



Notes from the Field: The St. Louis Bosnian Family and Youth Study

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The St. Louis metro area is home to the largest Bosnian community outside Bosnia-Herzegovina. Since the arrival of the first refugees from the Bosnian war in the mid- to late- 1990s, the community has been widely regarded as a great success story of immigrant incorporation. What is more, the influx of refugees from former Yugoslavia is also credited with revitalizing Bevo Mill, a declining south side neighborhood in St. Louis. Beyond these generally held ideas and a handful of studies on mental and physical health among the first generation, however, we know relatively little about the experience of the Bosnian community and their children in St. Louis.

For instance, there is no agreement even on the exact number of Bosnian and Bosnian-origin residents in St. Louis. Estimates range from 40,000 to about 70,000 in different studies. The challenge to estimate exact numbers is not confined to St. Louis and is largely due to migrants from Bosnia being classified as Caucasian in the U.S. Census Data, leaving place of birth as the only indicator to isolate the Bosnian-origin population. The resulting estimates, of course, remain problematic as most migrants from Bosnia who arrived as refugees have been in the U.S. twenty-plus years and their children are American-born. Nevertheless, estimates point to at least several thousand migrants from Bosnia in each larger urban community in the U.S., as well as to the existence of established ethnic enclaves¹.

Aside from its size, we also have limited knowledge about the current location of the community. While Bevo Mill is still referred to as ‘Little Bosnia’, anecdotal evidence, as well as a growing number of boarded up storefronts along the main commercial artery in the neighborhood, suggest that the community has left the city and relocated to South County in search of better housing and schools. A deeper understanding of what drives these residential dynamics could offer valuable lessons for policy makers, urban planners and social workers thinking about immigrant communities as a potential strategy to stem population loss and revitalize declining neighborhoods in former industrial cities like St. Louis.

Finally, we know next to nothing about the experience of the children of the refugee parents – children who are now getting ready to graduate from high school and enter college or the labor market in St. Louis. Given that the Bosnian community is considered a great success of immigrant incorporation, understanding the experience of children of immigrant parents could provide important insights into the challenges facing immigrant families. It could also shed light on how local institutions facilitate (or hinder) economic and social adaptation.

The Bosnian Family and Youth Study is a longitudinal project that seeks to follow a group of 50-60 Bosnian second-generation youth and 20-30 parents over several years to explore how

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the Bosnian Diaspora see Halilovic, H., Hasic, J., Karabegovic, D., Karamehic-Muratovic, A., & Oric, N. (2018). Mapping the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Diaspora. <http://mhrr.gov.ba/PDF/MAPPING%20BIH%20DIASPORA%20REPORT.pdf>

families, schools, neighborhoods and urban contexts shape their experiences and influence their decisions at critical moments in their lives. It is our hope that this study will provide useful insights into the kinds of supports and settings that can make St. Louis a welcoming destination for immigrant families and their children in the future.

Settlement Patterns of Bosnian Immigrants in St. Louis

The following section provides a series of maps documenting the settlement patterns of the Bosnian community in the St. Louis metro area since their arrival in the mid 1990's. It should be noted that due to the difficulties of distilling all Bosnian-origin residents from the U.S. Census, the maps only represent respondents who identified as having been born in Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, since it can be assumed that high school aged children are most likely to still reside with their parents, these maps provide a fairly accurate impression of the settlement patterns of Bosnian families in St. Louis over time.

Figure 1 shows the residential patterns for the foreign-born population from Bosnia-Herzegovina in the St. Louis metro area in 2000, right at the end of the main inflow of war refugees from Bosnia. The highest concentration of first-generation Bosnians is in Bevo Mill and the adjacent neighborhoods of Princeton Heights and South Hampton. It is interesting to note that between 1990 and 2000 the population in Bevo Mill increased by about 5% while the city overall lost about 12.2% during the same time period.

Immigrants from Bosnia & Herzegovina, 2000

2000 Census of Population

Foreign-Born from Bosnia & Herzegovina

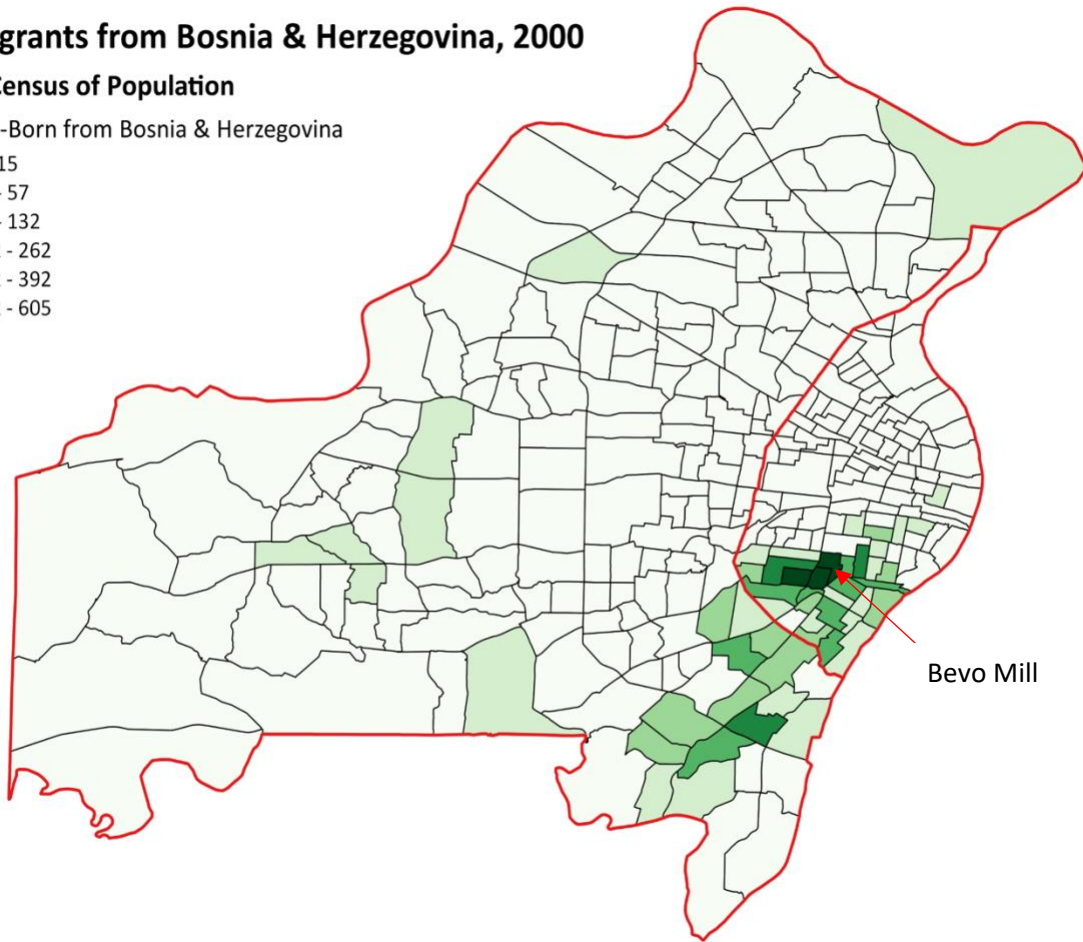
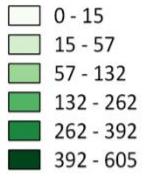


Figure 1

The second figure shows that by the mid 2000's the community had already started the leave Bevo Mill and was beginning to move south. The map indicates the main concentrations of first generation Bosnians in 2007 in Affton, in addition to a small pocket in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood in the city.

Immigrants from Bosnia & Herzegovina, 2007

ACS 2005-2009 5-Year Estimates

Foreign-Born from Bosnia & Herzegovina

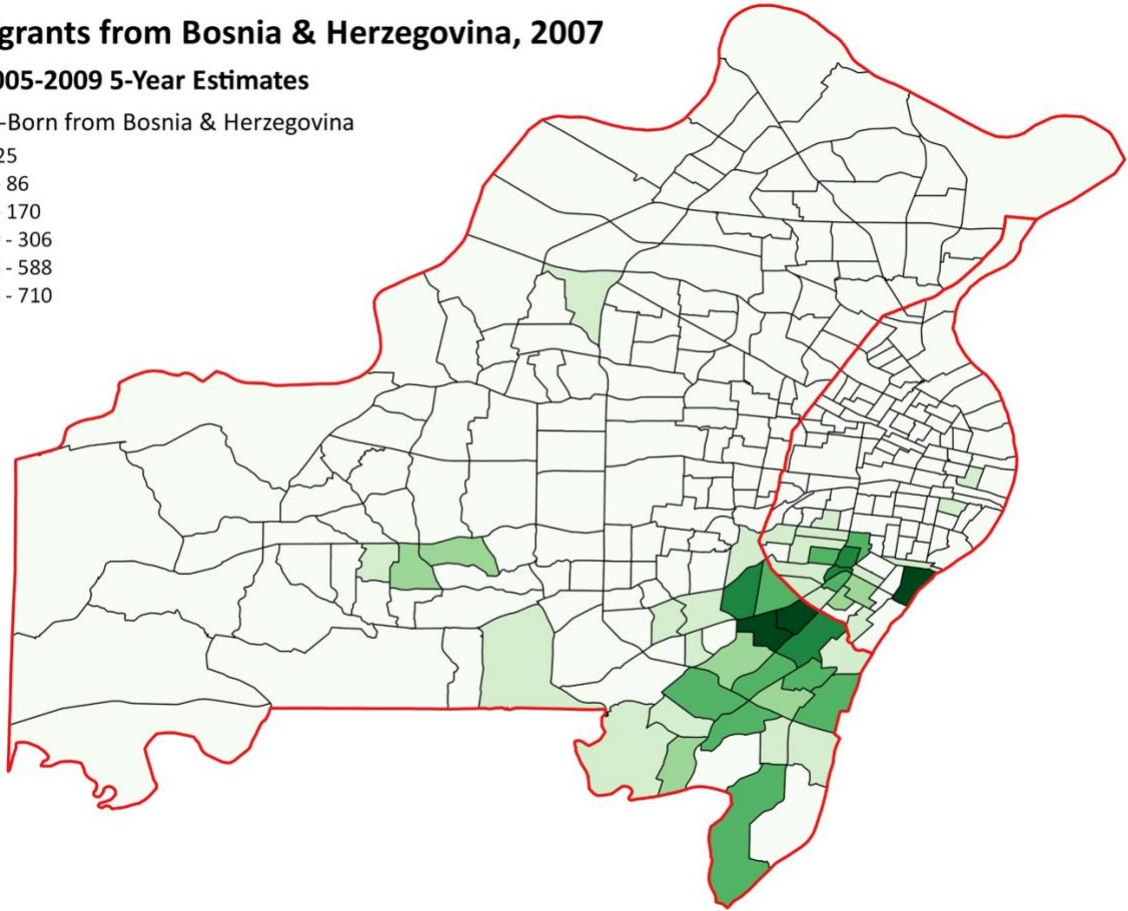
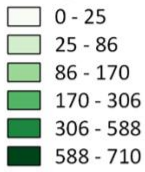


Figure 2

In 2010 the shift of the Bosnian community towards south county municipalities continued with a new locus emerging in Lemay-Mehlville. The residential pocket in Mount Pleasant seems to have largely disappeared by that time. These larger trends correspond with data indicating that, while Bevo Mill gained 5% in population over the 1990s, it lost about 5% between 2000 and 2010.

Immigrants from Bosnia & Herzegovina, 2010

ACS 2008-2012 5-Year Estimates

Foreign-Born from Bosnia & Herzegovina

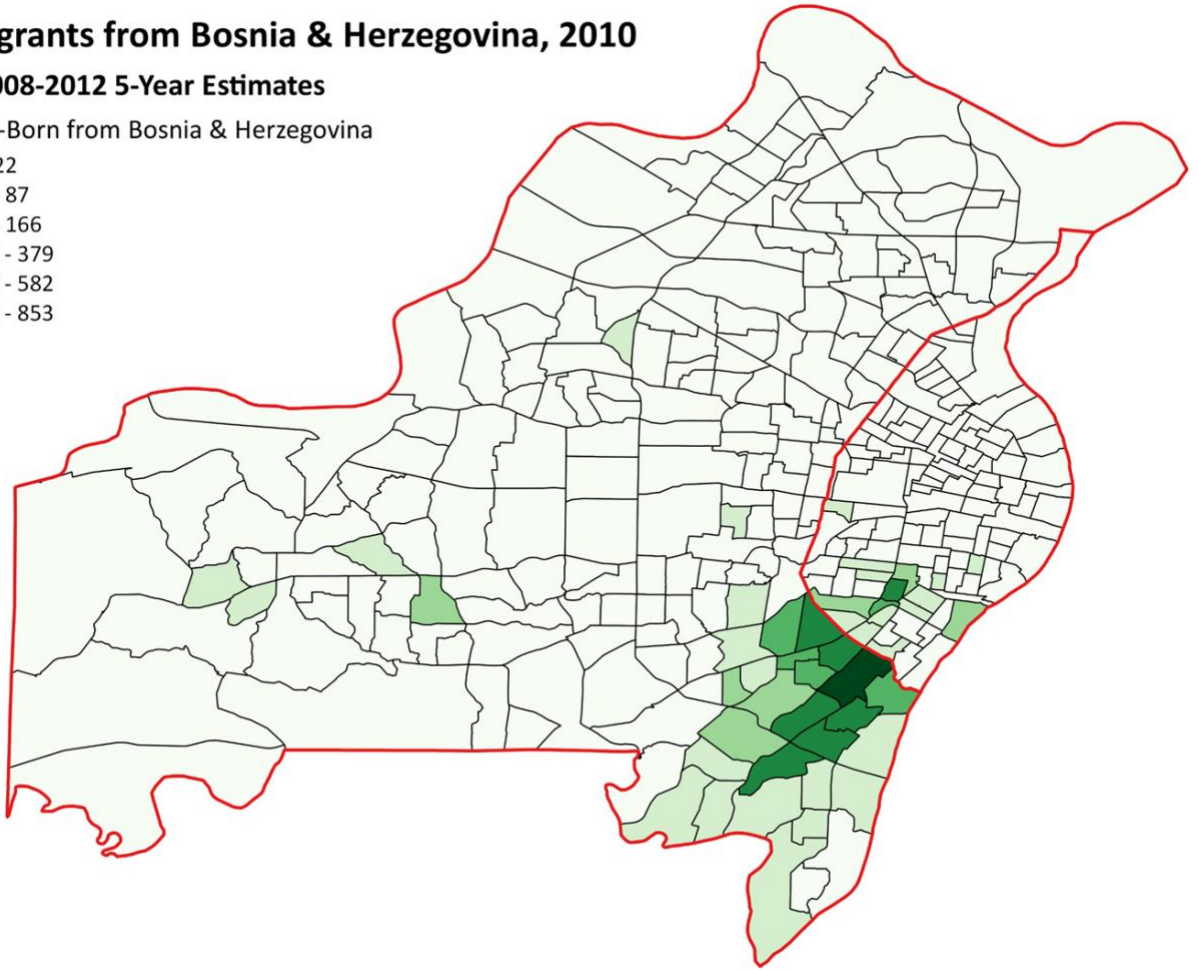
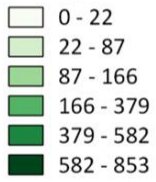


Figure 3

The last map shows that the southward move of the community seems to continue into the early 2010's with large concentrations of first-generation Bosnians emerging in Concord and Oakville.

Immigrants from Bosnia & Herzegovina, 2013

ACS 2011-2015 5-Year Estimates

Foreign-Born from Bosnia & Herzegovina

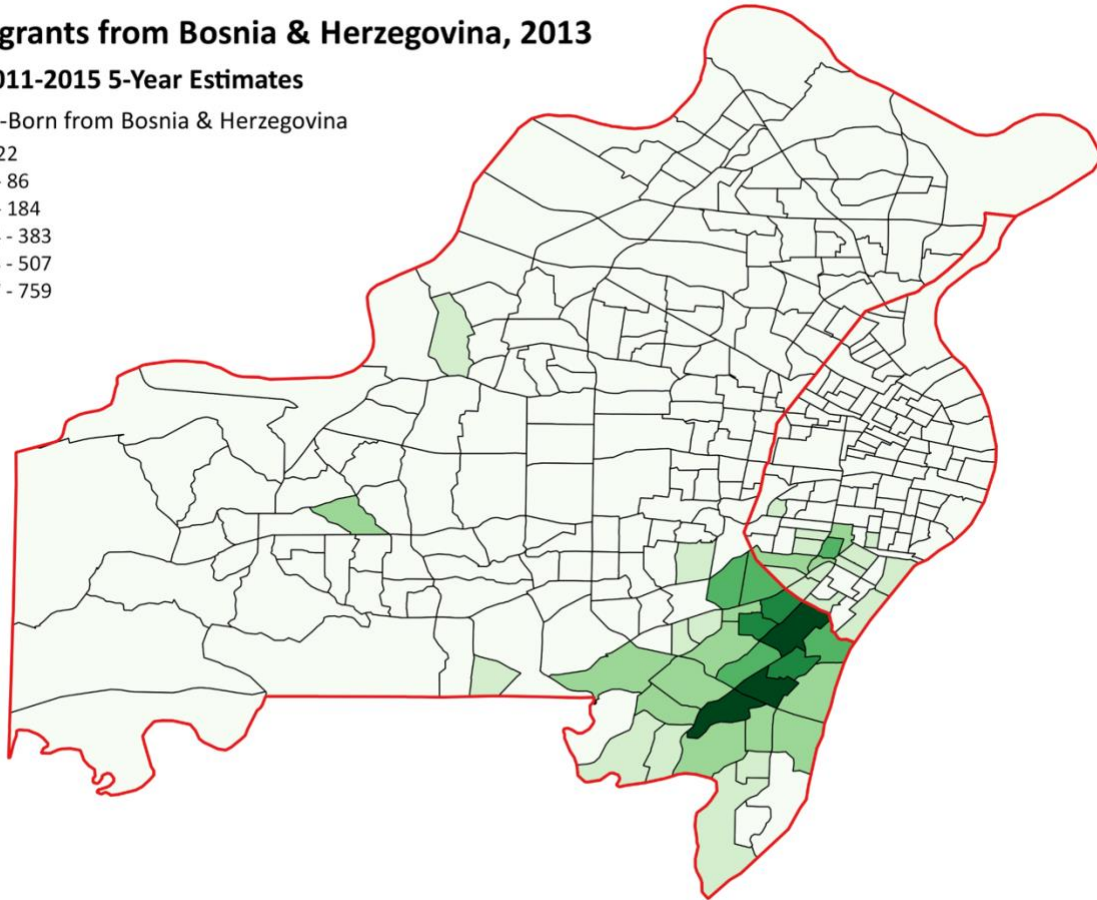
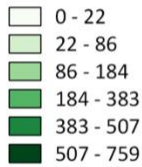


Figure 4

Conclusion: The Suburbanization of Bosnian Immigrant Families

Our results show that, while the first refugees from Bosnia settled in the Bevo Mill area throughout the 1990s, they soon began moving towards South County. This southward movement seems to have continued until today. Anecdotal evidence from our interviews with Bosnian youth and their parents suggests that the primary motivators that drove this residential shift were the search for safer areas and better quality schools. Although it would seem that public safety and education could provide policy makers with specific policies to attract and retain immigrant families, it is noteworthy that the St. Louis Police Department opened a substation in Bevo Mill in 2015, *after* the majority of the Bosnian community had left the city for South County.

We should point out that our analysis was able to track only Bosnian first-generation families and not their native-born children. Furthermore, safety and better quality schools do not explain the short-lived concentration of Bosnians in Mount Pleasant or how immigrant families access information about which schools and school districts to seek out for their children. We hope that our study will be able to shed light on these questions in the future.

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank the Creating Whole Communities Program for providing us with seed funding for our study. Jenny Connelly-Bowen provided critical help with creating the demographic maps and finally we want to thank the respondents in our study who have generously agreed to share their stories and experiences with us thus far.

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