

Refugee Resettlement Position Statement
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The American Psychoanalytic Association condemns inflammatory rhetoric directed at refugees seeking safety from conflicts in Iraq and Syria. We encourage both a greater understanding of the plight refugees face and the compassion that inevitably results from such understanding. The following principles organize our position:

- Statements and calls for policies that encourage racial and religious profiling create unnecessary fear and suspicion in U.S. citizens. Such rhetoric breeds insecurity, distorts relations between groups, and creates dysfunction within and between U.S. citizens, as well as harming refugees seeking safety and resettlement. All such statements should be rescinded and avoided.
- Assessments and interventions should be provided early in the refugee resettlement process to determine psychological vulnerabilities and mental health needs of refugees. Special attention should be paid to mental health issues resulting from refugee experiences such as traumatic loss, separation from family, and persecution.
- Reasonably efficient procedures for refugee resettlement and integration into new communities will minimize damaging mental health consequences and increases the benefit that will accrue to communities accepting refugees.
- Leaders across the political spectrum can temper the incendiary atmosphere created by vitriolic rhetoric by educating the public about the dangers of vilifying and persecuting vulnerable groups. All government officials and community leaders, including religious and business leaders, as well as others with a public profile, can lead by example by encouraging empathy and altruism and by opposing inhumanity.

Background

The United States defines refugees as persons who: 1) are located outside the United States, 2) are of special humanitarian concern to our country, 3) demonstrate that they were persecuted, or fear persecution, due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, 4) are not firmly resettled in another country, and 5) are admissible to the United States.¹

By any account, the refugee crisis caused by conflicts in Syria and Iraq is horrific; the number of refugees has in just the last year surged to over four million.² Although the vast majority of refugees prefer to return home upon resolution of the conflict, many remain vulnerable and benefit from resettlement.

Psychoanalytic Understanding of Refugee Public Discourse

Political and sociocultural discourse emphasizing “difference” between nationalities, races, or religions stirs the natural proclivity in human beings to view “outsiders” suspiciously and with hostility.³ Neuroscience has documented our predisposition towards prejudice and stereotyping.⁴ When presented with critical and hostile information about “outsiders,” the mind’s unconscious propensity for prejudice and stereotyping overrides reason. Our capacity for empathy shrinks, or even disappears altogether.⁵

The traumatic experience of refugees is well-documented: traumatic separation from family and peers, flight from homeland, loss of community, daily uncertainty about the possibility of survival, and the many strains associated with temporary resettlement. Both children and adults suffer. While many show resilience in the face of trauma, others suffer psychological distress such as depression, sleep disturbances, chronic anxiety, anger, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The dysfunction harms families and individuals.

As psychoanalysts, we value individual experience. Appreciating the differences and distinct human narratives that exist across racial, cultural, and religious groups is a source for individual and group strength. We witness every day the lived historical trauma in individuals, often passed from one generation to the next, and the next. The cycle of damage demands ongoing efforts at healing from succeeding generations. Such traumas become a part of the history of a people and of a nation. We must protect succeeding generations of Americans from the trauma of persecuting refugees seeking safety in our country today.⁶

References

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