

Challenges and Resilience in The Lives of Refugees Now Residing In The United States: A Health and Well-Being Perspective

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ABSTRACT

With the significant numbers of refugees currently seen around the world, attention should be paid to the significant challenges they face. This article explores the health-related challenges for refugees now residing in the United States and highlights strategies for building resilience in this vulnerable population.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines refugees as individuals who have been compelled to leave their home countries due to persecution, violence, or war. The United States currently hosts a substantial number of refugees and asylum seekers, with over 363,000 refugees and nearly 1.8 million asylum seekers, and these numbers have been on the rise. Refugee populations originate from diverse regions worldwide, including Iraq, Mexico, Nigeria, Yemen, Syria, Ukraine, and Afghanistan.

Their relocation to the United States presents many challenges, including language barriers, access to quality education, discrimination based on cultural and religious differences, and inadequate healthcare access. Child refugees, constituting a significant portion of the refugee population, face distinct challenges compared to adults. Many refugees grapple with psychological trauma and access to proper healthcare.

In summary, refugees face many challenges when transitioning to a new country, including losing community, familial support, safety, and cultural norms. To address these challenges in the United States, advocates, and public health advisors must actively engage with refugees to assess their needs and build resilient communities. Proactive outreach tailored to refugees' vulnerabilities is crucial to ensuring their well-being and successful integration into their new homes.

CHALLENGE #1: Access to Healthcare

Among the many difficulties refugees face, access to the healthcare system is among the most consequential and can compound an already challenging situation. As infectious disease outbreaks increase worldwide and are region-specific, refugees are at a heightened risk, as they may not have the benefit of prior immunity or understanding of the disease process and its symptoms.

Furthermore, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, ethnic groups and populations can be affected differently by the disease, which also needs to be factored into preventive and treatment measures.

Depending on the state of healthcare in their home countries, some refugees may have undiagnosed medical conditions and undertreated chronic health conditions, including psychiatric illness, which increase their vulnerability.

CHALLENGE #2: Loss of Identity and Professional Development

Many refugees held prior positions in their country before fleeing which may include academic and professional careers. Starting over in a new country with a language barrier can be a challenge, but not having reciprocity or a way to validate their education and work experiences leads to highly qualified refugees performing menial jobs. Stripping work identity impacts refugees and their families and is often seen as an embarrassment. Their prior impact on society may have been honorable and noble, only to now work jobs that require little to no skills or training. This can lead to a feeling that they wasted their educational training and professional career. Rather than start over with school, many refugees continue with their menial jobs in their adopted country.

CHALLENGE #3: Difficulty Integration into Society

Refugees must balance assimilation with maintaining their cultural and religious identity. They often encounter discrimination and challenges due to language, culture, and religious practices. A lack of knowledge about cultural diversity can lead to misunderstanding, which may result in refugees being subjected to harmful stereotypes and discrimination due to their cultural backgrounds and different values and lifestyles.

Not understanding English can make it difficult for refugees to find suitable employment. This puts refugees at an increased risk of being in danger as they may accept work that is not safe to provide for their families. Language is also a crucial aspect of cultural integration, so being unable to speak English may make it very difficult for refugees and asylum seekers to comprehend and adapt to societal norms, customs, and values, leading to discrimination and social isolation from the local population.

Challenge #4: Difficulty Integrating into Schools

Children who enroll in school often face the unfamiliar, as their previous education differs significantly from standard US methods. Unfamiliarity with traditional school practices in the United States, such as signing permission slips or looking for announcements in children's backpacks, can lead to increased stress or confusion.

Refugee children who are from war-torn countries may need a structured and personalized educational program. This may put them behind if the curricula was not the same which further subjects the children to isolation and/or stigmatization.

Children arrive in the US from around the world with diverse linguistic backgrounds, and many have limited knowledge of English. For example, trying to talk to peers, collaborate on school assignments, can seem impossible, making it harder for them to adapt and integrate into society.

CHALLENGE #5: Loss of Childhood

Refugee children having to move or adapt to new environments leads to not having a traditional childhood experience. Growing up too fast has its challenges as well, with children having difficulty forming an identity of self or lasting friendships.

There may not have been schools nearby and nor adequate transportation; thus, the child stayed at home to help support their family. Safety is also a concern, and families may have kept their children at home rather than exposing them to danger by sending them to school.

Children may have had to work to help support their family. By not being other children their own age to connect with, they faced the reality of adult life at a young age. When relocating, the children may face isolation from peers as they didn't adopt the care-free childhood mentality.

CHALLENGE #6: Family Separation

Fragmentation of the family unit and living with extended family does not replace parents. Refugees may be separated from family members who could not get visas into the United States, thus leaving young adults to live with extended family members and leading to emotional stress over loss of proximity to their parents.

Culturally, family units consist of immediate and extended family members. Generations often live together under one roof. Though this has pros and cons, having grown up this way and then living with just a few and perhaps unfamiliar extended family members can be emotionally scarring and detrimental to the well-being of child refugees, especially when challenged with being in a new location with a different language and customs, etc.

CONCLUSION

Refugees face many challenges as they leave their country. Migrating to another country presents some obstacles that can be mitigated and others that can never be replaced. Sense of community, familial support, safety, and cultural customs and norms are a few of the loss's refugees face. A health and well-being advocate to support them will allow refugees to comfortably seek and access care, decreasing the impact of the many hurdles they face. The status of refugees is particularly vulnerable, and community engagement is vital for their well-being and assimilation.

Societal inclusion of refugees is critical for their safety, well-being, and overall mental health. Advocates and public health advisors must engage refugees once they have settled in their new community to conduct a needs assessment and identify factors affecting their livelihood. Efforts made to help assimilate refugees into the community will improve their chances of succeeding and create a culture of inclusivity and caring to promote their resilience.

It is imperative for communities to provide supportive and accepting environments so that children, especially, can grow up and thrive. The familial pressure on children as they grow up in a new country can be challenges, especially as they incorporate their traditional customs in their new societal norms.