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INTRODUCTION

A team of University of Arizona researchers studied mobility challenges refugees in Tucson, Arizona experience after their resettlement. Using qualitative and quantitative data collected from interviews and survey data, the study reveals that mobility shapes the ways refugees foster social connections, attain employment and access educational opportunities. Barriers to mobility can thus negatively impact refugees' well-being in post resettlement. A UA study of refugee mobility documented mobility challenges, while also revealing the resilience of the refugee community in navigating the intersectional challenges they confront related to their mobility.

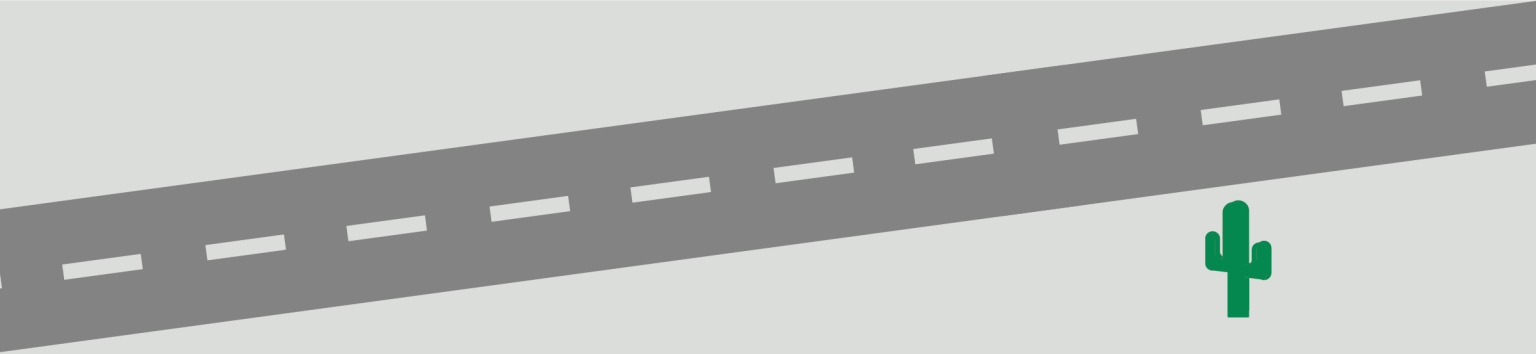


REFUGEES IN TUCSON, ARIZONA

As one of the top refugee-resettling states, Arizona has hosted refugees from 102 countries. Tucson is one of the two main cities where refugees are resettled in Arizona (Phoenix is the other city). As of 2020, at least seventeen Tucson-based organizations directly provide services to resettled refugees, including technical skills and vocational training.

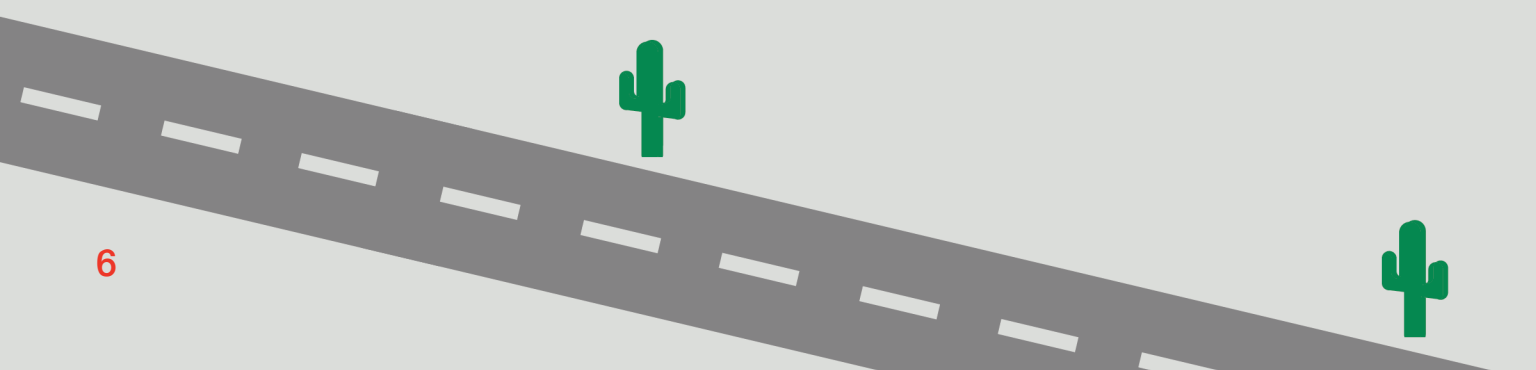




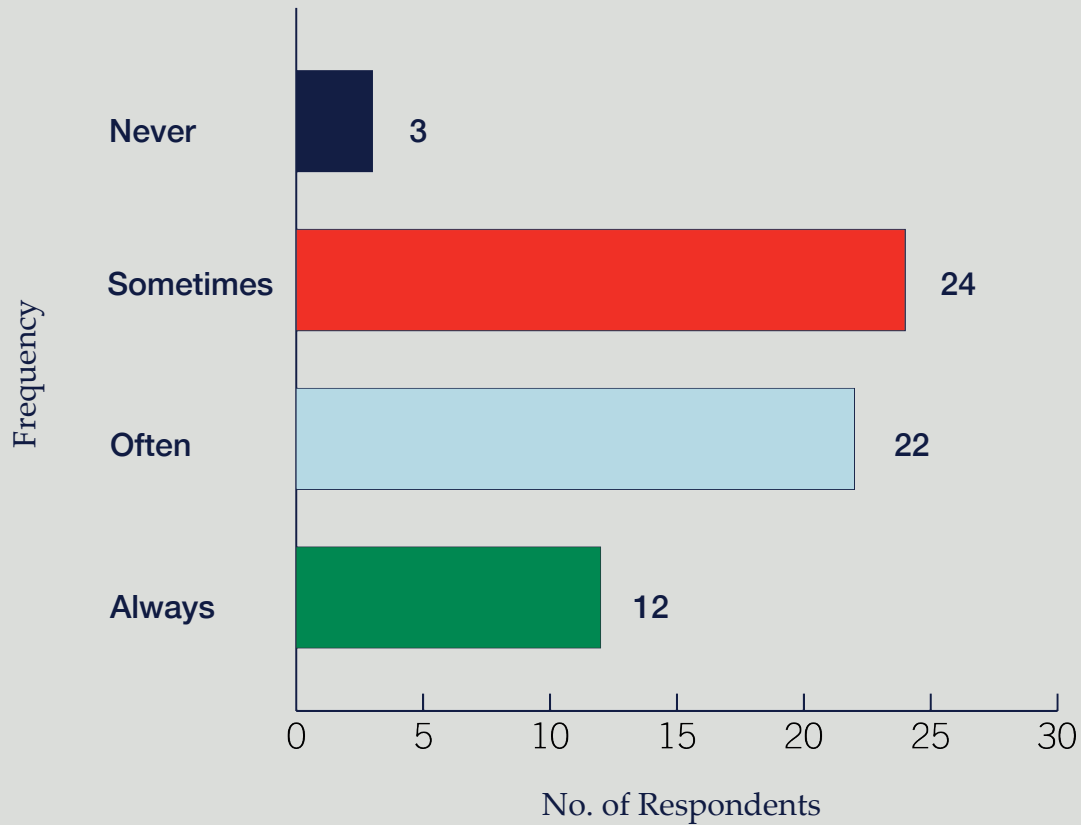


MOBILITY AND TRANSPORTATION

Transportation mobility is a basic need. Tucson is the second-largest city in Arizona with a large metropolitan population of 1.04 million people. In a city spread over 238 square miles, single-occupancy vehicle use represents nearly 75% of all commuting trips. But most refugees arrive in Tucson with no access to a personal vehicle.



Survey Respondent's Reported Impacts to Well-Being Attributed to Mobility-Related Challenges







MOBILITY AND PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION



The city's most extensive public transportation system is Sun Tran. It covers 296 square miles with 29 fixed routes and 12 express routes. Most buses are on 30-minute schedules. An above-ground train system - the Sun Link Modern Streetcar - travels a mere 4-mile route primarily through non-residential districts in the city's downtown area.

Most refugees rely on the Sun Tran public bus system at least initially upon arriving in Tucson. Refugee-resettling agencies provide bus passes and help them to get acquainted with the service. For most refugees, relying on the bus system is only temporary as they aspire to get their own private vehicle.

Refugees face an array of barriers to accessing and navigating the public transportation system. Difficulties associated with using Tucson's bus system included expensive bus fares, language barriers, bus-route confusion, limited routes and inconsistent bus arrival times. Additionally, COVID-19 health and safety concerns, and harassment/discrimination received from other bus users were also noted by project participants.

"Sometimes people are not patient, and many people are not understanding. People are disrespectful on the bus. The language barriers are big and communicating that you need one more quarter might take time."



— MZ, (Ethiopia)





MOBILITY AND WELL-BEING

Over (95.0%) survey respondents reported that their sense of well-being is impacted by transportation and mobility-related challenges. Both survey and interview findings suggest that people who often use public transportation as a primary mode of transportation experience negative impacts to their sense of well-being more often than those who always or often use other modes of transit.

Refugees of different backgrounds report experiencing anger as the strongest feeling among different groups. Other common feelings related to mobility challenges include feelings of frustration, sadness, and a longing for their homeland.

"The first time I used the bus, I realized that I was wasting my time. That was time that I could be using for crochet. I wasted time in refugee camp, and I didn't want to waste any more time."

— Josepha Ntakirutimana, (Rwanda)









ALTERNATIVE MODES OF TRANSPORTATION

Some refugees walk around to get to places to avoid using public transportation. However, Tucson is not particularly easy or safe to navigate by a non-vehicular transportation mode. For example, Arizona had a pedestrian fatality rate of 2.91 per 100,000 people in 2019, the 5th worst in the country. Tucson recorded 39 pedestrian deaths that same year. In addition, transit fare remains a barrier to refugees long after resettlement.

"Some people don't have money to take the bus. A lot of people just walk. When you go [on the bus] everyday it adds up."

—AM, (Somalia)





GENDER AND MOBILITY

Mobility-related challenges are gendered and experienced differently by men and women. Female refugees report that mobility barriers impact social, mental, and physical well-being more than male survey takers. Male refugees report that challenges to mobility impact their economic well-being more than female participants. In a household with two adult partners, it is more common for men to learn to drive first and, in many cases, remain the sole driver of the family. However, there was also a generational dimension we observed in terms of gender disparity. Younger women tended to be more willing to take on driving earlier than their mothers. Constance from Congo said she could not wait to get her driver's license. She enjoys the freedom that comes with it.

"It's a whole process that we go through as a family and we bond through it."

— Constance, (Congo)









RESILIENCE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Despite the disparate challenges refugees experience related to their mobility, our US study also reveals the importance of social network and community support systems that are critical in mitigating different challenges individuals and families have encountered. Often refugees who have settled in Tucson take it upon themselves to support newly arriving refugees, especially those who come from the same country of origin or mutual social group. Some refugees use these networks to access transportation to essential destinations including places of employment, the grocery store, social events that provide a sense of belonging, and even to practice driving before testing for a driver's license. It is not uncommon for refugees to rely on their network capital instead of the formal transit system.





RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations from refugees in Tucson tended to be organized around the need for a public transportation system with more destinations, more buses, increased bus departure and arrival frequencies that is more navigable and intuitive for some of Tucson's newest residents. Refugee organizations and transit agencies occupy a unique space to help orient newly arrived refugees to the transportation system. Refugees made it clear that transit fare remains a barrier for them long after resettlement; the cost of public transportation could be alleviated by broader fare-free policies that are designed for easy access by refugees.

SunTran has offered free rides since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and fares will remain free until June 2022. A permanent fare-free transit would help alleviate transportation-related challenges refugees experience.







CONCLUSION

This report sheds light on the mobility of resettled refugees and their experiences with Tucson's geography and transportation options. Quantitative findings from a survey revealed barriers common to those experiencing transportation disadvantages. Qualitative data from interviews, however, augments those findings with rich, illustrative stories of cultural norms, trauma, and disparate impacts by gender that contextualize the intersectional lived reality of refugees. These lived experiences help identify common challenges and thus can be used to develop strategies and recommendations to improve the experience of Tucson refugees around mobility and transportation.



Our findings also reveal the intersectional nature of the refugee’s experience, hinting that past trauma associated with travel and transportation itself may result in unique barriers to accessing the transportation system. Poor transportation access may also result in additional erosion of mental health and well-being in a population that has been well documented to be at high risk. The intersectional needs of refugees are unique and warrant continued research.

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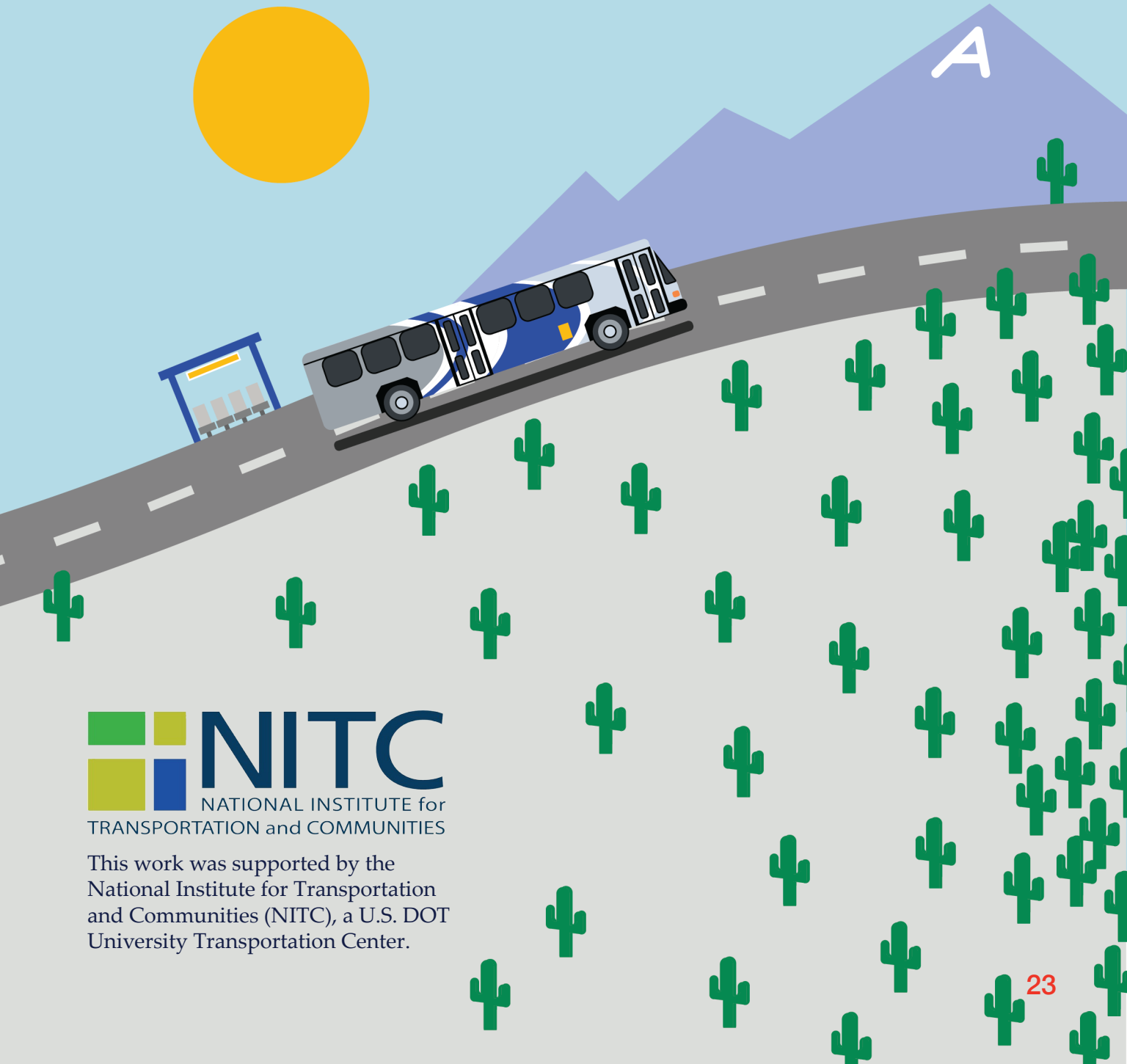
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ABOUT THE DESIGN

The refugee community within Tucson is frequently unheard. The cover of this publication depicts Tucson's major roads with quotes from our interviewees placed within. When we look into our community, we find many unique voices and stories.

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