

# How do refugees in the United States learn about race?

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The history of American race relations is intricate and troubled, and it can be difficult for individuals who have spent their entire lives in the United States to understand its nuances.

How much harder, then, might it be for recently-arrived refugees to

grasp the complex dynamics of race in this country? How might obstacles to understanding affect refugees' experiences as they try to integrate into their new environments and become a part of the communities where they live?

These are some of the questions underlying a new study by researchers at The Fletcher School, "Assessing Refugees' Understanding of and Responses to American Race Relations." The study, led by Henry J. Leir Professor in Global Migration Karen Jacobsen and co-authored by student researchers at The Fletcher School, is part of Tufts' Refugees in Towns project, which promotes understanding of migrants' experiences.

The study's researchers worked with a refugee resettlement agency called Hello Neighbor—a nationwide coalition of grassroots organizations that provide services to refugees and immigrants—supporting their efforts to understand how refugees learn about race relations in the U.S. In particular, researchers investigated how refugees understand racism, both as its victims and as its potential perpetrators. The study highlights the ways in which participants learned about American race relations before, during, and after their journeys to the U.S., through school, digital and print media, word of mouth, and personal experiences of discrimination.

"We want to learn more about how new immigrants and refugees experience racism themselves and then sometimes perpetrate the stereotypes and prejudices," Jacobsen noted. "We also want to work with refugee communities to help them—and us—learn about race in America. And we want to interrupt the process where new immigrants themselves pick up racist attitudes through not understanding the nuances; the hope is to then redirect the learning."

Between June and August 2022, student researchers partnered with the Hello Neighbor Network, living and working out of two cities:

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Mobile, Alabama.

They spent time meeting refugees served by local branches of the Hello Neighbor Network—in Alabama an organization called Dwell, and in Pennsylvania the original Hello Neighbor agency. Using Participatory Action Research methods, in which the subjects of a study are closely involved in aspects of the study's design, execution, publication, and follow-up, the students developed relationships with staff at the partner agencies and refugees in the communities. The partners helped the researchers create effective interview guides.

The findings? The report stresses that the study is exploratory, based on interviews with a relatively small number of refugees, and that the findings are not widely generalizable—but that they begin to offer some answers to the driving questions.

For example, it suggests that what the refugees learned, and how they learned it, depended in part on their education, age, and country of origin. Higher levels of education led to greater awareness of racism in the U.S.

"Most Pittsburgh participants said they had not known about U.S. racism before their arrival," the report states. "Only three Afghans said they had known about it; one said he knew because he is an academic. One participant from Congo said she had learned about the slave trade in school, but had not known about modern U.S. racism."

As for age, the report states that, "because they were on [social media](#)," younger refugees seemed more aware than their elder counterparts that racism exists in the U.S. And country of origin had an impact as well: "In Pittsburgh, more African participants knew about U.S. racism before their arrival compared to Iraqis," the report says.

Jacob Ewing, F22, a project manager at The Fletcher School's Leir Institute for Migration and Human Security, where the Refugees in Towns project is based, emphasized the importance of the study's relationship-building approach. "Our partners, Dwell and Hello Neighbor, were integral to the decisions we made about our [research process](#)," he said.

Once the interview guides were ready, the researchers interviewed 39 refugees, ages 18 to 65, including 14 Afghans, 13 Congolese, eight Iraqis, two Sudanese, one Nigerian, and one Rwandan. The questions were worded to avoid confusion around the term "race," explained Lucy Mastellar, a master's degree candidate at The Fletcher School, who conducted the interviews in Mobile. "Every culture has different definitions of race," Mastellar said. "When we were asking questions, we phrased them as, 'Have you ever experienced differential treatment because of your skin color, your appearance, or the way you talk?'"

Although most Americans probably would not consider accents or language to be elements of race, some of the refugees interviewed for the study did, especially those who did not distinguish between race and ethnicity. For example, in Pittsburgh, according to the report, "participants were unsure about the difference between race and ethnicity, as ethnicity matters in their countries of origin rather than race, and they were not familiar with the difference between the two concepts." It was only when researchers explained ethnicity as "a social group defined by similar language and culture" that some participants began to understand race as a separate concept. Likewise, in Mobile, some refugees felt that discrimination occurred because of the language they spoke. One participant told researchers, "We get bullied for how we sound, the accent."

What surprised Mastellar the most about the data she gathered, she said, was how little it differed from the data gathered by her counterparts in

Pittsburgh. As the report states, "Several participants in Mobile noted the American South's reputation as a hotbed for racism and intolerance, yet few participants expressed higher rates of mistreatment due to their geographic location." However, the report also notes that more research is needed to tease out the effects that location of resettlement might have on refugees' experiences of racism.

Another finding that intrigued Mastellar is that the environment in which refugees lived before coming to the U.S. seemed to influence their levels of racial prejudice. "A lot of refugees who had negative perceptions of the Black community in the United States were in [refugee camps](#) before coming to the U.S.," she said. "On the other hand, refugees who had been in cities—in, for example, Jordan and Turkey—did not seem to have the same degree of bias when they came in." (Again, the study notes these findings are exploratory and cannot be generalized to the entire resettled refugee population.)

The report notes that "Afghan participants...stated that in refugee camps they heard Black Americans were dangerous," and some Congolese men reported that "they were scared of Black Americans due to their media portrayals in the refugee camps where they had spent time."

Researchers hope that such insights will help lead to the creation of antiracist programming to help refugees adjust to their new environments. In the spring, Mastellar and co-researchers Yumeka Kawahara and Charlie Williams, also master's candidates at Fletcher, will conduct further research in Pittsburgh, Mobile, and two additional cities—Lincoln, Nebraska, and Utica, New York—to share and validate their findings and to launch another phase of Participatory Action Research in the hopes of developing effective programming. The Refugees in Towns project and Tisch College will host a symposium at Tufts that will include partners from the Hello Neighbor Network, leaders from the [refugee](#) communities, students, and Tufts experts, to

share their findings.

"We're looking to go back to these communities to determine how we can create interventions guided by the communities themselves to help refugees better navigate and understand racial contexts," Ewing said.

Jacobsen added that the research team is not yet sure what their proposed interventions will look like. "They could be workshops, training sessions, school curricula, informal sessions—we don't know yet," she said. "We won't know until we consult with the communities about what would work best for them."

Ultimately, she said, "the goal is to scale up and see if we can help develop services and programming that will be applicable around the U.S.—and also in other countries. We'd love to try this out elsewhere too."

**More information:** Assessing Refugees' Understanding of and Responses to American Race Relations. [sites.tufts.edu/ihs/files/2022-11-refugees-Report\\_v3.pdf](https://sites.tufts.edu/ihs/files/2022-11-refugees-Report_v3.pdf)

Provided by Tufts University

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