

# LINKING VOCATIONAL SERVICE TO EARLY EMPLOYMENT AMONG SOVIET REFUGEES

KATHRYN E. H. RACE

*Director of Research Grants and Sponsored Programs, Lutheran General Health System,  
Park Ridge, Illinois*

BLASE E. MASINI

*Doctoral Program, Department of Psychology, Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois  
and*

SUSAN SHEFFEY

*Director of Research, Jewish Vocational Service, Chicago, Illinois*

*Early employment of refugees from the former Soviet Union is related to gender, marital status, and age of the refugees, as well as ESL level and frequency and variety of vocational service received. Results of a stepwise, logistic regression analysis suggest that the frequency of contact with a job developer, age, and gender are predictors of early employment for this group.*

More than 120,000 Soviet Jews have resettled in the United States between 1988 and the end of 1991 (Bernick, 1992). Despite the fact that emigres from the former Soviet Union (FSU), primarily Jews, make up the largest refugee population to enter the United States in recent years, few studies have investigated their employment patterns (Gold, 1990). In a notable exception, Majka and Mullan (1992) found that age, number of dependents, English proficiency, and type of services accessible to refugees were related to employment patterns and retention. The inclusion of only a small sample of Soviet refugees in this study, however, makes it difficult to generalize these findings to a larger population.

The need to improve our understanding of the processes underlying employment, job retention, and job transition among refugees is acutely evidenced by the many, and sometimes contradictory, programmatic issues that resettlement agencies face. On the one hand, the ultimate goal of the voluntary resettlement agencies is to help the refugee realize his or her potential during the acculturation process. To this end, Schwamm, Greenstone, and Hoffman (1982) have emphasized English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, vocational training, job placement services, physical

and emotional health care services, and social adjustment services as necessary components of a refugee resettlement program. In contrast, federal refugee resettlement efforts focus on economic self-sufficiency and the early employment of new migrants as principal indicators of socioeconomic progress in adjusting to American society (Majka & Mullan, 1992). This focus is framed by federal policies that specify that concurrent goals in training and ESL instruction should not compete with early job placement (Chiswick, 1992).

The philosophical similarities and differences between volunteer and federal efforts notwithstanding, the role that research can play in adding to our knowledge of the refugee resettlement process is significant. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to investigate the relationship among select demographic characteristics, vocational service, and early job placement among Jewish refugees from the FSU. Particular attention is given to the type and nature of vocational services received by a select group of refugees and how these services are associated with job placement.

It is important to recognize that the vocational services that are the primary focus of this study are part of a larger refugee resettlement program administered under the

auspices of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago (JFMC). Numerous other resettlement services are provided, and many are used before or concurrently with vocational counseling services. Such services include routine medical examinations and tests and assignment to a resettlement case worker shortly after arrival. This case worker, a staff member of the Jewish Family and Community Service (JFCS), works individually with refugees to develop, review, and implement a comprehensive service plan and monitors a refugee's progress during the first 4 to 6 months of his or her residency in the United States. The vocational plan, developed in concert with the refugee and a member of the JVS staff, is part of this larger comprehensive service plan. Vocational service, however, can and often does extend beyond these early months of residency. It is this vocational service and its link to early employment that is the primary focus of this exploratory effort.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

The sample for this study consisted of 379 Jewish refugees from the FSU who resettled in the Metropolitan Chicago area. These refugees were employable adults under the age of 55 whose first visit to Jewish Vocational Service (JVS) Chicago occurred between October 1 and December 31, 1991.

### **Overview of Vocational Services**

Refugees in this sample received individualized vocational service through JVS. This service varied on a case-by-case basis by type, frequency, and variety. There were, however, common elements to this service. All new Soviet emigres participated in a 1½ day community orientation program, during which all refugees in this sample were interviewed by a vocational counselor in an initial session that took about 1 hour to complete. After this initial session, their English as a Second Language (ESL) level

was evaluated. These refugees then participated in a 1½ hour employment orientation session conducted in a group setting.

Within 15 days to one month of the initial orientation, each refugee in this sample was transferred to a JVS job placement facility and met with a professional who would become his or her primary counselor. This first visit generally lasted between 1 and 1½ hours. After this, service varied considerably and often included subsequent face-to-face meetings with the primary counselor, group activities, and individual meetings with job developers whose focus was developing placements for specific job openings. Client contact with a primary counselor could be initiated by either the client or the counselor, with both often occurring during the course of service; contact with a job developer, however, was always initiated by the counselor.

An extensive job search seminar was among the major group activities offered on a volunteer basis to these refugees. This job search seminar was conducted for 4 hours a day, across 5 days, and culminated in mock interviews. During this seminar, selected interviews were videotaped and then viewed and critiqued by the group. Clients also conducted mock telephone calls to employers to practice job interview and appointment skills. Other group services included seminars tailored to specific professions (e.g., engineers, data processing, and accountants), as well as prescreening interviews for specific job positions.

Support services also included follow-up telephone calls to clients, employers, or others on a client's behalf; resume writing, and follow-up calls regarding 30- and 90-day job retention.

### **English as a Second Language**

To evaluate their initial English proficiency, the Basic English Skills Test (BEST) was administered to refugees at intake as more fully described elsewhere (Race & Masini, 1994).

The purpose of the English as a Second

Language (ESL) program is to develop refugees' English language skills so that they can be placed in jobs within their chosen fields. To this end, the program offered eight levels of ESL/General Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL), as well as VESL classes in specialized fields, such as Business/Accounting VESL. The ESL classes develop listening and speaking skills needed for survival and social interaction. General VESL classes focus on the development of language skills necessary to obtain and retain a job. Specific VESL classes teach the language needed for work-related communication within a specific field (Kessler, unpublished).

Refugees typically entered the ESL program within a few weeks of arrival in the United States and were assigned classes on the basis of their BEST scores. Refugees tested at a zero level were enrolled in ESL/General VESL classes for 4 hours a day, 4 days a week. Students in Levels 1 through 6 spent 4 hours a day in class at the appropriate level of English for oral communication and 2 hours in a multilevel, specialized VESL class. Level 7 students received advanced communications as well as general VESL class instruction (Kessler, unpublished).

#### **Study Design**

Vocational service and employment experience was tracked from October 1, 1991 through December 31, 1992, representing a follow-up period of 12 months per refugee. Frequency of service was defined as the number of times a client received service, with each event counted as one. Similarly, variety of service was defined simply as the frequency of different vocational services received by a client. For example, a client who participated in individual counseling and a group activity would be given a score of 2; if in addition, he or she met with a job developer a score of 3 would be given. The maximum value for variety of service was 5, with a typical range of between 2 and 3.

#### **RESULTS**

All differences reported below are statistically significant, although for the sake of brevity the particular statistical technique used and probability level are not indicated. A more detailed discussion of the data analyses and results of this study is presented by Race and Masini (1994).

Refugees in this study ranged in age from 15 to 54, with an average age of 36. A total of 198 (52 percent) were male and 181 (48 percent) were female. Regarding education, 135 (36 percent) were college graduates and an additional 139 (37 percent) had some college experience. At the time of their first visit, 294 (78 percent) refugees were subjectively evaluated by experienced vocational counselors as "difficult to place" or "extremely difficult to place."

At the end of the 12-month period, a total of 167 (44 percent) refugees were known to be employed versus 212 (56 percent) who were not known to be employed. Of those employed, the most common areas of employment sought were, in order, professional, management, or technical occupations; machine trades and benchwork occupations; and clerical, sales, and service occupations. In terms of the type of jobs that were actually obtained, the order of these occupational areas was reversed, with jobs most frequently obtained in clerical, sales, and service occupations; followed by machine trades and benchwork occupations; and then, professional, management, and technical areas. Although not all occupations in the FSU have a one-to-one counterpart in the United States, first jobs in the professional, management, and technical occupations seemed to be more difficult for these refugees to obtain.

#### **ESL**

Despite the fact that these refugees represented a relatively well-educated group, most spoke little English at the time of their arrival in the United States. A total of 176 refugees (46%) tested at an ESL level of zero at intake.

Information on ESL progress was available for only 254 of the 379 refugees included in this study. Analyses of initial ESL levels showed that English proficiency was related to gender, age, and prior educational levels. Initially males were more proficient than females, and younger refugees (25 years and younger) tested at higher ESL levels. Additionally, previous education correlated positively with better English skills.

Upon completion of classes, a significant shift in English competency was evident; 56% attained an ESL level of 5 or greater. Refugees spent an average of 3.7 months attending ESL classes. The number of months of ESL attendance was related to ESL level at intake, such that the lower the initial ESL level, the more months in attendance. Also, the more months in attendance, the greater the number of ESL levels that students advanced.

#### **Frequency and Variety of Vocational Service**

Analysis of select demographic characteristics and vocational services received by refugees suggested that the frequency and variety of service received were also related to gender. Males tended to receive more service compared to females, and this service tended to be more varied. Further analysis showed that this finding was related to marital status. No difference in the frequency or variety of service for single males and females was found, but marked and statistically significant differences were noted for married refugees. Married males received more service compared to married females, and this service was more varied for married males.

The vocational service received by refugees was of three general types: individual counseling, group activities, and contact with job developers. With all three types, gender differences seemed to be mediated by marital status. That is, gender-specific service differences were not evident for single male and female refugees, but statis-

tically significant differences persisted for married males and females regarding contact with a primary counselor, involvement in group counseling, and frequency of contact with a job developer.

Frequency and variety of vocational service were also related to prior level of education. Refugees with the equivalent of a high school diploma sought service less frequently and received less varied service than college graduates.

Higher English proficiency was related to more frequent service. This relationship held for both initial levels of ESL and highest level of ESL attained. In addition, ESL was related to the variety of service; that is, clients with lower initial ESL levels received or sought out less varied vocational services. This relationship also held when variety of service and highest level of ESL level attained were compared.

Neither age nor assessed placeability at intake by their primary counselor was related to the frequency or variety of vocational services, and none of the other demographic characteristics selected for investigation in this study was statistically related to specific types of vocational service.

#### **Employment**

Factors related to early employment were analyzed using a stepwise, logistic regression model. The dependent variable for this model was "employed (ever worked)" versus "not employed," and the independent variables were age, gender, marital status, placeability at intake, frequency of service, frequency of contact with a job developer, and variety of service.

Based on this analysis, three variables were identified as predictors of early employment among these refugees. The frequency with which refugees met with a job developer was the first variable selected and was positively related to job placement ( $R = .15$ ). This finding suggests that, of all the service variables considered, frequency of contact with a job developer was most able to discriminate between those refugees who

were placed in early employment and those who were not. Age and gender were also significantly related to early employment, with age negatively correlated with early employment ( $R = .11$ ), and employment more likely for males ( $R = .09$ ).

Further descriptive analyses indicated that more males than females were placed in early employment. This finding was again related to marital status, with no difference in employment found for single males and females. In contrast, married males were more likely to obtain jobs than their female counterparts, and more females in this sample were married as compared to males.

Age was also related to early placement, with fewer placements occurring for refugees in the 51 to 54 age group. This relationship persisted when both age and gender were analyzed, but difficulty in placement for older refugees was slightly more pronounced for male refugees. Also noteworthy, placements were greater for refugees in the 31 to 35 age group. Further inspection suggests that this finding was slightly more pronounced for female refugees in this age group. That is, a greater number of females in this age group were employed than males. Finally, the initial assessment of a refugee's placeability and level of education were not related to early

placement.

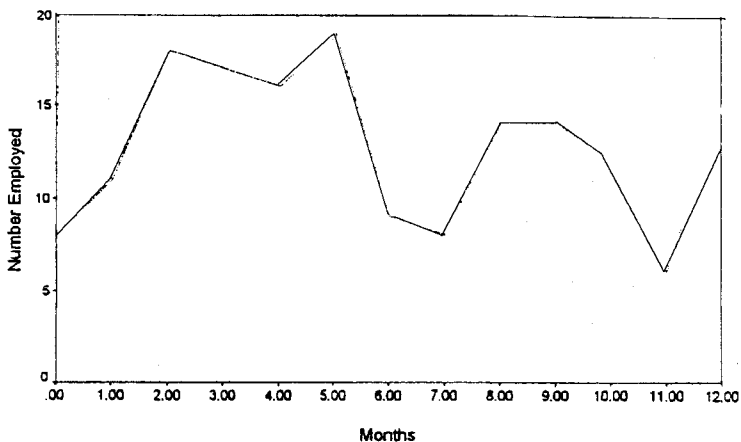
Refugees with an initial ESL level of 4 or greater were more likely to be placed in early employment than their less proficient-in-English counterparts. This difference persisted when the highest ESL level attained was compared to employment patterns as well. That is, those refugees with an ESL level of 6 and 7 were more likely to be placed in employment than those less proficient in English.

Employed refugees tended to receive more frequent vocational services within this 12-month period of study. Similarly, refugees who received diverse vocational service were more likely to be placed in early employment as compared with those clients receiving less varied services. Closer inspection of the three main service categories also indicated significant relationships with early employment. That is, more frequent contact with a primary group counselor, increased involvement in group activities, and increased frequency with which the refugee met with a job developer were statistically associated with early job placement.

### Retention

Figure 1 shows the lag time from the first visit with the refugee's primary counselor to the starting date of the first job. Of the 167

*Figure 1. Lag Time from Initial Interview with Primary Counselor to Date of First Employment*



refugees placed in competitive employment during this study period, 141 (84%) were still on the same job after 30 days. Of the 26 who did not retain their first job for this 30-day period, 3 were placed in employment late enough in the study that there may not have been sufficient time for a second placement to have occurred.

After 90 days, the number of employed refugees had dropped to 105 or 63%. Of the 36 refugees who did not retain their first job for this 90-day period, 4 obtained jobs late enough in the study period that there was not sufficient time for the full follow-up period to have elapsed. An additional five went on to obtain at least a second job before the end of this 12-month period, and ten others got their first job late enough during the study that there may not have been sufficient time for a second placement to have occurred.

In sum, although there was some fluctuation in employment for those refugees in the ever-worked category, job retention was shown to be high for this sample group. The small number of refugees failing to meet the 30-day and 90-day retention criteria prevented any detailed descriptive analyses of differences between those who had and had not retained their first job.

### DISCUSSION

In support of past research, these findings suggest that gender and age are demographic variables fundamental to employment and that the importance of these variables holds for employment patterns among refugees as well (Majka & Mullan, 1992). Especially important, however, is the consistent finding from this study that marital status may mediate many of the noted gender differences. Moreover, gender differences in employment may likely be related to differences in vocational services received. In this study, more women than men were married, and married women received less frequent and less varied vocational services. In turn, this finding may be related to accessibility of service, which

may be lower for married women because of their family and day care responsibilities, tasks that traditionally fall on women's shoulders. Moreover, research suggests that a large-sized household, especially one with children or other dependents, can inhibit job search and placement (Majka & Mullan, 1992). Thus, accessibility of service may tie directly to noted differences in employment patterns between men and women in this sample. The generalizability of this pervasive finding to other refugee populations, however, may need to be tested, especially when one recognizes that in the FSU both men and women were expected to work, women enjoyed professional and technical opportunities and advancement, and not working was considered illegal (Oberrotman, 1981; Parker, 1991).

Although age was not related to the frequency or variety of vocational services received by refugees, it was related to employment patterns. Refugees in the older age group of 51 to 54 were less likely to be employed early in their resettlement process. This finding persisted for both men and women, but was slightly more pronounced for males. This difference may be related to language skills since refugees in the younger age groups tended to have higher ESL levels. It is also likely that older refugees may have experienced other social or structural barriers in the workplace, such as age-related discrimination (Majka & Mullan, 1992). Of interest, more refugees were employed in the 31 to 35 age group, with females more frequently employed than males in this age group.

Consistent with previous studies (Handelman & Miller, 1982; Schwamm, Greenstone, & Hoffman, 1982), English language competency was a significant factor in early employment as measured in this study by initial and highest ESL level attained. As important, these results have added to our previous knowledge by suggesting that higher levels of language proficiency are linked to more frequent and more varied vocational services.

The preliminary nature of this present study should be fully noted. These findings are based on a small group of refugees who may or may not be representative of those who have resettled in the Chicago area or in various cities across the United States. The limitations of this preliminary study notwithstanding, the overall positive nature of these findings is very encouraging. Results clearly suggest that early employment is associated with more frequent vocational service, as well as the refugee's participation in more varied vocational activities and services. Specific vocational services linked in this study to employment included how often refugees met or talked with their primary counselor, greater involvement in group activities and services, and frequency of contact with a job developer. The results of the stepwise, logistic regression analysis suggest that frequency of contact with a job developer is a good indicator of early employment. Although the results of this analysis should be interpreted cautiously (Henderson & Denison, 1989), contact with a job developer may be a good predictor of early employment by serving as a marker to identify job-ready clients. Thus, frequent and varied vocational services, other than contact with a job developer, may lend a supportive and necessary step in helping ensure that job-developer contact is relevant, productive, and likely to result in a positive outcome, i.e., placement in competitive employment.

No doubt, many factors that were beyond the scope of the present study are necessary components to the resettlement and acculturation process and should be thoroughly studied (Fox, 1992). These include other resettlement services, such as family services and community-related activities, that support vocational services. Also important are individual differences and the role that motivational level and social adaptability skills play in successful job placement. In addition, an in-depth analysis of employment patterns would seem especially helpful for further study; in particular, the role that

early job experience plays in the process that can eventually lead to employment offering a good match between the skills of the refugee and the responsibilities of the position.

The number of refugees from this sample who were working or who had work experience after only one year in their new host company is noteworthy. This finding is especially significant because reasons often cited by Soviet refugees for leaving their former country are not solely economic. Among the major reasons cited are personal and institutional anti-Semitism, including difficulty in obtaining good career positions, and the increased difficulty that Jewish children have in obtaining post-secondary education and high-level jobs. Indeed, the need to provide improved opportunities for their children, and not individual advancement, is a frequently cited reason for leaving (Benifand, 1991; Gold, 1990). Thus, the present results need to be placed in a larger context as we attempt to gain a more complete understanding of the successful acculturation of an important group of refugees (Bernick, 1992).

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks are due Alan Goldstein, executive director of Jewish Vocational Services, for his support during this project; Gerald H. Silverstein, associate executive director, for his thoughtful suggestions in preparation of this manuscript, and Karen Rychlik, team leader, for her assistance in the preparation of this and previous versions of this manuscript.

#### REFERENCES

- Benifand, A. (1991). Jewish emigration from the USSR in the 1990s. *Innovation*, 35-50.
- Bernick, D. (1992). Introduction. In M. Tress, & D. Bernick (Eds.), *Soviet resettlement: Employment strategies*. New York: Council of Jewish Federations.
- Chiswick, B. (1992). The view for ORR. In M. Tress, & D. Bernick (Eds.), *Soviet resettlement: Employment strategies*. New York: Council of Jewish Federations.

- Fox, S. (1992). Loss and the emigration experience of Jews from the former Soviet Union. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 69, 80-86.
- Gold, S. J. (1990). *Soviet Jews in the United States*. San Francisco, CA: New Faces of Liberty. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 347 223).
- Handleman, M., & Miller, A. P. (1990). Vocational services in Soviet Jewish resettlement: The challenge for the nineties. *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 67, 108-113.
- Henderson, D. A., & Denison, D. R. (1989). Stepwise regression in social and psychological research. *Psychological Reports*, 64, 251-257.
- Kessler, M. (unpublished). *English as a second language program*. Chicago: Jewish Vocational Service.
- Majka, L., & Mullan, B. (1992). Employment retention, area of origin and type of social support among refugees in the Chicago area. *International Migration Review*, 26, 899-926.
- Oberrotman, J. B. (1981). *A study of the occupational adaptability of immigrants: With specific reference to Russian Jewish immigrants in the Chicago area in the seventies*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Parker, M. (1991). Career and employment counseling with Soviet Jewish immigrants: Issues and recommendations. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 28, 157-166.
- Race, K. E. H., & Masini, B. E. (1994, November). *Social justice and refugee resettlement: Evaluating factors associated with early employment*. Paper presented at the American Evaluation Association Annual Meeting, Boston.
- Schwamm, J., Greenstone, K., & Hoffman, H. (1982). Resettling newcomers: The case of Soviet Jewish immigration. *Arete*, 7, 25-36.