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Migrant-Serving Organizations: Supporting U.S. Migrants with Safe Digital Access¹

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Abstract

Migrants to the United States face technology, language, legal, cultural, and economic barriers. Without direct voter influence, migrants engage with and depend upon migrant-serving organizations to build identity, address negative scrutiny, overcome obstacles, and acclimate to society. In a growing and shifted digital landscape, migrant-serving organizations are vital to providing digital accessibility amongst migrants. This paper provides a literature review regarding digital accessibility amongst migrants. It offers recommendations for migrant-serving organizations in investigating barriers and program design that support the unique digital needs of migrants.

Keywords: *Migrant-serving organizations; digital divide; equity and inclusivity; migrants*

Introduction

Today, nearly 40 million international migrants, or foreign-born individuals, live in the United States, accounting for 14% of the total U.S. population (Budiman, 2020). These individuals contribute to the United States economically, culturally, and philanthropically (Bloemraad et al., 2020; Osili & Du, 2000). Generous estimates by the Center for American Progress indicate that migrants and their children will account for 85% of the net growth in the workforce by 2030 (Myer et al., 2013). In fact, during the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign-born individuals were heavily represented in essential jobs (Kerwin & Warren, 2020).

This paper provides a literature review to investigate the relationship between demographic changes, technological advancements, and digital accessibility. Studies currently address legal, cultural, language, and economic barriers to integration but fewer studies address technology barriers. Further, policymakers and the public debate the net gain of migrant contributions, and these debates underlie the exclusionary patchwork of immigration laws and public policies (Kerwin & Warren, 2020). Existing scholarship addresses government limitations and expresses the need for philanthropic intervention (Garkisch et al., 2017). Garkisch et al. (2017) states, “where governmental agencies struggle with this complex environment, third sector organizations (TSOs), such as non-governmental organizations (N.G.O.s), nonprofit organizations (N.P.O.s), and voluntary organizations, have come to deliver various social, humanitarian, political, and cultural services to incoming people” (p. 1841). Without direct voter influence, migrants engage with and depend upon migrant-serving organizations to build identity, address negative scrutiny, overcome barriers, and acclimate to society. In an

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increasingly digital world, migrant-serving organizations must also address the digital barriers faced by migrants.

Migrant-serving organizations fall under the umbrella of philanthropy and provide “voluntary action for the public good” (Payton & Moody, 2008, p. 28). Migrant-serving organizations are a colorful mosaic of institutions: registered nonprofit organizations, mutual-aid societies, private networks, and informal voluntary associations. Conservative accounts estimate there are 3,707 migrant-serving organizations across all fifty states (Guidestar, n.d.). These organizations build deep relationships within migrant communities to develop trust and meet community needs (Bloemraad et al., 2020). Overall, migrant-serving organizations help migrants overcome barriers through direct support, capacity-building, and advocacy (Garkisch et al., 2017). Direct services include language access, tutoring, technical training, basic needs, legal aid, and employment readiness (Garkisch et al., 2017). For example, refugee resettlement agencies are registered nonprofit organizations; they provide wrap-around services to help refugees build new lives (Gilhooly & Lee, 2014). These services include rental assistance and on-the-job support (Gilhooly & Lee, 2014).

While typically private and non-governmental, many migrant-serving organizations form relationships with the government through advocacy or funding. Advocacy efforts include public education and support for humanizing legislation (Garkisch et al., 2017). Such organizations provide a bridging relationship between migrants and government while amplifying or joining the voice of migrants (Garkisch et al., 2017). Mutual-aid societies are also migrant-serving (Garkisch et al., 2017). Here, community members pool together resources in support of one another. Specialized attention on this migrant-serving nonprofit subsector is still emerging.

Thus far, U.S. migration studies have primarily focused on the individual characteristics of migrants or the assimilation functions of an organization (Bloemraad et al., 2020). Less attention has focused on how migrant-serving organizations meet the unique needs of migrants (Bloemraad et al., 2020; Garkisch et al., 2017). There also remains room to understand migrant agency and civic equality in association with legal status (Bloemraad et al., 2020).

Digital skills and access by migrants are also not well understood. Before the pandemic, migrant populations were half as likely to have access to high-speed Internet (Brown et al., 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, such disparities were exposed. Digital reliance became undeniable for all segments of society, including migrants. Migrant-households were among the 18 million households without Internet access (Cherewka, 2020). At some point, most students attended school virtually, and telehealth soared (Cherewka, 2020). Virtual workplace adaptations also became critical. As many as 70% of U.S. employees worked remotely (Cherawaka, 2020).

Moreover, early findings suggest that corporations adapted workplace giving options using technology and innovation (Paarlberg et al., 2021). The overall success of these digital pivots depended on various factors, including computers in the household, reliable Internet, and digital competency. Although shifts in the digital landscape are still unfolding, there are already visible gaps in digital access amongst migrants (Bastick & Mallet-Garcia, 2022).

These complex socio-economic frameworks were on display during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed existing social disparities among Americans —



inequities that extend to migrants (Addo, 2020; Bernholz, 2020; Capps & Gelatt, 2020; Clark et al., 2020; Gelatt, 2020). Nearly 8% of the total U.S. population lost jobs between February and April 2020 (Karpman & Acs, 2020). By comparison, in a non-representative sample of New York City migrants, over 90% of migrants indicated not working during the prior four weeks (Smith et al., 2020). In the same survey, 3/4 of respondents felt at-risk for homelessness (Smith et al., 2020). A more comprehensive study indicates significantly higher unemployment rates amongst Latinos than other racial groups between February and June 2020 (Saenz & Sparks, 2020). And, immigrants faced increased exposure with higher concentrations of employment in essential healthcare jobs (Kerwin & Warren, 2020.; Kiester & Vasquez-Merino, 2021). Further study is warranted, and no broad conclusions can be drawn from these comparisons. Nevertheless, there is a strong indication that migrants faced increased economic and health vulnerabilities.

During the pandemic, migrant-serving organizations were lifelines to migrants. Amidst stay-at-home orders, migrant-serving organizations pivoted to remote functions and relied on user-friendly technology to meet clients' needs. In response to the priority needs of cash and food, migrant-serving organizations raised emergency funds and assisted clients with public benefits applications (Bernstein et al., 2020). They also helped migrants navigate unique challenges related to health risks and workplace protection (Bernstein et al., 2020). The pandemic also reinforced the need to provide attention to the special needs of vulnerable populations, including migrants.

Overall, there remains room for understanding the deeper dimensions of migrant-serving organizations and their engagement with migrants (Bloemraad et al., 2020; Garkisch, 2017). How do migrant-serving organizations support digital access for migrants? Does digital presence by migrant-serving organizations play an indirect role in advocacy, social cohesion, or policy debates? How do organizations design programs that aid migrants with digital accessibility? This paper addresses the literature gap on digital accessibility by migrants by examining existing scholarship about the role of migrant-serving organizations concerning this need. It further examines the nuances of digital accessibility amongst migrants. It offers recommendations for migrant-serving organizations in investigating barriers and program design that support the unique digital needs of migrants. To better support digital accessibility among migrants, migrant-serving organizations must investigate barriers, design programs, and advocate for the unique digital needs of migrants.

Terminology and Research Scope

This section provides a brief discussion and clarification of basic terminology used throughout the paper. Migration studies have increasingly gained recognition as an interdisciplinary field (Brettel & Hollifield, 2022). Within migration studies, the language used across disciplines varies (Brettel & Hollifield, 2022). Hence the need to clarify terminology.

Migrant is an umbrella term that includes immigrant, nonimmigrants, diaspora, foreign-born individuals, undocumented persons, and refugees. Although some research uses these words interchangeably, most of these words have specific implications under U.S. immigration laws. For example, under 8 U.S.C. § 1101, immigrant “means every alien except an alien who is within one of the following classes of nonimmigrant aliens.” An immigrant is presumed to have the intent to permanently stay in the United States, whereas most nonimmigrants cannot have this intention. Migrant, on the other hand, is not restricted in definition by U.S.

immigration laws. According to Black Law’s Dictionary, migration is defined as “someone’s movement from one place to another.” This paper applies this definition to migrants. Throughout this paper, migrant implies that the individual is foreign-born and crossed a border into the United States without bearing upon legal status or permanency of movement.

To match with “migrant,” I chose migrant-serving organizations over immigrant organizations or third-sector organizations. I apply Bloemraad, Gleeson, and de Graauw’s definition of an immigrant organization to a migrant-serving organization where a “substantial part of the organization’s interests or activities should involve issues that tend to distinguish immigrants from native-born citizens, such as legal status barriers, linguistic or cultural obstacles to service, or concern over economic or political development in the country of origin” (2020, p. 293). Migrant-serving organizations include registered nonprofit organizations, mutual-aid societies, private networks, and informal voluntary associations.

Similarly, many terms describe how migrants facilitate and negotiate their new lives in the United States. These words include assimilation, acculturation, integration, and acclimation. This paper does not dwell in the literary debates about the pros and cons of each term. Instead, I use the seemingly more neutral term of acclimation to discuss how migrants become accustomed to U.S. customs and culture.

The scope of this paper examines all migrants rather than a subset of migrants. While future research may investigate the digital accessibility of migrants more narrowly concerning socio-economic status, geographic location, cultural background, or legal status, the current literature on digital access among migrants was sparse and spread. To engage a deeper analysis, I captured U.S. migrants in their entirety. Thus, this concept paper anchors itself more broadly to the concepts of U.S. migrants and the role of philanthropy in digital accessibility.

Distinctive Barriers and Needs

Overall, migrants to the United States are subject to restrictive immigration laws, and these laws set the tone for how migrants are treated and perceived. These laws are built upon concepts of “desirable” and “undesirable,” with many legal provisions excluding the undesirable. For example, under 8 U.S.C. 1182(a)(4), an applicant becomes inadmissible or unable to get immigration status if “at the time of application for admission or adjustment of status, is likely at any time to become a public charge.” What are the effects of such language? Most migrants, even when eligible, avoid means-tested benefits such as food stamps to avoid the label of public charge and risk future opportunities for citizenship (Bernstein et al., 2020).

Legal exclusions create a unique set of needs and considerations. These needs include safety, humanitarian aid, health, and social welfare (Garkisch et al., 2017). For example, prior experiences with foreign governments may prevent migrants from reporting crimes for fear of retribution. Even victims of crimes may not feel safe accessing government resources, and they may also fear adverse effects on their legal status in the United States. At least some migrants amongst Hispanic populations have indicated their hesitation in developing a digital presence for fear of how it might be used to determine admissibility or removal in an immigration petition or removal proceeding (Katz & Gonzalez, 2016). Their hesitation might be partially grounded in experiences with security background checks. Historically, the Department of Homeland Security has screened social media accounts for indications of



anything that might contradict a person's eligibility for immigration status (Katz & Gonzalez, 2016).

While navigating complex laws, migrants also look for ways to acclimate to life in the United States. Various factors may influence their acclimation, including education level, English proficiency, and U.S. ties (Budiman, 2020; Osili & Du, 2005). Existing literature has given considerable attention to the capacity development of immigrants, including education, language, and economic development (Garkisch et al., 2017), with health and English language proficiency as indicators of civic participation amongst war-affected Arab refugees (Alamdari, 2020). Capacity building of digital skills has been afforded lesser attention within the literature.

Digital skills and spaces have become necessary during present times. Nevertheless, there appear to be nuanced considerations for migrants. For example, technology provides a way to connect with family and friends abroad, but there are often limitations in the infrastructure overseas (Wyche & Grinter, 2012). Infrastructure is a problem in rural locations where broadband Internet access is less available (Wyche & Grinter, 2012). Internet access and cultural norms also impact romantic relationships, as demonstrated in a study among Arab couples (Alsheikh et al., 2011). In each study, technology was important to maintain social relationships. These studies do not explore how technology advances or impedes the lives of migrants with cultural acclimation or advocacy. These findings must also be explored with an increasingly digital economy and migrant-serving organizations.

Migrant-Serving Organizations

Migrant-serving organizations play an essential role within our global reality in which people are diverse in many ways. Within the literature about migration studies, migrant-serving organizations are increasingly recognized for providing complex, multi-level services (Garkisch et al., 2017). These services overlap with the needs identified in more extensive scholarship on the individual contributions and characteristics of migrants. Individual studies examine education, income, skill sets, economic output, and voting trends (Bloemraad et al., 2020).

Migrant-serving organizations serve a variety of functions. A systematic literature review on migrant-serving organizations revealed three major research themes, primarily related to service provision (Garkisch et al., 2017). These three themes include service provision for basic needs, capacity development, and advocacy of migrants (Garkisch et al., 2017). The unique benefits of certain types of migrant-serving organizations are also being evaluated, including mutual aid societies, unions, and hybrid organizations (de Graauw, 2008).

Data on individual migrants overlaps with the role of migrant-serving organizations. Migrants to the United States come from worldwide (Budiman, 2020). As discussed earlier, migrants have distinctive basic and capacity-building needs, including language access, acclimation, and education. For example, 53% of migrants are English proficient, and proficiency varies amongst nationalities and individuals (Budiman, 2020). Emerging studies examine the specialized services necessary for language interpretation and cultural competency (de Graauw, 2008; Garkisch et al., 2017).

Migrant-serving organizations are also recognized for their central role as a mobilizer of migrants and bridge to local government, but this relationship is still not well understood (de Graauw, 2008; Wilson, 2013; Wong, 2006). The majority of migrant-serving organizations do

engage in policy or advocacy, a finding that is distinctive from other human service organizations (Calderon et al., 2021). Thus, migrant-serving organizations help migrants overcome the legal impediment of noncitizen status. Recent studies have examined the relationship between urban, suburban, and rural settings upon the prevalence and influence of migrant-serving organizations in defined geographies (Wilson, 2013; de Graauw and Gleeson, 2017). Advocacy efforts have included housing, education, language access, and police interactions (Andersen, 2010; Bloemraad, 2006; Cordero-Guzmán et al., 2008; Varsanyi, 2007). Advocacy efforts about digital accessibility have not widely entered the literature.

Migrant-serving organizations are undoubtedly crucial for the successful acclimation, capacity-building, and advocacy of migrants. They fill a particular niche in understanding the unique needs of migrants. In an era of undeniable digital reliance, migrant-serving organizations must continue to investigate and provide for the needs of migrants in relation to the digital landscape. Digital accessibility will increasingly inform the future for all individuals, including migrants.

The Great Digital Divide?

Global trends indicate that automation and digital skills are informing the future of the workforce (Lyons et al., 2019). The United Nations supports the Internet as a fundamental human right and expressed concern for the persistence of “many forms of digital divides” (United Nations, 2016; p. 146). This global position supports the domestic notion that meaningful tools and programs are needed to ensure digital accessibility as principles of social justice and human rights (Fink, 2021). The literature is uneven about whether the overall digital divide is widening or narrowing. However, the literature is consistent about gaps in desirable digital accessibility, especially amongst vulnerable populations like international migrants (Gomez et al., 2019; Nogueron-Liu, 2016). To this extent, organizations should consider developing multi-level, culturally sensitive approaches, especially for vulnerable populations (Lyons et al., 2019). Global scholars and practitioners are investigating how to upskill digital capacity best and provide accessibility amongst vulnerable populations—persons most at risk of being left behind in a digital economy. Vulnerable populations include migrants.

Digital spaces, however, pose concerns for a diminished sense of community and heightened risks of breaches in data privacy (Harlow & Guo, 2014; Gomez, 2019). Several studies examine the intersection between data privacy and vulnerable migrants. Nogueron-Lui (2016) engages with migrant adults to uncover how their understanding of privacy and risk in online platforms translates into their comfort with digital literacy to support more culturally responsive classrooms. Another study examines the practices and systems adopted by humanitarian organizations to protect undocumented migrants, including legal standards of data security and privacy (Gomez et al., 2019). This study advocates for universal organizational guidelines for protective and proactive data security practices (Gomez et al., 2019). Yet, a third study examines the role of digital activism to advance the voice of at-risk immigrants (Harlow & Guo, 2014). The sharing of passwords amongst family members, whether for digital assistance or digital control, also gave rise to data privacy and security concerns (Wyche & Grinter, 2012). The final study seeks to understand why diaspora populations use particular technologies among Iranian Kurds and how current demographics



influence technology use (Hosseini, 2017). The question presented in the final study was less apparent than the other studies, shadowing the potential of its findings. Overall, each study asked questions that show how safety and identity impact the digital presence of migrants.

Migrants engage or refrain from digital spaces with due consideration to the effect on their migration status (Nogueron-Liu, 2016). For example, in an ethnographic study conducted among Spanish-dominant adults of elementary-aged children, adult students expressed hesitations about using social media (Nogueron-Liu, 2016). Ethnographer and teacher Nogueron-Liu (2016) finds “a constant tension...in my teaching was students’ reluctance to join these platforms. Some students preferred not to be on Facebook because their relatives back home did not have Internet access” (p. 508-9). Others hesitated because social media could inadvertently result in kidnappings during travel or the surrounding community members in a neighborhood that might be at risk for deportation (Nogueron-Liu, 2016). Similarly, for migrants that are undocumented and lack legal status, the use of digital spaces can pose risks to their physical presence in the United States (Gomez et al., 2019).

Technology helps maintain connections between migrants and family and friends abroad (Benitez, 2006). However, there are often limitations in the technology infrastructure overseas, especially among rural locations (Wyche & Grinter, 2012). For example, among Kenyan migrants in Atlanta, traditional modes of communication were still the primary modes of communication due to unreliable high-speed Internet abroad (Wyche & Grinter, 2012). They also relied on relatives who physically traveled between the countries to send back physical pictures or burned DVDs (Wyche & Grinter, 2012).

In addition to connecting with family and friends, migrant populations also rely upon peer-to-peer digital networks for information. While easily accessible on a smartphone, the veracity and reliability of peer-to-peer news remain unvetted. Peer-to-peer networks have been used during the COVID-19 pandemic to spread vaccine disinformation (Contreras, 2021). During the pandemic, some migrant-serving organizations engaged in education and outreach to address myths about the vaccine (Contreras, 2021). The extent to which truthful news and information are transmitted between social networks are important considerations for migrant-serving organizations, as they develop solutions to digital needs of migrants in their communities.

The Migration Policy Institute defines digital access as “an individual’s ability to obtain tools such as computers and smartphones, as well as consistent connection to the Internet” (Cherewka, 2020, p. 2). Digital access to smartphones is ubiquitous amongst migrants. Smartphone dependency may be related to various reasons, including the high cost of computers, high-speed Internet access, and lack of comprehensive infrastructure across borders. For example, email was not as responsive a medium as a phone call (Wyche & Grinter, 2012). At least a couple of studies have examined the role of social media, smartphones, and digital literacy by refugees during migration and resettlement. These studies asked questions pertinent to the geographical situations. The U.S.-based research evaluated the use of technology amongst the Karen Burmese refugees, one of the largest ethnic groups resettling into the United States at the time of the study (Gilhooly & Lee, 2014). The European study tackled criticisms of smartphone use by Syrian refugees—the largest ethnic group to resettle in Europe between 2015 and 2016 (Dekker et al., 2018). Researchers explored how smartphones and social media were used before and during migration to the Netherlands

(Dekker et al., 2018). Each study tailored the research question to the community and social discourse within the relevant geographic scope.

Smartphones may have reduced the digital divide for some migrants. For example, Mexicans account for a quarter of all U.S. migrants, are among the least likely to have a high school degree and are less likely to have high-speed Internet access (Brown et al., 2016; Budiman, 2020). However, in a 2016 survey amongst a nationally representative sample of Latinos, increased Internet use was associated with smartphone reliance (Brown et al., 2016). Smartphone reliance, however, has not overcome the lack of access to high-speed Internet; the rate of access remained stagnant between 2010 and 2015 (Brown, A. et al. 2016). Furthermore, nearly 21% of non-English speakers had no computer use compared to only 5% of English speakers (Cherewka, 2020). The lower-income and lower education levels amongst some migrants were associated with the accessibility to computers (Ono & Zavado, 2008).

Without additional digital skills, computer access, and high-speed Internet, smartphone dependence is termed “fragmented digital knowledge” (Cherewka, 2020). For some migrants, phones are preferred as a faster form of communication in situations where high-speed Internet is perceived as a barrier (Wyche & Grinter, 2012). Nevertheless, fragmented knowledge and smartphone dependence have not translated well into problem-solving in digital environments (Cherewka, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, when nearly every social aspect pivoted online, fragmented digital knowledge was potentially a barrier to employment, as demonstrated earlier in the higher levels of unemployment amongst certain migrants. Lockdowns and social distancing measures necessitated remote and digital functions to stay connected. This fragmented knowledge was also recognized as one barrier to implementing an email or text-based survey among New York migrants. Instead, phone calls were used as one tool to gather survey data and overcome this barrier (Smith et al., 2020). While smartphones have helped, they do not seem to develop more dynamic digital skills among migrants that keep pace with the rapid pace of digital advancements.

Conclusion

A review of the literature demonstrates that migrants have unique needs and barriers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the deep impact of the digital divide upon migrant communities became exposed, although the full effects are still unfolding. Due to government limitations, migrant-serving organizations are critical to understanding, meeting, and advocating for the unique needs of migrants.

The literature documents digital gaps amongst migrants, including smartphone dependency, limited Internet access, and potential misinformation through digital peer-to-peer networks. The gaps may vary among communities and client populations. Thus, to uncover accessibility limitations, migrant-serving organizations should conduct a needs assessment with their communities and clients. An individualized needs assessment can help inform what type of digital gap needs to be addressed. It can also advise what kind of intervention to undertake. Does the organization need to leverage its relationship with the government to advocate for broadband Internet access in specific jurisdictions? Or does it need to incorporate training about critically evaluating news sources? Survey feedback is crucial to understanding client needs and how accessibility is limited.



Scholarly research can also investigate what digital barriers immigrants face, including barriers that impact their day-to-day lives. Does fragmented digital knowledge impact economic opportunities, and how? Research can further explain how peer-to-peer social networks are influencing decision-making. Digital reliance must also be investigated concerning privacy and data risks. Existing research has demonstrated that migrants often make decisions that reflect the need for data privacy and risk management. Migrants consider the impact of digital presence on their legal status. Research can help explain how privacy and risk adversity vary amongst different migrants. This research can also help migrant-serving organizations develop practices and policies that best support and protect the digital vulnerabilities of their clients while building digital capacities, accessibility, and social connections. To best support digital accessibility, migrant-serving organizations must lean into their clients to understand their specific concerns and barriers. They must find tools and develop programs with which clients are comfortable and do not place them at risk.

As we enter an increasingly digital world, migrant-serving organizations must continue to understand and investigate technology barriers faced by clients. A deeper understanding of digital access, risks, and gaps helps in more than one way. It can improve opportunities for migrants and strengthen the migrant-serving nonprofit subsector—investments that enhance the lives of all Americans.

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