

COVID-19 and Refugees:

Understanding the Human Security Consequences of Delayed Resettlement

This project seeks to understand how delayed international resettlement as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic affects the human security of refugees. The project will be a short-term scoping study working with individuals who have recently been resettled to Canada. We hope findings will inform broader research on consequences of narrowing channels for the international protection of displaced people.

Co-Investigators

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Rationale

There are over 26 million refugees in the world, the highest figure on record. The vast majority (over 85%) are hosted in developing states. Moreover, the nature of today's displacement and lack of durable solutions means increasingly protracted refugee situations - with displacement lasting an average of more than two decades. Return to countries of origin and political integration in host states are increasingly rare.

In this broader context, third-country resettlement remains a crucial part of the international community's humanitarian response to forced migration, and a critical means for securing the long-term protection of refugees unable to return home. However, global refugee resettlement efforts remain highly limited in overall impact. Support for resettlement has not expanded to match the significant growth in displacement. On average, less than 1% of the world's refugees have been resettled annually over the last two decades. Resettlement has declined drastically given the Trump Administration's efforts to cut American resettlement quotas. Global resettlement fell to a low of 107,800 places in 2019.

The already challenging situation was further exacerbated by the imposition of worldwide mobility restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only did travel restrictions impacted access to asylum and refugees' wellbeing in host states, but already meagre resettlement opportunities plummeted. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees' most recent data reflects a nearly two-thirds decrease in resettlement during the first year of the pandemic. The number of departure countries dropped from 84 to 69 and receiving countries from 27 to 22 during the pandemic.

The UN and receiving countries cooperate to identify and resettle the most vulnerable people in the most urgent need of protection ahead of those in similar circumstances. The UNHCR and Government of Canada recognize vulnerability as exposure to heightened risk to personal or physical safety. Put more plainly, those selected for resettlement among the tiny fraction of the world's registered refugees face real and immediate hazards including gender-based violence, extortion, or being targeted for political, social, ethnic, or religious identity or affiliations. Vulnerability can also include acute medical needs or trauma, being a single parent with young children, danger because of sexual orientation or gender identity, and a range of other factors. The effects of delayed resettlement for those already in the queue are potentially severe.

Methods

This project proposes a qualitative study focused on identifying the human security consequences of delayed settlement as a result of COVID-19, by engaging with individuals recently resettled to Canada whose arrival was directly delayed by the pandemic. The researchers will use approximately 30 semi-structured interviews to explore the situation of refugee participants prior to their arrival, with a particular emphasis on the impacts of delayed resettlement on refugees' human security. Recruitment will emphasize inclusion of a broad range of relevant demographics, such as nationality and host countries from which they were resettled, as well as aim for equal gender and diverse age representation. Canada is an ideal site for the research given its commitment to resettlement even during the pandemic, the diversity of resettlement programs, and wide range of actors in the settlement sector with which to partner on research.

The researchers will also conduct one to two focus groups with personnel from Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) Service Provider Organizations who are tasked with settling Government-Assisted Refugees, Sponsorship Agreement Holders who oversee private refugee resettlement, representatives from the International Organization for Migration and UNHCR, and frontline workers who understand the impacts of delayed resettlement.

We hope that early findings will inform a broader research project on the effects of declining support for global resettlement and the urgent need to provide more durable solutions for the world's displaced people.