



## **African Immigrant Perceptions of Non-Profit Service Providers in the St. Louis Metropolitan Region**

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### ***Immigrant services in U.S. metropolitan regions***

As the foreign-born population in the United States has grown at an increasing rate over the last 30 years, immigrants have settled in “new destination” states, cities and rural areas that have not experienced much immigration since the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Between 2000 and 2013, the growth of foreign-born residents increased at a faster pace in the suburbs than the cities of Los Angeles, Chicago, Minneapolis, Baltimore, Charlotte, and St. Louis.<sup>2</sup>

Recent foreign-born growth and settlement patterns have consequences for social and human service delivery to suburban immigrants. Suburban government officials are less likely to provide immigrant services, preferring instead to rely on non-profits in cities to meet their foreign-born residents’ needs without incurring the costs themselves.<sup>3</sup> In turn, suburban immigrants must typically search outside of their own neighborhoods to locate vital resources in highly fragmented metropolitan regions.

Indeed, a spatial mismatch between immigrant service organizations and the places where immigrants live exists. Yet, few studies have assessed the kinds of organizations from which immigrants are likely to receive services. In this study, I ask: **Why might immigrants seek services from some organizations and not others?**

### ***Vitendo for Africa***

Through Creating Whole Communities (CWC) research grant, I worked with Vitendo for Africa to understand immigrants’ perceptions of the kinds of social service providers from which they are likely to seek assistance. Vitendo is a non-profit organization that strives to welcome, connect and empower healthier immigrant individuals and families through the provision of support and services, and by coordinating resources. Vitendo – which is a Swahili word that means action – directs its activities and services toward African immigrants living in Missouri. The organization is an example of a nonprofit service provider that connects its target population with other local organizations and also serve as a broker to acquire resources at immigrant service and mainstream organizations in the region. Some of these activities involve helping people get credit line, loans, and referrals to other service agencies as well as increasing awareness of nutrition, homebuying, youth development programs, health screenings, and legal services.



Vitendo is located in Hazelwood, Missouri, which is a North County suburb of the St. Louis metro region. According to the 2010 American Community Survey of the U.S. Census, Hazelwood's population is estimated at 25,700. Sixty-four percent of the population is white, 30.5% are either black or African-American, 3.0% are Hispanic or Latino, and 1.4% are Asian. The foreign-born population is estimated at 6.1% of Hazelwood's population. Estimates of the African immigrant population are more difficult to estimate with certainty. Based on the 2011-2015 ACS 5-year estimates, Africans represent 31.3% (with a margin of error of +/- 16.1%) of Hazelwood's foreign-born population. In comparison, Asians and Latinos represent 43.9% (+/- 13.3%) and 17.5% (+/- 11.1%) of the foreign-born population, respectively. Hazelwood is more like other local areas in St. Louis County, where there is a small population of immigrants, which is not large enough to incentivize municipal officials to deliver culturally appropriate services.

The need for a car among immigrant households becomes greater as the Hazelwood local government has a low capacity to serve its foreign-born residents and that most immigrant service partners are located in the city. Hazelwood is over 20 miles from South St. Louis City, the location where most immigrant service organizations are based. Vitendo's executive director mostly travels with immigrants and engage in a "circuit of services," in which immigrants are introduced to organizations that assist with homeownership, afterschool programs, health screenings, and legal services.

### ***Methods and Data***

I administered a pencil and paper questionnaire to 100 African immigrants who live primarily in Hazelwood or St. Louis County. Participants were informed about my questionnaire through my community partner (Vitendo) and sponsoring organization, the Missouri Immigrant and Refugee Advocates (MIRA). I received forty-two completed surveys. Most participants identify as female, are legal permanent residents, employed, have children, lived in the U.S. for less than 9 years, have at least a college degree, and are insured through their job or family member's employer. In addition, most are married and identify as Christian. Vitendo mostly serves Kenyans, Ethiopians, and Nigerians.

In the survey, each participant is given a table that compares the profile of two organizations. The participant is then asked to choose the service provider organization from which they prefer to receive assistance. The profile of each organization is based on eight attributes: an organization's target population (who they serve), service provided, how services are provided, the quality of bilingual services provided in participant's native tongue, time distance by car, accessibility to public transportation, neighborhood safety, and the person who recommended the organization. Each attribute has different values (see Appendix 1), which produce more than 2 million different combinations. I randomly chose the values for 800 different profiles of service provider organizations and assigned them to participants. This research design, also known as a conjoint analysis experiment, provides several advantages over prior observational and experimental approaches, such as identifying the effect of each organizational attribute on the probability of selection and disentangling the effects of correlated attributes.<sup>4</sup>

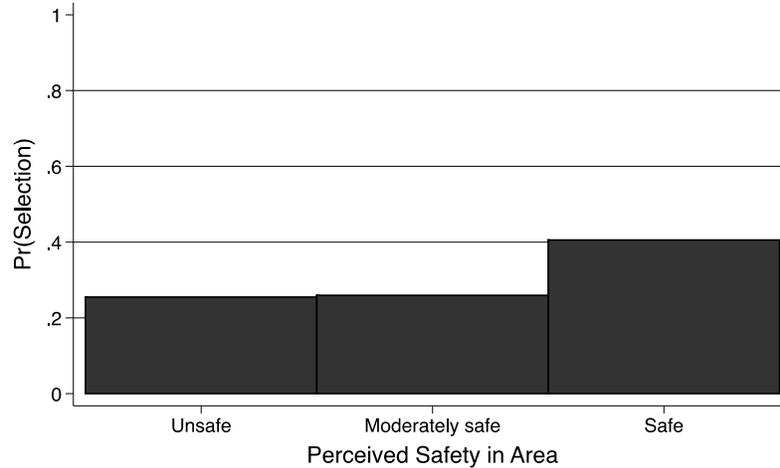
### ***Results***

The results indicate that distance or public transport accessibility do not discourage respondents from seeking assistance from an organization. I obtain stronger evidence that the perceived safety of a service organization's location influenced respondents. Respondents were nearly twice as likely to select an organization in a safe community than one in a somewhat unsafe community. Figure 1 plots the probability of selecting an organization based on varying degrees of perceived safety. Holding all other values at their mean and median values, respondents were 40% more likely to choose an organization when told that they are in a safe community. Respondents also found no difference between organizations in unsafe and



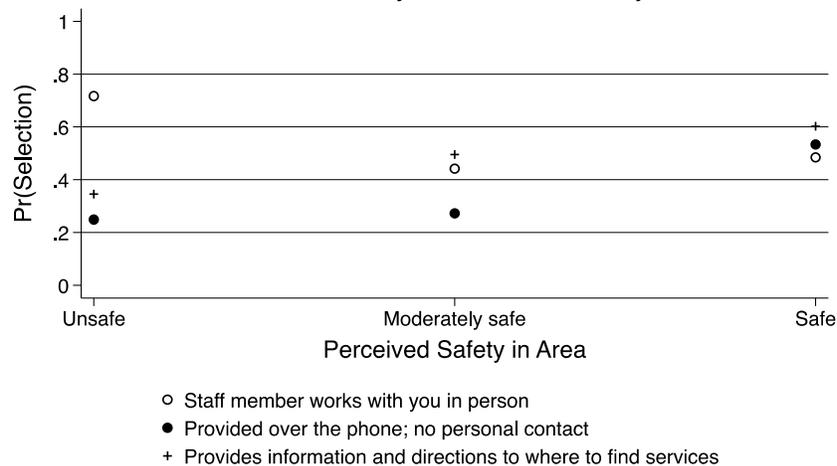
somewhat safe communities, suggesting that any hint of perceived threat would prompt them to not seek assistance from an organization at all.

Figure 1. Probability of Selecting Organization Based on Perceived Safety



Further analysis reveals that respondents value personal contact with service providers, even if it means traveling to an unsafe area (see Figure 2). For organizations that provide directions on where to find services, the results indicate service delivery does not matter much in communities that are perceived as safe. However, for organizations that provide services in person, perceived safety has minimal effect. Respondents were 75% more likely to select an organization that provides in-person services, despite unsafe location. This finding highlights the risks and tradeoffs that immigrants confront when considering to use nonprofit services.

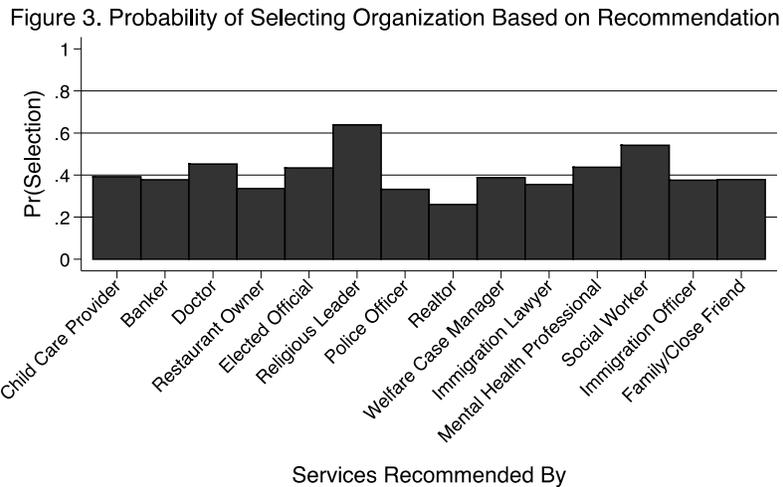
Figure 2. Probability of Selecting Organization Based on Perceived Safety and Service Delivery



The results also show that preferences for service organizations can also be shaped by the people in one's social networks. Figure 2 plots the probability of selecting an organization based on who recommends for it. Most actors have similar effects on the probability of selecting an organization. The exceptions are the roles of social workers, doctors, and religious leaders in African immigrant



communities. In particular, a respondent is over 60% more likely to select an organization when told that it is recommended by a religious leader, while holding all other values at their mean and median values.



### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has leveraged the immigrant perspective to understand the spatial mismatch of immigrant service providers and the places where immigrants live. Rather than document the distance between providers and immigrants, I investigate the kinds of organizations from which immigrants are likely to seek assistance. The results strongly show that, at least for African immigrants living in a St. Louis suburb, distance and public transportation accessibility does not affect their choices of service providers. Rather, the results provide strong evidence that their decisions are based on perceptions of safety, influence from community leaders in their social networks, and which organizations are likely to provide services in person. As more research is geared toward understanding the landscape of immigrant service providers at the local level, this study hopes to encourage scholars, researchers, as well as nonprofit and charitable leaders to understand how immigrants' usage of services are influenced by the roles of community contextual cues, how people learn about services through word of mouth, and also the extent to which people risk their own safety in pursuing assistance.



## APPENDIX

### Full List of Values for Each Organizational Attribute

Attribute	Value Set
Who do they serve	Everyone (citizens, immigrants, and refugees); All immigrants and refugees in St. Louis region; People from your country of birth
What does it provide	Teaches parenting skills; Find housing/shelter; Counseling to improve credit/reduce debt; Find and prepare for a job; Savings plan to send money to home country; Legal services for immigration matters; After-School Youth Programs; Youth Violence Prevention; Tutoring in math and reading; Mental health and counseling for trauma
How are services given	Staff member works with you in person; Provided over the phone; no personal contact; Provides information and directions to where to find services
Public transit accessibility	Easy; Difficult
Bilingual services	Poor; Average; Good
Distance by car	5 - 60 minutes (increments of 5 minutes)
Neighborhood safety	Unsafe; Moderately safe; Safe
Recommended by	Nurse; Teacher; Child care provider; Banker; Doctor; Restaurant owner; Elected official, Religious leader; Police officer; Realtor; Welfare case manager; Immigration lawyer; Mental health professional; Social worker; Immigration officer; Family/close friend



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<sup>1</sup> Marrow, 2005; Singer, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson and Prchal Svajlenka 2014

<sup>3</sup> de Graauw, Gleeson & Bloemraad, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015