respondents in the two sociology classes where the study was announced were also able to earn extra credit for participating in the survey

The survey questionnaire had 259 respondents participate. However, 43 respondents completed less than half of the survey and their survey results were disqualified from the survey results. Ultimately, 216 survey questionnaires were kept for analysis.

SPSS was used to analyze the survey results. First, I used a descriptive statistics frequency test to analyze respondents' definitions and estimates of refugees. I used a chi-square test to analyze if respondents were significantly more accepting of some refugee categories than others (ex. female refugees fleeing gender persecution versus male refugees fleeing gender persecution). I also used a repeated measures general linear model and independent-samples t-test to analyze if respondent variables (ex. gender) were significantly related to different acceptance rates toward refugees.

## **Sample**

The 216 respondents were university students from a university in the southeastern United States (Appendix II). While the survey sample was a convenient sample and therefore not necessarily representative of the population of university's students, the respondents' demographics reflected the average university demographics on some accounts. Approximately one fourth of the respondents were drawn from an introductory sociology class that fulfills a general education requirement; thus, this class included diverse students from across the entire campus. As such, the sample was more likely to better match the university population than it would have been if the sample was gathered only through snowball or other convenience sampling techniques. The sample had an overrepresentation of women compared to the university as a whole: Respondents were 73.6% female, 26.0% male, and 0.5% other gender identity while the general university population consists of approximately 60% female and 40% male students.

Racially and ethnically, the respondents were 64.1% Caucasian, 23% African American, 9.1% multiple races, 2.4% Asian, and 0.5% Native American or Alaskan Native, Hispanic or Latino, and Middle Eastern. These percentages are somewhat reflective of the university racial and ethnical make-up: 59% of university students are Caucasian, 31% African American, 3% Hispanic, and approximately 1% of other racial and ethnic groups. However, the difference between the racial composition of the respondents and the university may also partly be attributable to differences in the way the question is asked: the survey for this study specifically asks students to mark all of their racial groups, which resulted in a sizable group of respondents being categorized as "multiple races."

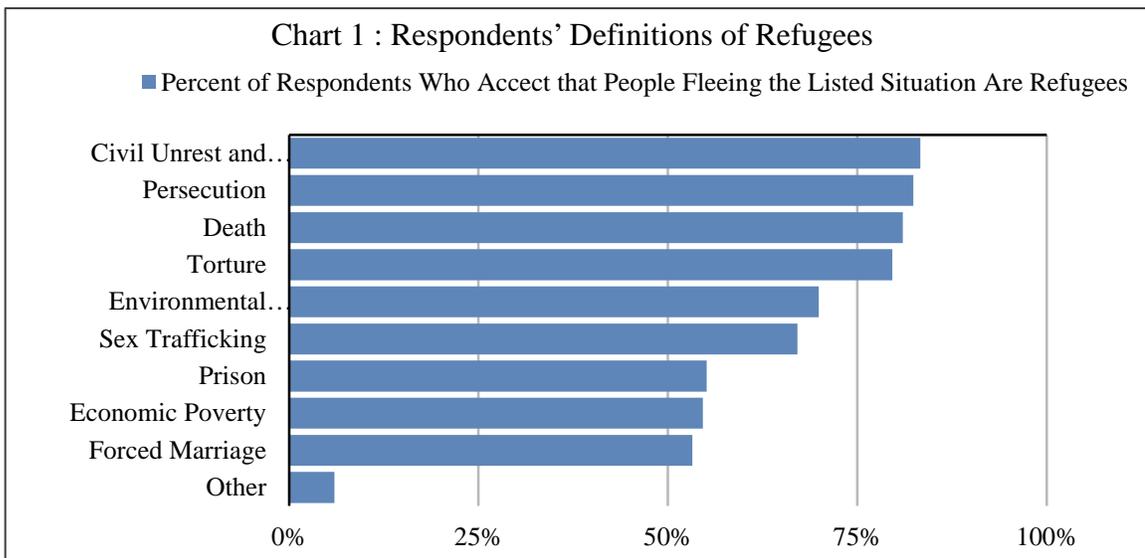
Respondents' hometown demographics also showed some similar patterns to the university demographics, but the sample underrepresented students from Mississippi: 65.7% of respondents were from Mississippi, 22.9% from the Southeast United States, 9.0% from other areas of the United States, and 2.9% from outside of the United States. For the university, 87% of students were from Mississippi, 12% from other areas of the United States, and 1% from other countries.

In addition, 48.1% of respondents indicated they were eligible for and received financial aid while an additional 5.2% were eligible for but did not receive financial aid. This is in line with the university demographics, where 48% of students were low income students.

## IV: RESPONDENTS' DEFINITIONS AND ESTIMATES

### Definitions

Many researchers disagree on the exact definition of the word *refugee*. To learn how respondents define the word refugee, they were asked to select their definition of the word based on the types of situations that pushed a person to leave their country. For example, did the respondent think that persons fleeing civil unrest and violence in their country should be included in the definition of refugees? Respondents could include multiple different situations in their definition.



Of the respondents, 83.3% stated that people fleeing civil unrest and violence are considered refugees, 82.4% that people fleeing persecution, 81% stated that people fleeing death, and 79.6% that people fleeing torture are refugees (see Chart 1). Also, 69.9% of respondents agreed that people fleeing environmental disasters and 67.1% that people fleeing forced sex trafficking are refugees. Lastly, 55.1% of respondents selected that

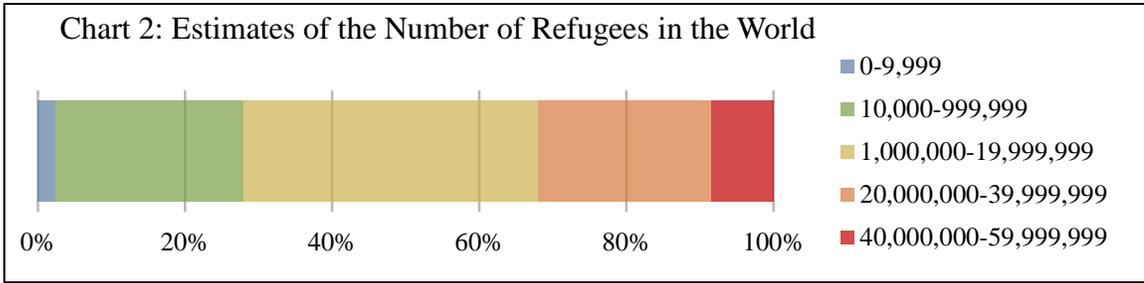
people fleeing imprisonment, 54.6% that people fleeing economic poverty, and 53.2% that people fleeing forced marriage are refugees.

Six percent also stated that there are additional reasons why a person would be considered a refugee. In the comment box provided with the survey question, several respondents listed alternative reasons such as, “A person who flees or is forced from their country with the intent to attain greater liberties,” “A person who flees their country to escape something ‘bad,’” “a person who flees his or her country to escape occupation, war, lack of education/work opportunities, and illegal settlements on his or her land (stealing of home by the government or armed forces),” and “A person who flees a country for any [reason] seeking protection at a certain place” as refugees.

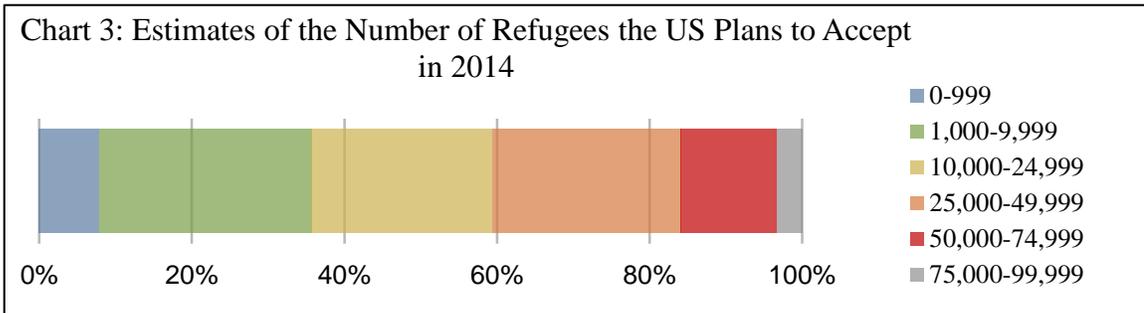
Most researchers’ definitions of refugees include people escaping persecution, war, and natural disasters. Respondents’ responses indicated that their most common definitions of refugees, which include people fleeing civil unrest or violence, persecution, death, and torture, are similar to the researchers’ most common definitions of refugees. Both sets of definitions focus on people fleeing physical harm and possible death.

### **Estimates**

Because of the conflicting definitions of refugees, researchers’ estimates of the number of refugees in the world vary widely. To learn how many refugees that respondents believe are in the world, they were asked to estimate how many refugees were in the world. They were given the following options to choose from: 0 - 9,999; 10,000 - 999,999; 1,000,000 - 9,999,999; 10,000,000 - 99,999,999; 100,000,000 - 999,999,999.



Respondents were most likely to estimate that there were between 1,000,000 to 19,000,000 refugees in the world (see Chart 2). This estimate is much lower than the United Nations’ estimate of approximately 45,000,000 refugees in the world (UNHCR 2012). Although respondents generally define refugees using the same criteria as the United Nations, the large gap between respondents’ and the United Nations estimates of the numbers of refugees indicates that many of the respondents did not realize how serious the refugee situation actually is compared to numbers used by some international organizations such as the United Nations.



Respondents were also asked to estimate how many refugees the United States planned to allow into the United States in 2014. They were given the following options to choose from: 0 - 999; 1,000 - 9,999; 10,000 - 24,999; 25,000 - 49,999; 50,000 - 74,999; 75,000 - 99,999. Respondents were most likely to estimate that the United States planned to allow 1,000 - 9,999 into the United States in 2014 (see Chart 3). This is sig-

nificantly less than the 70,000 refugees the United States government planned to allow into the United States (Obama 2013). This indicates that respondents do believe so many refugees are given refugee in the United States, but it may also be a reflection of their low estimates of how many refugees exist in the world as a whole.

## **V: REFUGEE VARIABLES**

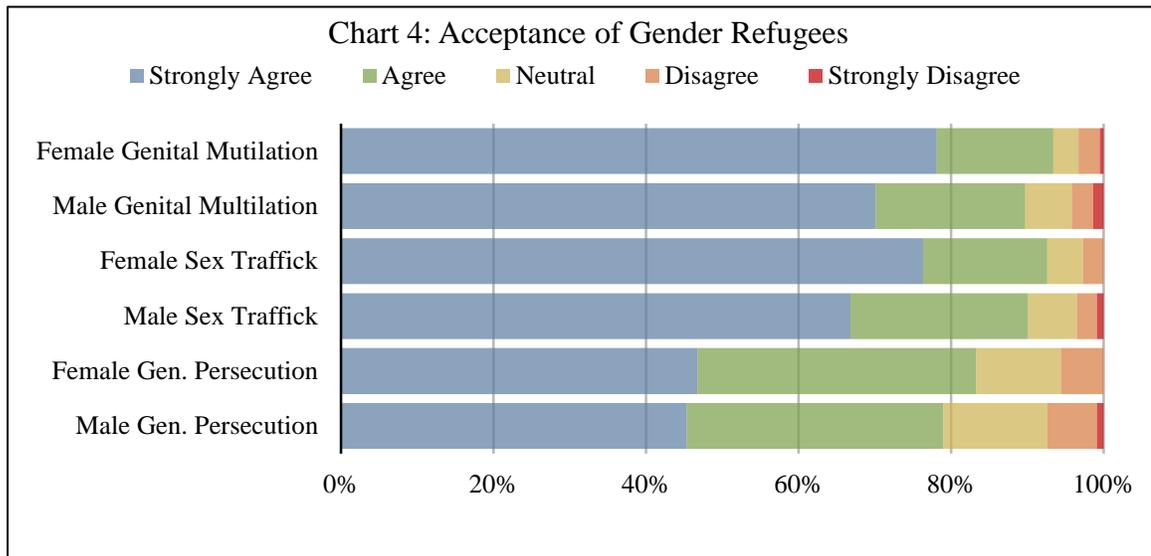
In this chapter, I examine how variables related to the refugee impact respondents' attitudes toward allowing the refugee to be admitted into the United States. The survey presented a number of variables related to the refugee, including demographic factors (ex., refugee's gender, religion, geographical region of origin) and also the situation that they were fleeing (ex., gender persecution, religious persecution, political persecution). For example, the survey presented the description "a girl or woman fleeing forced marriage" or "a boy or man fleeing forced marriage" and asked the respondent to indicate for each case how much they agree or disagree with allowing the person described into the United States as a refugee based on a Likert scale with 1 indicating "strongly agree" and 5 indicating "strongly disagreed" (see Appendix XX for full list of cases and phrasing of the descriptions). Thus, lower numbers mean that the respondent felt more favorable toward admitting the refugee. In every case presented, the vast majority of respondents indicated that the refugee should be admitted to the United States (i.e., either strongly agreed or agreed). Also, in all cases presented, the mean response was under 2 out of a scale of 1-5. However, respondents were more accepting of certain types of refugees than others, which I explore in the following sections.

### **Gender and Sexuality**

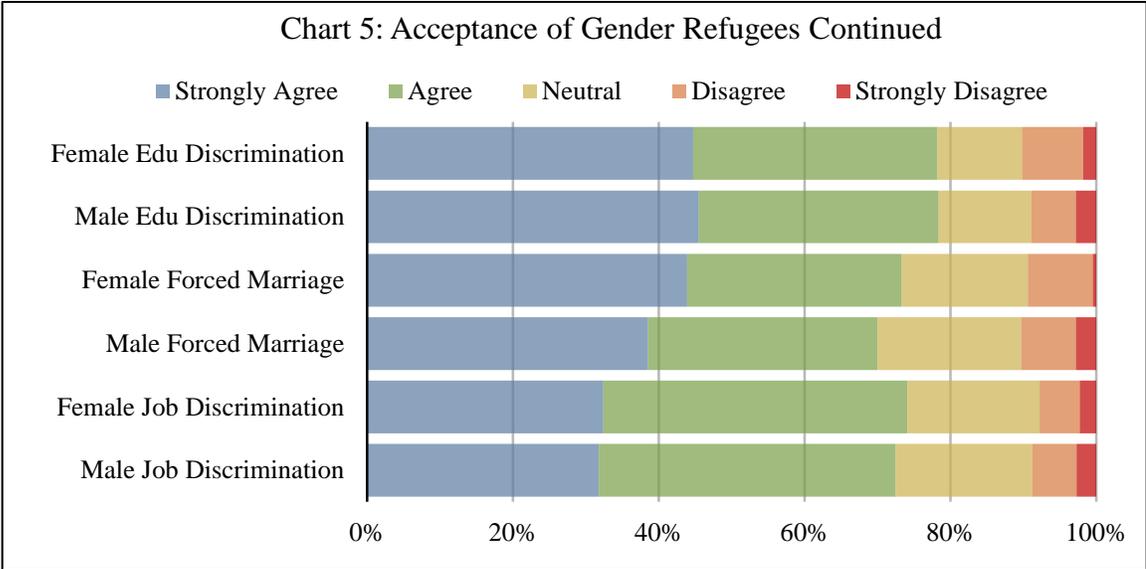
Respondents were surprisingly accepting of refugees fleeing all forms of gender and sexuality persecution being let into the United States. Approximately 75% of respondents agreed that refugees fleeing the listed forms of gender and sexuality persecution should be given refuge. However, while most respondents agreed that these types of

refugees should be given refuge, some refugee variables were significantly related to respondents' greater acceptance rates.

For example, when respondents were asked if males and females fleeing gender persecution and people fleeing persecution for being gay or lesbian should be accepted as refugees into the United States, most respondents agreed that they should be given refuge in the United States (see Charts 4 and 5). While respondents in the sample were slightly more accepting of females fleeing gender persecution ( $M = 1.76$ ) than males fleeing gender persecution ( $M = 1.84$ ), this difference was not statistically significant. However, there was a significant difference from the mean between respondents' acceptance of people fleeing persecution for being gay or lesbian ( $M = 1.98$ ) and their acceptance of males and females fleeing gender persecution in general. One possible reason for this



difference in acceptance is that there continues to be prejudice against members of the LGBTQ community, especially in the southeastern United States.



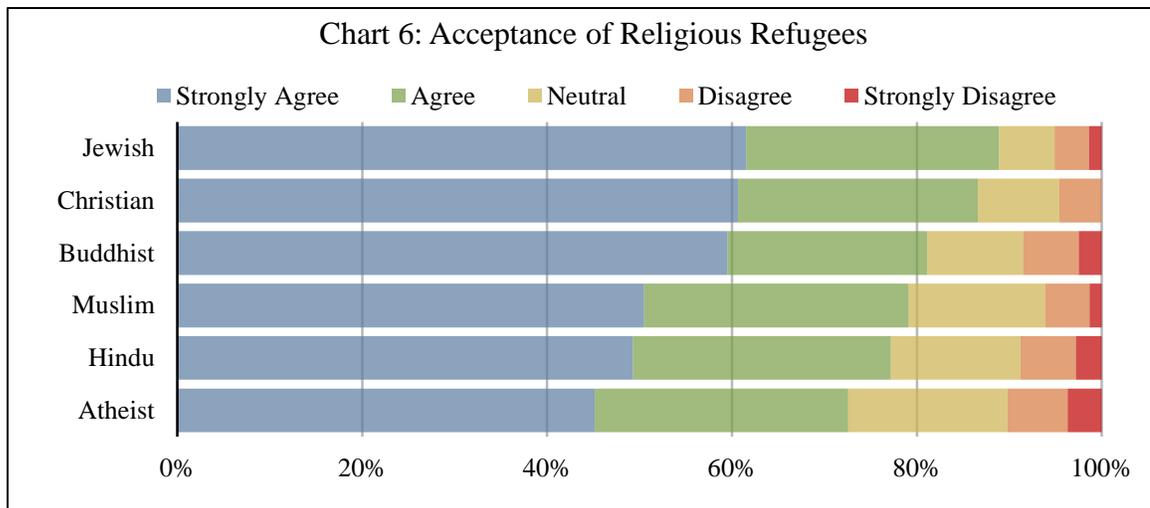
Respondents were also extremely accepting of male and female refugees fleeing other forms of gender and sexuality persecution. Respondents had similar acceptance rates for male and female refugees fleeing gender persecution, fleeing gender-based job discrimination, and fleeing gender-based educational discrimination. No significant difference could be found between respondents' acceptance of male and female refugees in these situations.

However, a significant difference could be found between respondents' acceptance rates for male and female refugees in the following situations: fleeing sex trafficking, fleeing forced marriage, and fleeing genital mutilation. Respondents were significantly more likely to accept female refugees fleeing sex trafficking ( $M = 1.333$ ) than male refugees ( $M = 1.468$ ). Respondents were also significantly more likely to accept female refugees fleeing forced marriage ( $M = 1.92$ ) than male refugees ( $M = 2.03$ ). In addition, respondents were significantly more likely to accept female refugees fleeing genital mutilation ( $M = 1.32$ ) than male refugees ( $M = 1.46$ ).

Ultimately, respondents were extremely accepting of both male and female refugees fleeing all forms of gender and sexuality persecution, with approximately 75% or more of respondents approving giving the refugees refuge in the United States. However, respondents did show slightly greater acceptance of female refugees than male refugees in certain circumstances: fleeing sex trafficking, feeling forced marriage, and fleeing genital mutilation. All of the circumstances with significant difference between male and female refugees were sexual in nature. One possible reason for these differences in acceptance rates is that respondents might have felt that female refugees needed more protection from sexual forms of persecution than male refugees.

**Religion**

Respondents were also highly accepting of refugees with different religions fleeing persecution. Approximately 75% or more of respondents agreed that refugees of all the listed religions should be given refuge in the United States from religious persecution



(see Chart 6). However, while respondents were accepting of all listed religions, refugees’ religious affiliation was also significantly related to respondents’ acceptance rates.

Respondents were asked if people of various religions (Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Atheist) fleeing religious persecution should be accepted as refugees into the United States. Respondents were significantly more likely to accept Jewish people fleeing religious persecution as refugees than any other religion (M = 1.54) (see Table 1). It is difficult to know what may be behind these results, but possible reasons for respondents' high acceptance rates of Jewish refugees may include memory of the Holocaust or the United States' close ties with Israel.

Respondents were next more likely to accept Christian people (M = 1.57) and Buddhist people (M = 1.67) fleeing religious persecution. Compared to other religious groups, respondents were least likely to accept Muslim people (M = 1.78), Hindu people (M = 1.84), and Atheist people (M = 1.96) as religious refugees, although, again, it is important to note that overall respondents were inclined to agree that people from any of these religious groups should be accepted into the United States as refugees if they were being persecuted for their religious beliefs.

	Jewish	Buddhist	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Atheist
Jewish		-0.134*	-0.301*	-0.244*	-0.029	-0.416*
Buddhist	0.134*		-0.167*	-0.110*	0.105	-0.282*
Hindu	0.301*	0.167*		0.057	0.273*	-0.115
Muslim	0.244*	0.110*	-0.057		0.215*	-0.172*
Christian	0.029	-0.105	-0.273*	-0.215*		-0.388*
Atheist	0.416*	0.282*	0.115	0.172*	0.388*	

\* Significant Difference, p=.05

## **Geographical Regions**

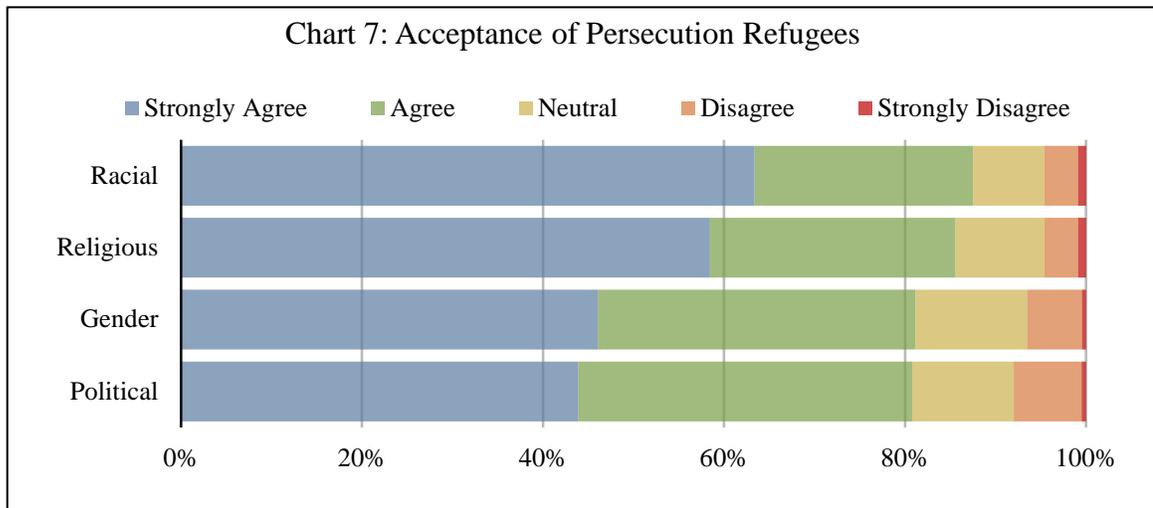
Just like their responses to refugees of different genders and religions, respondents were extremely accepting of refugees from different geographical regions, which represented different racial groups in this survey. Approximately 80% or more of respondents were accepting of refugees from all listed geographical regions. However, respondents' acceptance rates were affected by some geographical variables.

Respondents were asked if people from various world regions (Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and South America) fleeing a deadly war should be accepted as refugees in the United States. Respondents were significantly more accepting of people from Asia as refugees ( $M = 1.48$ ) than any other world regions. Respondents' acceptance rates for people from the Middle East ( $M = 1.58$ ), Europe ( $M = 1.59$ ), South American ( $M = 1.60$ ), and African ( $M = 1.60$ ) were significantly lower than acceptance rates for people from Asia. Given that the United States is majority white, these results may seem counter-intuitive on some level. However, one possible reason for this higher acceptance rate for refugees from Asia may be relative stronger prejudices against those from South America, the Middle East, and Africa. Another possible reason for this difference is that respondents may feel least threatened by Asian immigrants, who have been often referred to in popular discourse as the so-called "model minority."

## **Types of Persecution**

Approximately 80% or more of respondents agreed that refugees fleeing all forms of persecution should be given refuge in the United States (see Chart 7). However, respondents were more accepting of granting asylum based on some types of persecution than others. Respondents were asked if people fleeing different types of persecution

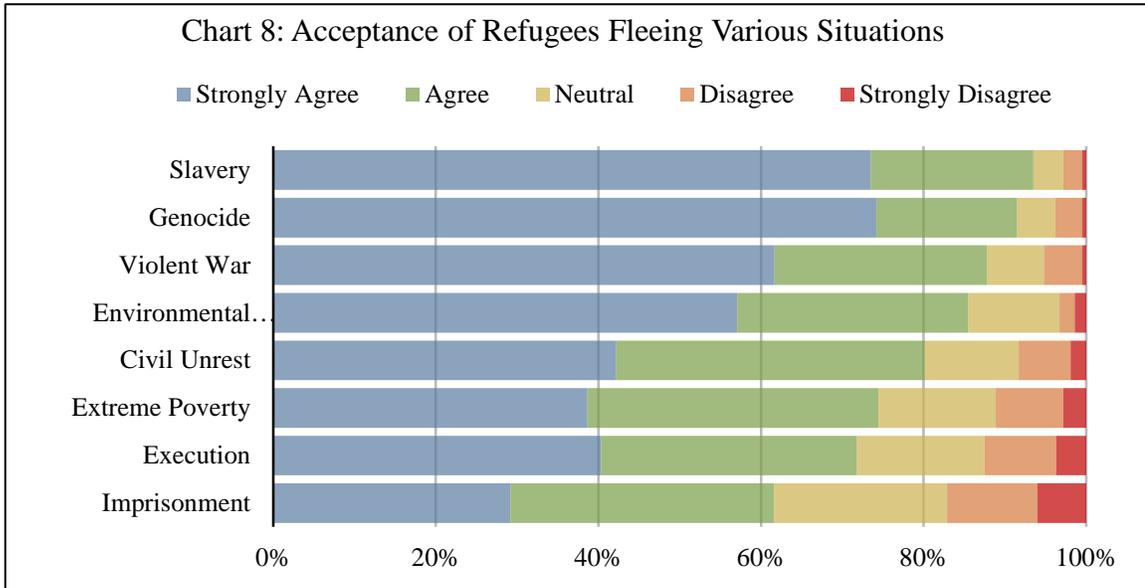
(gender, political, racial, and religious) should be accepted as refugees in the United States. Respondents were most likely to accept racial persecution refugees ( $M = 1.55$ ), followed closely by religious persecution refugees ( $M = 1.60$ ). Respondents were significantly less likely to accept gender-persecuted refugees ( $M = 1.80$ ) than either racially persecuted refugees ( $MD = 0.255$ ) or religiously persecution refugees ( $MD = 0.198$ ). Respondents were also significantly less likely to accept politically persecuted refugees ( $M = 1.84$ ) than racially persecuted refugees ( $MD = 0.292$ ) and religiously persecuted refugees ( $MD = 0.236$ ). However, ultimately most respondents agreed that all listed forms of persecuted refugees should be accepted into the United States.



### **Types of Situation**

Respondents were also extremely accepting of refugees fleeing other situations. Most situational variables confronting refugees were accepted by more than 75% or more of respondents (see Chart 8). Nevertheless, some situational variables were more accepted by respondents than others. Respondents were asked if people fleeing various situa-

tions should be accepted as refugees into the United States. These situations included



fleeing imprisonment and execution for a crime that is not illegal in the United States (ex. adultery), extreme poverty, environmental disasters, civil unrest, violent wars, genocide, and slavery.

Respondents were most likely to accept people fleeing slavery ( $M = 1.37$ ) and genocide ( $M = 1.38$ ) as refugees (see Table 2). People fleeing slavery and genocide had a significantly higher acceptance rate than any other situations. One possible reason for this extraordinary high acceptance rate is the popular sentiment in the United States that genocide and slavery are abhorrent and intolerable on a moral level, generally without exception.

Respondents were next most likely to accept people fleeing violent wars ( $M = 1.56$ ) and environmental disasters ( $M = 1.62$ ) as refugees. People fleeing violent wars and environmental disasters were significantly more likely to be accepted as refugees than people fleeing the remaining four situations. Respondents' acceptance of these situ-

ational variables could be influenced by the perceived level of danger these types of refugees face.

Respondents were significantly less likely to accept people fleeing civil unrest (M = 1.90), extreme poverty (M = 2.01), and execution for a crime not illegal in the United States (M = 2.05) compared to the other situations listed above. However, respondents were least likely to accept people fleeing imprisonment for a crime not illegal in the United States (M = 2.33) than any other situation presented in the survey. People fleeing imprisonment for a crime that would be legal in the United States had significantly lower acceptance rates than any other situation.

Table 2: Mean Differences Between Acceptance of Refugees from Various Situations

	Slavery	Genocide	War	Disaster	Unrest	Poverty	Executed	Prison
Slavery		-0.014	-0.195*	-0.257*	-0.529*	-0.643*	-0.681*	-0.962*
Genocide	0.014		-0.181*	-0.243*	-0.514*	-0.629*	-0.667*	-0.948*
War	0.195*	0.181*		-0.062	-0.333*	-0.448*	-0.486*	-0.767*
Disaster	0.257*	0.243*	0.062		-0.271*	-0.386*	-0.424*	-0.705
Unrest	0.529*	0.514*	0.333*	0.271*		-0.114	-0.152	-0.433*
Poverty	0.643*	0.629*	0.448*	0.386*	0.114		-0.038	-0.319*
Executed	0.681*	0.667*	0.486*	0.424*	0.152	0.038		0.281*
Prison	0.962*	0.948*	0.767*	0.705*	0.433*	0.319*	0.281*	

\* Significant Difference, p=.05

Ultimately, different situational variables were related to respondents' different acceptance rates for the refugees. However, even refugees fleeing the least accepted variable (imprisonment for a crime legal in the United States) were still accepted by more than 50% of respondents.

## **VI: RESPONDENT VARIABLES**

In this chapter, I examine how respondent variables are related to respondents' attitudes toward increasing the number of refugees allowed into the United States. The survey asked for respondents' demographic variables (ex., gender, religion, race or ethnicity, hometown; see Appendix I for the full list of demographic questions and coding). Respondents were also asked how much they agree or disagree that the number of refugees allowed into the United States should be increased based on a Likert scale with 1 indicating "strongly agree" and 5 indicating "strongly disagreed." Thus, lower numbers mean that the respondent felt more favorable toward increasing the number of refugees allowed into the United States. The respondents from all demographic backgrounds generally either agreed that the number of refugees should be increased or they were neutral on the topic. However, some respondent demographic groups were more accepting of increasing the number of refugees than other demographic groups, which I explore in the following section.

### **Respondent Variables**

In order to measure how respondent variables affected their acceptance of refugees into the United States, respondents were asked if the number of refugees allowed into the United States should be increased. A large majority of respondents had surprisingly accepting attitudes toward increasing the number of refugees in the United States. In addition, most respondent demographic variables were not significantly related to respondents' attitudes toward increasing the number of refugees in the United States. However, several demographic variables related to the respondent were significantly re-

lated to respondents' attitudes on the topic. These respondent variables included region of hometown, the number of refugees they had met, political orientation, and religion.

Respondents' hometown was significantly related to attitudes toward the topic. Surprisingly, respondents from Mississippi were more likely to agree that the United States should allow more refugees into the country ( $M = 2.73$ ) than respondents from the United States but outside of the Southeast. This finding may seem counterintuitive given that Mississippi and the Southeast in general is a politically conservative region of the United States, and political conservatism tends to be popularly associated with stricter immigration policies. One possible reason for this significantly higher acceptance by Mississippi natives, however, could be related to the relatively low number of refugees in Mississippi, allowing natives of Mississippi to believe that the number of refugees in the United States is extremely low and that a few more refugees would not challenge the current status quo.

Respondents' attitudes toward increasing the number of refugees was also affected by the number of refugees that the respondents had met. One surprising finding was that respondents who had never met a refugee were more likely to agree that more refugees should be allowed into the countries ( $M = 2.71$ ) than respondents who had met five or more refugees ( $M = 3.30$ ). One possible reason for this interesting finding is that respondents who have actually met numerous refugees may be more likely to view the refugee population as large and therefore too much of a burden to admit to the United States or a threat to the current status quo if they were to be. It could also be the case that knowing actual refugees may normalize how natives tend to view refugees: rather than being

rare or urgent cases in need of crisis assistance, they may be more likely to be seen as regular people like the rest of the population.

Unsurprisingly, political orientation variables were also related to respondents' attitudes on the topic. Respondents who identified as "very liberal" were significantly more likely to agree that more refugees should be given asylum in the United States ( $M = 2.00$ ) than very conservative respondents ( $M = 3.36$ ). Perhaps connected to political orientation, religion was another respondent variable significantly related toward attitudes on allowing refugees into the United States. Respondents who stated that they did not have a religion were more likely to accept increasing the number of refugees in the United States ( $M = 2.30$ ) than respondents who stated that they were Christians ( $M = 2.89$ ). This difference in acceptance rates based on respondents' religion may be related to Christians possibly being more politically conservative on average compared to those who claim no religion.

While respondents' demographic variables were occasionally related to their attitudes toward refugees, not all demographic variables were significant. In regard to respondents' attitudes toward increasing the number of refugees, respondents' race or ethnicity, gender, political party, major, and religious-service attendance were not significantly related. In addition, the number of immigrant family members and friends respondents' have as well as how many times they have been outside of the United States, were also not significantly related to their attitudes towards increasing the number of refugees. Ultimately, the majority of respondents were accepting of refugees, despite their different variables.

## VII: CONCLUSION

Nearly fifty-million people are currently refugees in the world and have either received or need asylum in another country (UNHCR 2012). Previous research studies have found that people's attitudes toward refugees entering their country can be affected by two factors: First, people's attitudes toward refugees can be affected by the refugees' variables. Second, people's demographic variables can also affect their attitudes toward refugees.

While many studies have been conducted on this topic in other countries, few research studies on this have been conducted in the United States. This research study was conducted with the purpose of learning how a subgroup of residents in the United States, college students in a southeastern university in particular, defined the word refugees and if respondents' variables and refugees' variables are significantly related toward respondents' attitudes toward refugees.

Refugee variables were significantly related to respondents' attitudes toward refugees in several situations. For example, with refugee gender variables, respondents were more accepting of female refugees fleeing sex trafficking, forced marriage, and genital mutilation than male refugees. Respondents were also less accepting of refugees fleeing LGBT persecution than refugees fleeing an unspecified form of gender persecution.

Other refugee variables that were significantly related to respondents' attitudes included religion and region. Respondents were accepting of Jewish refugees and refugees from Asia than any other religious or regional refugee.

Respondents were also included by refugee variables based on the refugees' situation. Refugees fleeing racial and religious persecution were generally more accepted than refugees fleeing gender and political persecution. In addition, respondents were more likely to accept refugees fleeing situations such as genocide and slavery than situations like execution or imprisonment for a crime that is not illegal in the United States.

Respondents' attitudes toward refugees were not only affected by refugee variables, but also by some of the respondents' variables. Very liberal respondents were more likely to agree that the United States should increase its acceptance of refugees than very conservative respondents. In addition, respondents who identified as not having a religion were also more accepting of increasing refugee acceptance in the United States than respondents who identified as Christian.

Surprisingly, respondents from Mississippi were more accepting of increasing refugee numbers than respondents from hometowns outside of the Southeast United States. In addition, respondents who had met five or more refugees were much less likely to agree that the United States should allow more refugees into the United States than respondents who had never met a refugee.

Ultimately, while not all refugee and respondent variables were significantly related to respondents' attitudes toward refugees, some refugee and respondent variables were related to respondents' acceptance of refugees in the United States. Because of the potential impact people's attitudes toward refugees can have on refugee policies, it is important to understand the variables that affect those attitudes (Verkuyten 2004).

This research project had several limitations. First, the research sample was not randomly selected. Second, the research respondents were all from a university in the southeastern United States. This prevents the study results from being generalized to other populations. Future research should be conducted in United States to gain additional insight into people's attitudes toward refugees.

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## Appendix I: Survey Questionnaire and Coding

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Survey Question</i>	<i>Coding</i>
Definition of Refugees	<p>Please use the following options and the additional writing space to describe how you personally would define the word “refugee.” Please check all that apply:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A person who flees their country to escape death</li> <li>- A person who flees their country to escape civil unrest and violence</li> <li>- A person who flees their country to escape torture</li> <li>- A person who flees their country to escape persecution (ex. political, religious, racial, gender)</li> <li>- A person who flees their country to escape prison</li> <li>- A person who flees their country to escape economic poverty</li> <li>- A person who flees their country to escape environmental disasters (ex. droughts, floods, earthquakes)</li> <li>- A person who flees their country to escape a forced marriage</li> <li>- A person who flees their country to escape sex trafficking</li> <li>- Other</li> </ul>	<p>0: No 1: Yes</p>
Estimate of # of refugees	<p>What would be your best guess for how many people in the world are currently refugees (people forced to leave their native home or country for safety reasons)?</p>	<p>1: 0-9,999 2: 10,000-999,999 3: 1,000,000-19,999,999 4: 20,000,000-39,999,999 5: 40,000,000-59,999,999</p>
Estimate of # of refugees allowed into the US	<p>Every year the United States government decides how many refugees to allow into the United States. What would be your best guess for how many refugees the United States government plans to allow into the United States in 2014?</p>	<p>1: 0 – 999 2: 1,000 - 9,999 3: 10,000 - 24,999 4: 25,000 - 49,999 5: 50,000 - 74,999 6: 75,000 - 99,999</p>
Gender	<p>A girl or woman fleeing persecution based on her gender</p>	<p>1: Strongly Agree 2: Agree 3: Neutral 4: Disagree 5: Strongly Disagree</p>
Gender	<p>A girl or woman unable to have any paid job outside of her home because of her gender</p>	<p>"</p>
Gender	<p>A girl unable to attend elementary school because of her gender</p>	<p>"</p>
Gender	<p>A girl or woman fleeing sex trafficking</p>	<p>"</p>

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Survey Question</i>	<i>Coding</i>
Gender	A girl or woman fleeing forced marriage	"
Gender	A girl or woman fleeing the mandatory cutting or mutilation of her genitals	"
Gender	A boy or man fleeing persecution based on his gender	"
Gender	A boy or man unable to have any paid job outside of his home because of his gender	"
Gender	A boy unable to attend elementary school because of his gender	"
Gender	A boy or man fleeing sex trafficking	"
Gender	A boy or man fleeing forced marriage	"
Gender	A boy or man fleeing the mandatory cutting or mutilation of his genitals	"
Gender	A person fleeing persecution for being gay or lesbian	"
Gender	A person fleeing execution for being gay or lesbian	"
Continent	A person fleeing a deadly war in their home country in Asia	"
Continent	A person fleeing a deadly war in their home country in South America	"
Continent	A person fleeing a deadly war in their home country in Africa	"
Continent	A person fleeing a deadly war in their home country in the Middle East	"
Continent	A person fleeing a deadly war in their home country in Europe	"
Religion	A Buddhist fleeing religious persecution	"
Religion	A Jew fleeing religious persecution	"
Religion	A Hindu fleeing religious persecution	"
Religion	A Muslim fleeing religious persecution	"
Religion	A Christian fleeing religious persecution	"
Religion	An Atheist fleeing religious persecution	"
Situation	A person fleeing racial persecution	"
Criminal Punishment	A person facing imprisonment for a crime that is not illegal in the United States (ex. adultery, owning a religious book)	"

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Survey Question</i>	<i>Coding</i>
Criminal Punishment	A person facing the death penalty for a crime that is not illegal in the United States (ex. adultery, owning a religious book)	"
Situation	A person fleeing extreme poverty	"
Situation	A person fleeing an environmental disaster	"
Situation	A person fleeing religious persecution	"
Situation	A person fleeing civil unrest	"
Situation	A person fleeing a violent war	"
Situation	A person fleeing genocide	"
Situation	A person fleeing slavery	"
Situation	A person fleeing political persecution	"
Policies	Refugees should be given the same social services given to other legal residents of the United States, such as education and healthcare.	1: Strongly Agree 2: Agree 3: Neutral 4: Disagree 5: Strongly Disagree
Policies	Refugees should be given the chance to find jobs and work.	"
Policies	The United States should spend less money caring for and supporting refugees.	"
Policies	The United States should focus on protecting its own interests and not worry about the interests of international refugees	"
Policies	The number of refugees allowed into the United States should be increased	"
Beliefs	Refugees try to exploit (take advantage of) the United States and its goodwill	"
Beliefs	Refugees are willing to cheat to get their way into the United States	"
Beliefs	Refugees increase taxes for citizens of the United States	"
Beliefs	Refugees are a threat to the United States and its citizens	"
Beliefs	Refugees will destroy the culture and values of the United States	"

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Survey Question</i>	<i>Coding</i>
Beliefs	Refugees in the United States increase Americans' awareness of other cultures and world issues	"
Classification	What is your classification?	1: Freshman (1) 2: Sophomore (2) 3: Junior (3) 4: Senior (+4) 5: Graduate Student
Major	In what College is your major? (If undeclared, choose the college you are most likely to pick a major from.)	1: Arts & Letters 2: Business 3: Education & Psych. 4: Health 5: Nursing 6: Science & Technology
Hometown	Which region best describes your "hometown" or the region in which you were raised?	1: Mississippi 2: Southeast US 3: US 4: Outside of the US
International Experience	How many times have you traveled outside of the United States?	1: 0 2: 1-2 3: 3-4 4: 5 or more
International Experience	How many refugees (people forced to flee their native country or home) have you ever personally met?	"
International Experience	How many of your personal friends are immigrants or were born in a country other than the United States?	"
International Experience	How many of your family members are immigrants or were born in a country other than the United States?	"
Race	What is your race or ethnicity? - African American or Black	1: Yes
Race	What is your race or ethnicity? - Asian American or Asian	"
Race	What is your race or ethnicity? - Caucasian or White	"
Race	What is your race or ethnicity? - Hispanic or Latino American	"
Race	What is your race or ethnicity? - Middle Eastern American	"
Race	What is your race or ethnicity? - Other	"

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Survey Question</i>	<i>Coding</i>
Gender	What is your gender?	1: Male 2: Female 3: Other
Religion	What is your religious identity, if any?	1: Christian 2: Atheist 3: Muslim 4: Buddhist 5: Hindu 6: Jewish 7: None 8: Other
Religion	Generally, how often do you attend religious services? Would you say...	1: Less than once a year 2: Once to several times a year 3: One to three times a month 4: Once a week 5: More than once a week
Politics	Politically, do you consider yourself to be...	1: Very conservative 2: Somewhat conservative 3: Middle of the road 4: Somewhat liberal 5: Very liberal
Politics	What is your political party?	1: Democrat 2: Republican 3: Independent 4: None 5: Other
Financial	Are you eligible for need-based financial aid (ex. Pell Grant)?	1: Yes, and I receive financial aid. 2: Yes, but I do not receive financial aid. 3: No, I am not eligible. 4: I do not know if I am eligible.

## Appendix II: Survey Sample Demographics

<i>Survey Question: Participant Demographics</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	54	26.0%
Female	153	73.6%
Other	1	0.5%
<b>Hometown</b>		
Mississippi, US	137	65.2%
Southeast, US	48	22.9%
US (Outside of the Southeast)	19	9.0%
Outside of the US	6	2.9%
<b>Classification</b>		
Freshman (1st Year)	33	15.7%
Sophomore (2nd Year)	80	38.1%
Junior (3rd Year)	45	21.4%
Senior (4th Year or Above)	47	22.4%
Graduate Student	5	2.4%
<b>Major's College</b>		
Arts and Letters	71	33.8%
Business	24	11.4%
Education and Psychology	25	11.9%
Health	19	9.0%
Nursing	32	15.2%
Science and Technology	39	18.6%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
African American/Black	48	23%
Asian	5	2.4%
Caucasian/White	134	64.1%
Native American/Alaskan Native	1	0.5%
Hispanic/Latino	1	0.5%
Middle Eastern	1	0.5%
Multiple	19	9.1%
<b>Religion</b>		
Christian	162	77.5%
Atheist	9	4.3%

<i>Survey Question: Participant Demographics</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Muslim	3	1.4%
Buddhist	4	1.9%
Jewish	3	1.4%
None	20	9.6%
Other	8	3.8%
<b>Attend Religious Services</b>		
Less than once a year	42	20.0%
Once to several times a year	50	23.8%
One to three times a month	43	20.5%
Once a week	45	21.4%
More than once a week	30	14.3%
<b>Political Party</b>		
Democrat	48	23.0%
Republican	71	34.0%
Independent	27	12.9%
None	56	26.8%
Other	7	3.3%
<b>Political Orientation</b>		
Very Conservative	14	6.5%
Conservative	60	27.8%
Middle of the Road	83	38.4%
Liberal	38	17.6%
Very Liberal	15	6.9%
<b>Eligible for Need-Based Financial Aid</b>		
Yes, and receive financial aid	101	48.1%
Yes, but do not receive financial aid	11	5.2%
Not eligible	70	33.3%
Do not know	19	9.0%
Prefer not to answer	9	4.3%

## Appendix III: Institutional Review Board Approval



### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001

Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | [www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board](http://www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board)

### NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.  
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 14090205

PROJECT TITLE: Attitudes toward Refugees Entering the United States

PROJECT TYPE: New Project

RESEARCHER(S): Sarah Bullard

COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Arts and Letters

DEPARTMENT: Anthropology and Sociology

FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Exempt Review Approval

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 09/09/2014 to 09/08/2015

**Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.**  
**Institutional Review Board**