

Human rights in a changing sociopolitical climate

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The number of people seeking asylum in the United States is drastically lower this year than last. With a growing national debate over policies and limited understanding of the resettlement process, the United States is on track to admit the fewest number of refugees since creation of the resettlement program.

In a new study to understand the current sociopolitical climate, particularly as it relates to Syrians, researchers from the University of Minnesota conducted a comprehensive needs and readiness assessment of the United States Refugee Resettlement Program.

Damir S. Utran, Ph.D., LMFT, post-doctoral fellow in the University of Minnesota Medical School's Division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Health, and colleagues examined the needs of resettlement organizations in the United States and their readiness to facilitate the transition of Syrian refugees. Published in the journal *International Migration* on behalf of the International Organization for Migration, an affiliate of the United Nations, they designed a survey assessing different aspects of the current program (i.e., community and climate, availability of resources and organizational readiness).

After analyzing responses of 71 resettlement organization leaders, who together resettled 76 percent of all refugees and 44 percent of Syrians over a three-year period from 2013 to 2016, Utran and colleagues found a noticeable shift in the sociopolitical climate after the most recent presidential election.

"We designed and distributed our survey before the [presidential election](#). Our response rates were relatively low before election night but surged the following week," said Utran, lead author of the study and a refugee from Bosnia-Herzegovina. "Organizations became concerned about their ability to facilitate the resettlement of refugees broadly and Syrian refugees specifically given Mr. Trump's campaign-trail rhetoric."

According to the study, organizations struggled with obtaining basic resources for refugees upon their arrival to the United States, including trouble finding housing for large families, helping parents find work and providing individuals inclusive cultural orientation training.

However, the study suggests none of these troubles were their fault.

"Organizations were strangled by recent policy changes that cut their funding dramatically and, in doing so, indirectly reduced their capacity to serve the most vulnerable members of society," said Utran. "Most refugees who come to the United States are women and children. The consequences of limited access to basic needs worsens existing mental health problems from going through countless stressful events, particularly in children."

The study also found that misinformation was not only a significant source of anti-[refugee](#) sentiment but also deepened mistrust between politicians and the public.

"The findings from our study support public education initiatives on refugees and the resettlement process," said Utran. "But there is also good news. Organizations enjoyed working with refugees from Syria and other countries despite the relatively negative sociopolitical climate. They are determined, now more than ever, to make people fleeing from violence and persecution around the world feel welcome in the United States."

More information: Damir Utržan et al, A Needs and Readiness Assessment of the United States Refugee Resettlement Program: Focus on Syrian Asylum-Seekers and Refugees, *International Migration* (2018). DOI: [10.1111/imig.12479](https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12479)

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