

# Iceland's Refugee Resettlement System: A Model or an Outlier

## Sarah Dickson and Michelle Van Veen

### Background

Iceland, the Nordic island country located between the North American and European continents, is consistently ranked the most peaceful country in the world by the Global Peace Index, produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace.<sup>1</sup> Not only is Iceland praised for its lack of concrete violence, as it has not had a standing army since 1869, but it is also praised for its atmosphere of positive peace. Positive peace, as described by Galtung & Jacobsen, refers to the absence of structural violence in addition to the existence of supportive and peaceful systems and relationships.<sup>2</sup>

When a country is rated the most peaceful country in the world, it tends to be presented as an example for other countries to emulate. However, Iceland is home to many unique demographic and geographic conditions that allow for the existence of such positive peace. The sparsely populated island is home to an extremely homogeneous population, with 93.34% of residents having been born in Iceland.<sup>3</sup> Iceland's isolated location and island geography make the country a difficult destination for refugees, legally and illegally, who therefore often end up immigrating to more convenient locations in continental Europe. This proposal seeks to investigate if Iceland's refugee resettlement system can or should be seen as an example for other countries struggling with refugee resettlement.

### Rationale

Iceland, a country with a population of only 320,000, is currently responsible for 67 refugees, 216 asylum seekers, and 119 stateless persons for a total of 402 "people of concern" who making up less than one percent of the total population.<sup>4</sup> With the allowance of only 25 to 30 refugees per year, it is evident that Iceland remains strict about opening its borders.<sup>5</sup> Those who do manage to come to Iceland illegally face time in prison and probable deportation. Handling illegal refugees in this manner is controversial as the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees states that refugees should be exempt from penalties for forgery, because legal documentation is often infeasible and potentially dangerous to attain for refugees.<sup>6</sup> However, Iceland has worked its way around this policy by stating that refugees coming from an EU country are the responsibility of that country, and are therefore subject to deportation. This is significant as 99 percent of refugees come through EU countries prior to coming to Iceland.<sup>7</sup> With these types of legal policies in place, Iceland manages to keep its intake of refugees extremely low, which in turn contributes to the preservation of the homogeneity of the population.

However, those who do receive entry into Iceland as part of the few who make the quota each year under refugee status are welcomed into a very unique refugee resettlement system overseen by the Icelandic Red Cross and government municipalities.<sup>8</sup> They are immediately placed within a community, typically outside of the capitol city, Reykjavik, to help support the local fishing economy.<sup>9</sup> Refugee families are initially adopted by an Icelandic 'support family' to help them integrate into Icelandic society and learn the local language. Because the number of refugees is so small, Iceland is able to provide adequate housing, financial services, counseling, childhood education and language lessons to the resettled population.

### Research Questions

Because of its manageable size, Iceland's refugee placement program is extremely efficient, but also extremely unique. As a country that has been ranked as the most peaceful in the world, it is looked to as an example for other countries. In the case of dealing with refugees, a troublesome issue for many countries around the world, our research asks if Iceland's unique system can be seen as an example to others. We wish to analyze the complexity of attitudes towards integrating a diverse subpopulation into a very homogeneous state and study the implications of the emulating of the Icelandic system.

Furthermore, how does Iceland's homogeneity play into the answer of these questions? Does the Icelandic legal system surrounding refugees, particularly the strict limits on the number of refugees allowed into the country, constitute as a form of structural violence?

### Methodology

We propose to use the Davis grant to travel to Iceland and live in Reykjavik, the capital city where over 90% of the population of Iceland is located, for two months (June 1-July 31, 2014). Based in Reykjavik, we will

be centrally located to speak with institutions directly involved with the Icelandic refugee resettlement process. We have reached out to the Icelandic Red Cross and hope to meet with a representative of the organization in order to learn more local and specific details of the resettlement practices on the ground. In meeting with the Iceland Red Cross, we will specifically focus on learning more about the screening process in which refugees are selected to live in Iceland. From there, we will aim to learn more about the services provided to refugees once they have arrived in the country. By learning about the specific details of the resettlement system, we will gain insight into how the system is built to meet Iceland's unique needs which will help us to answer our research question about the adaptability and implementation of Iceland's system elsewhere.

In addition to researching the system itself, we will interview Icelanders living in areas populated by resettled refugees to hear how native people perceive the resettlement program. These interviews will be conducted with local storeowners, restaurant owners, and other local Icelanders who live in the Reykjavik area, where most of the refugees have resettled. These interviews will help us to understand how the local population is reacting to an increase, albeit small, of non-homogeneous residents, and if they are aware of the program at all. These perspectives will allow us to analyze the complexity of integrating a refugee population into an almost completely homogeneous society.

While these interviews will provide us with the bulk of our data, we plan to supplement this research with observations regarding the use of space in Reykjavik. We will focus on three specific areas and events. First, we will visit Reykjavik's fishing docks, where many refugees find work, and observe how refugees work among Icelandic nationals. Second, we will also observe the placement of non-dominant religious institutions, as the location and use of these spaces will provide insight into how refugees maintain a connection to their own national identities. Third, we will make observations about use of space, use of rhetoric, and immigrant participation during the Icelandic festival of Jónsmessa (Midsummer's night) on June 24. Jónsmessa is a festival deeply rooted in Icelandic identity and folklore, therefore it will be a prime opportunity to observe practices demonstrating Icelandic identity and observe if immigrants participate in the festival, and if so, how.

While our research data and analysis will culminate in a final report, we also plan to keep a public blog throughout our two months in Iceland in order to update readers on interviews, findings, and analysis throughout the project. This blog will help to keep our research on track, as well as provide us with an outlet to share our experiences and findings.

Both Michelle and Sarah have experience living abroad and conversing with people about the lived experiences of their local community. Michelle spent the Spring 2013 semester living in Kenya and worked at a hospice, providing care to terminally ill patients. She also recently wrote her thesis about her experience in Kenya in terms of the importance of ethical and self-reflective research. Sarah spent the Spring 2013 semester living in Tunisia and completed an independent study project based on field research and in-person interviews with Tunisian youth. Both Michelle and Sarah's experiences living and researching outside of the U.S. have prepared them with the skills required to successfully complete this field research-based project in Iceland.

### **Potential Obstacles**

The biggest potential obstacle to our research is gaining honest perceptions of the refugee program from native Icelanders. In order to deal with this obstacle, we plan to ask direct and specific rather than broad questions that do not threaten the interviewee or sound accusatory in any way. We will ask people questions that focus on their own experience in Iceland, with reference to refugees and immigrants, but not primarily focusing on the government's policies. In this way, our research will produce findings that are reflective of the population's view of identity in light of immigration and refugee policies, rather than focusing on the legal policies explicitly.

### **Potential Impact of Findings**

Our research has the potential to further an understanding of positive peace by looking at one of the most peaceful countries in the world with a critical lens. In a time when many Scandinavian countries, such as Sweden and Norway, are experiencing an influx of refugees and immigrants and struggling to accommodate them, our research will examine the possibility of replicating Iceland's refugee resettlement program. More broadly, our research will provide insight into how a homogeneous society deals with a small influx of diversity, and question if it's methods of dealing with this influx are peaceful, violent or replicable.