

Definitions

Refugee. A refugee is someone who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. (Article 1 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees)

Asylum-Seeker. An individual who does not meet the legal definition of refugee, but who applies for asylum (or refugee) status after he/she is already present in the US or at a port of entry. Asylum applicants can have any (or no) immigration status when they apply. Asylum status can be granted by either a USCIS asylum officer or by an Immigration Judge within the US Department of Justice's Executive Office of Immigration Review. (Section 208 of the Immigration and Nationality Act)

What Have Refugee Families Experienced?

Many refugees, especially children, have experienced trauma related to war or persecution that may affect their mental and physical health long after the events have occurred. These traumatic events may occur while the refugees are in their country of origin, during displacement from their country of origin, or in the resettlement process here in the US.

While in their country of origin, refugee children may have experienced traumatic events or hardships including:

- Violence (as witnesses, victims, and/or perpetrators)
- War
- Lack of food, water, and shelter
- Physical injuries, infections, and diseases
- Torture
- Forced labor
- Sexual assault
- Lack of medical care
- Loss of loved ones
- Disruption in or lack of access to schooling

During displacement, refugee children often face many of the same types of traumatic events or hardships that they faced in their country of origin, as well as new experiences such as:

- Living in refugee camps
- Separation from family
- Loss of community
- Uncertainty about the future
- Harassment by local authorities
- Traveling long distances by foot
- Detention

Refugee Core Stressors

Refugee children may feel relieved when they are resettled in the US. However, the difficulties they face do not end upon their arrival. Once resettled in the US, refugees may face stressors in four major categories: Traumatic Stress, Acculturation Stress, Resettlement Stress, and Isolation.

Traumatic Stress

Occurs when a child experiences an intense event that threatens or causes harm to his or her emotional and physical well-being. Refugees can experience traumatic stress related to:

- War and persecution
- Displacement from their home
- Flight and migration
- Poverty
- Family/community violence

Resettlement Stress

Stressors that refugee children and families experience as they try to make a new life for themselves. Examples include:

- Financial stressors
- Difficulties finding adequate housing
- Difficulties finding employment
- Loss of community support
- Lack of access to resources
- Transportation difficulties

Acculturation Stress

Stressors that refugee children and families experience as they try to navigate between their new culture and their culture of origin. Examples include:

- Conflicts between children and parents over new and old cultural views
- Conflicts with peers related to cultural misunderstandings
- The necessity to translate for family members who are not fluent in English
- Problems trying to fit in at school
- Struggle to form an integrated identity including elements of their new culture and their culture of origin

Isolation Stress

Stressors that refugee children and families experience as minorities in a new country. Examples include:

- Feelings of loneliness and loss of social support network

- Discrimination
- Experiences of harassment from peers, adults, or law enforcement
- Experiences with others who do not trust the refugee child and family
- Feelings of not fitting in with others
- Loss of social status

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