

Study: Refugees often face violence, mental health issues in the cities where they had sought safety

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Refugees who experience violence in the North American cities where they've sought asylum suffer from devastating, long-lasting mental health

issues—and those issues can impact them just as deeply as the violence they faced in their home country, says Carmel Salhi, assistant professor of health sciences.

A new study on the mental [health](#) impact of violence on refugees provides valuable insight into the ongoing issues facing an already marginalized population, says Salhi. Using data from a community-partnered study funded by National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities with Somali refugees living in North American cities of like Boston and Minneapolis. The study is part of a multi-year effort of Northeastern's Institute for Health Equity and Social Justice Research and the Refugee Trauma and Children's Center at the Boston Children's Hospital to better understand both mental health risk and resilience among [refugee](#) populations.

How did you decide on this line of research?

One thing that struck me about past work with refugees is that, while it's a population that's highly exposed to violence, their experiences after resettlement are under-studied relative to those in their country of origin.

Were you surprised at the amount of violence these refugees experienced in the places they sought asylum?

Based on my past work and the experiences of other colleagues who work with refugees, I knew this was a big issue, but I didn't realize the magnitude of the problem. More than half of the people we spoke to for this study had some kind of direct experience with violence. The other important finding was how deeply post-resettlement violence was related to mental health, beyond the impact of violence related to political conflict. I didn't expect that our findings would suggest that what

refugees experienced in North America would be similar in impact to their experiences of political violence.

What kind of violence do these refugees encounter?

Before they resettled, the most common sort of violence was that they were physically forced out of their home, were beaten or severely injured or witnessed someone else going through physical violence. Other than being forced from one's home, refugees living in North America reported similar incidents at a substantial rate, such as being beaten or armed robbery. So it's not surprising the deep impact these experiences have on this population's mental health

Where are they experiencing these incidents?

They occur in or around people's homes or in their neighborhoods. And what we know from the qualitative interviews from this study is that they experience a lot of structural and interpersonal discrimination in complex ways, because they are refugees, they are Black, and they are Muslim.

How can the communities where refugees resettle address these issues?

I think there needs to be more investment in communities that work with refugee populations, both in the systems that support refugees specifically but also in the communities themselves. In addition, I believe violence after resettlement is something that mental health providers can be more actively attuned to. In general, there is a lot of focus on what sort of trauma refugees experienced before they resettled, and rightfully so. However, we need to pay more attention to the challenges they [experiences](#) after seeking asylum, including the [violence](#)

they continue to face.

Provided by Northeastern University

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