

## LOSS AND PROTRACTED FAMILY SEPARATION AMONG REFUGEE CHILDREN AND YOUTH: EXAMINING POST-MIGRATION IMPACTS AND SERVICE NEEDS

**RESEARCHERS:** Akm Alamgir<sup>1</sup>, Serena Nudel<sup>1</sup>, Amjed Abojedi<sup>1</sup>, Kwame McKenzie<sup>2</sup>, Brenda Roche<sup>2</sup>, Michaela Hynie<sup>3</sup>, Manolli Ekra<sup>4</sup>, and Branka Agic<sup>5</sup>

**AFFILIATION:** Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services<sup>1</sup>, Wellesley Institute<sup>2</sup>, York University<sup>3</sup>, Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI)<sup>4</sup>, The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)<sup>5</sup>

**RESEARCH PARTNER:** Access Alliance, OCASI, Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT), Across Boundaries, FCJ Refugee Centre

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### WHAT THE RESEARCH IS ABOUT

**OVERVIEW:** This study combines findings from a literature review with interview data from refugee youth and service providers to summarize evidence about the impacts of family loss and separation on refugee youth. Based on their findings, researchers developed a resource list for refugee youth, a practitioner toolkit for conducting research with refugee youth, and a policy statement.

**OBJECTIVE:** To explore how the experience of loss or family separation affects the mental and social wellbeing of refugee youth.

**RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION:** Refugee youth who have been separated from their families comprise a socially vulnerable population. The barriers they face in accessing social and healthcare services escalates their trauma. Despite the rising number of refugee children and youth who are “unaccompanied” or “separated” worldwide, there is limited evidence on how loss and separation of family members due to war and forced migration affect their wellbeing and post-migration settlement.

### HOW THE DATA WAS OBTAINED

The research team took a multi-phased approach, beginning with a scoping review of peer-reviewed articles from databases and journals. Appropriate articles were selected for review and analysed using qualitative software. The team then collected firsthand data through five focus group discussions with service providers and refugee youth who had experienced family loss or separation. Trained peer researchers participated in the collective model that was used to analyze data from the three sources.

## WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

Mental health challenges are common among refugee youth who experience family loss or separation. PTSD was the most prevalent mental health concern, followed by depression and anxiety.

- Severity of PTSD is related to the frequency and magnitude of the traumatic experience. Self-conscious emotion (guilt and shame), lower levels of literacy, language barriers, and social isolation predict the severity of PTSD.
- Housing in low-support care facilities affects the severity of PTSD. Refugee youth who were placed in reception centres for adults had higher levels of psychological distress symptoms than those placed in youth reception centres.
- Social determinants of health – such as poverty, social insecurity, and deprivation from family attachment – triggered mental health issues and negatively impacted integration.
- Manual cognitive behavioural therapy at the individual level and supportive services at the community level were found to be effective intervention models. This includes support with housing and other needs (i.e.: obtaining warm clothing, dealing with claims in court, filing taxes etc); mental health, leadership, and mentorship programs; recreational activities and arts-based programs.
- Social support plays a crucial role in reducing PTSD, depression, and anxiety.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### ✓ ACCESSIBILITY

Services and service providers must be accessible (in terms of cost, availability, and language) and use trauma-informed approaches.

### 🏛️ POLICY CHANGE

Reduce wait times for claimant decisions, expediate family reunification, improve access to healthcare, and allow youth to access services in their preferred language.

### 🏠 AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Refugee youth need access to affordable housing regardless of their claimant status.

### 📖 EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT

Education credentials from outside of Canada need to be recognized. Policies aimed at protecting refugee youth from exploitation in the workplace must be strengthened and enforced.





## SUPPORT & ADVOCACY

Refugee supporters should adopt a strengths-based approach that recognizes the resilience of refugee populations and positions refugees to be key stakeholders in decision-making and policy advocacy.

A 'Community of Practice' is important for sharing best-practices and supporting separated refugee youth with resources and policy advocacy. Community health centres such as Access Alliance, can playing a lead role.

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## ABOUT CYRRC

The Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition (CYRRC) is a network of researchers, service providers, and government partners working together to produce and share research that facilitates the integration of young refugees and their families in Canada and beyond.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition.

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