



## Refugee young people and resettlement

September 2006

### Overview

This information sheet provides workers with an overview of some of the common experiences refugee young people face in resettling in Australia. It describes the journey refugees make from their country of origin to Australia — from the refugee experience, flight and time spent in refugee camps, to the pressures young people face in negotiating their new life in Australia.

### What does it mean to be a refugee?

While there is no standard 'refugee experience', refugees have, by definition, been forced to flee their country of origin because of war or persecution. Many refugee young people will come to Australia with their immediate or extended family, and others will come as unaccompanied minors or with non-parent carers, such as siblings.

Some young people who arrive in Australia through other migration programs (such as family migration) come from refugee source countries and may have also experienced persecution or periods spent in refugee camps.

A growing proportion of those arriving as humanitarian entrants in Australia are young people. In 2005, 64% of Australia's 13,075 Humanitarian new arrivals were under the age of 25 and 31% were between the age of 12–24.

**Figure 1** provides an overview of some of the common experiences and issues faced by refugee young people that impact on their settlement and wellbeing. It should be noted that this diagram focuses primarily on issues and barriers, and does not describe the many strengths that refugee young people and their families utilise in negotiating resettlement.

### The refugee experience

The refugee experience is by definition traumatic, and characterised by persecution, displacement, loss and grief, and forced separation from family, home and belongings. This displacement has a profound impact on the individual, family and community. Many refugee young people and their families will have experienced some or all of the following:

- Forced departure from their country of origin;
- Conflict, organised violence and human rights abuses; and
- A dangerous escape from their country of origin, travelling long distances, sometimes by foot and in cramped conditions (RRAC 2002:4).

Those who are unable to return home often spend many years in a country of first asylum, which is usually another developing country (e.g. Kenya or Thailand). For some young people, the majority of their lives have been spent in transition countries and this profoundly affects their identity and resettlement experience in Australia. Many young people will have spent time in UN organised refugee camps, while others may have lived in the community in an urban situation. Conditions in refugee camps vary widely in terms of the availability of amenities, infrastructure, basic services and food. However, most young people who have lived in a camp experience:

- Prolonged periods in overcrowded conditions, where social and political structures are fragmented or have collapsed;
- Low nutrition and poor health;
- Disrupted schooling (a few hours a day or none at all); and
- Profound lack of social opportunities and life choices.

Those living in urban situations (such as in Egypt or Greece) may have had better access to health services and education than their counterparts in refugee camps, but have often faced hostility and racism from the wider community. For example, families may have been too fearful to let their young people leave the house and attend school.

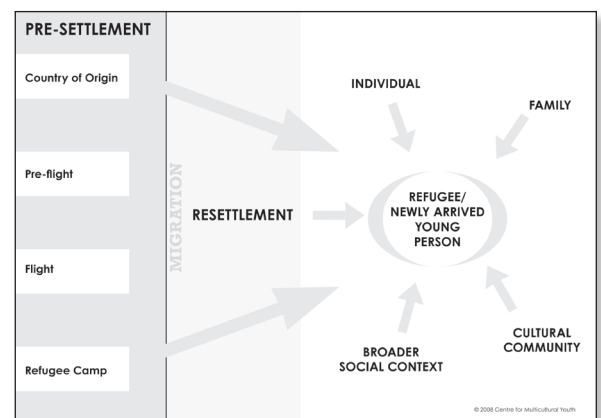


Figure 1: Refugee youth issues





## Resettlement in Australia

For young people who are refugees or newly arrived in Australia, the developmental tasks of adolescence are compounded by the traumatic nature of the refugee experience, cultural dislocation, loss of established social networks and the practical demands of resettlement (RRAC 2002: 4).

Refugee young people must negotiate education and employment pathways (many with a history of disrupted or no formal education), a new language and culture, make new friends, and navigate unfamiliar and complex social systems (such as Centrelink, Australian laws, public transport), while also negotiating individual, family and community expectations.

## The strengths of the refugee experience

Despite the immense difficulty of resettlement and recovery, refugee young people often make remarkable progress and bring a wealth of resources and strengths to the Australian community. The refugee experience can bring about qualities such as:

- Resilience and resourcefulness;
- Adaptability;
- Strong commitment to the family and the value of community; and
- Strong desire to achieve educationally.

Newly arrived young people often have broad international knowledge, multilingual skills and awareness of many cultures and communities. If well supported in the transition to life in Australia, refugee young people have demonstrated their strong capacity to be able to rebuild their lives, achieve their goals and contribute dynamically to the broader community.

## What resettlement services are available to refugee young people?

• The Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) is a federally-funded program which coordinates the services for newly arrived humanitarian entrants who have been granted an offshore visa. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) funds a range of services to provide accommodation, information and referral, intensive assistance, volunteer support, and torture and trauma services.

Some humanitarian entrants receive less help, and are instead supported by family members. Those on temporary protection visas (TPV/THP) who have spent time in detention before having their refugee status recognised are not able to access this support.

• After a period of adjustment, most refugees are able to access Migrant Resource Centres and other agencies funded through the Settlement Grants Program (SGP), of which there are a number of youth-specific positions ([www.cmy.net.au/ResourcesfortheSector#Directories](http://www.cmy.net.au/ResourcesfortheSector#Directories)).

For more information about IHSS and SGP, go to: [www.immi.gov.au](http://www.immi.gov.au).

• Most humanitarian entrants are entitled to receive the full range of Centrelink benefits on arrival in Australia. The financial costs for those starting anew, however, may mean that families have little disposable income. The pressure to leave school and take up work, or to work part time, can be very high. Young people often feel responsible for helping to repay family debt and may also send money overseas to support family and friends, and to assist further family members to migrate. (YAPA 2004:1)

• Refugee young people of school age are entitled to attend an English Language School or Centre (also known as Intensive English Centres) for up to 12 months before transitioning into mainstream education and/or employment. Those of post-compulsory school age are able to access free English tuition through Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) providers. Young refugees often find it difficult to access appropriate education and training pathways, particularly as their previous education may have been disrupted or even non-existent (YAPA 2004:1).

• Some people who enter Australia as refugees are eligible for housing in a government-leased flat for a limited period after arrival, where they pay rent before accessing long term accommodation. Others have to find housing in the private rental market when they first arrive, which can be extremely difficult due to the shortage of appropriately-sized and affordable housing for large families, newly arrived families' inability to provide a rental history, and discrimination. Humanitarian entrants are not seen as a priority group within public housing and are required to go on the same lengthy waiting lists that other low-income earners contend with.

• Humanitarian entrants undergo a rigorous health screening prior to arrival. Once in Australia they are eligible for a Medicare card. Young people who have spent time in refugee camps may have long term health issues or injuries that have not been adequately treated, and face many barriers to accessing health services in Australia, such as a lack of knowledge and information about available services, language and cultural barriers.



## Negotiating individual, family and community expectations

Throughout resettlement young people juggle multiple pressures, from family, school, peer and community expectations, through to adolescence and personal development.

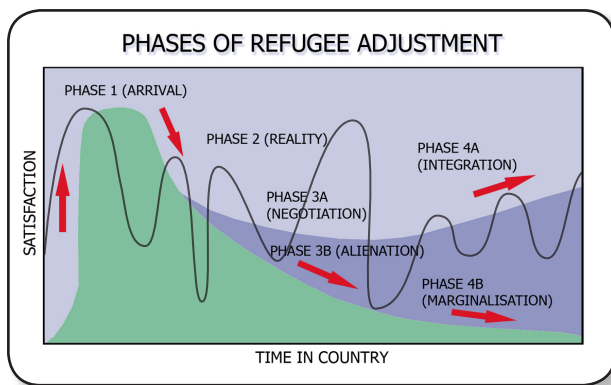
**Figure 2** reflects the phases of resettlement that many young refugees go through:

**Phase 1** is characterised by relief mixed with high expectations, feelings of being disoriented and confused, and numbness and anger.

**Phase 2** occurs when a young person's desire for quick adjustment has not been realised and awareness of the challenges to be met can be overwhelming.

**Phases 3** and **4** are largely dependent on the settlement support and acceptance that young people experience. The extent to which a young person is able to build on strengths and effectively negotiate systems will determine whether they experience a growing sense of mastery and comfort in Australia, or alienation and marginalisation. (Minnesota Centre for Victims of Torture)

**Figure 2:** Source: Minnesota Centre for Victims of Torture



### Individual

Refugee young people living in Australia are often recovering from the effects of torture and trauma, which may mean they feel depressed or angry, experience nightmares, have trouble concentrating, feel a loss of meaning, or find it difficult to make new relationships. Others may have been too young to consciously remember their experience but may be living with relatives who express their pain in ways the young person may not understand or feel able to cope with. This is in addition to having to cope with adapting and integrating to a new life in Australia and searching for their own identity within different cultures.

### Family

The pressures of resettlement on families can be enormous and have a considerable impact on how well a young person

negotiates their resettlement. Attachment and family support can be some of the strongest factors in the successful integration of a refugee young person. However, some of the common challenges for refugee families with young people include:

- Inter-generational conflict within families due to changing values and expectations;
- Changes in family roles where young people are expected to adopt adult roles, such as advocating on behalf of the family due to their stronger English language skills;
- Changes in family make-up and dynamics as families are reunified after many years of separation, or young people are sponsored out to Australia by distant relatives;
- Young people feeling guilty that other family members have been 'left behind' and feel responsible for their wellbeing overseas;
- Overcrowded housing and a lack of study space;
- Large family size and financial difficulties, including repaying pre-arrival air fare debts;
- Family members absent (due to being killed or going missing in home country).

### Community

A young person's resettlement experience will depend on how they negotiate the expectations and value systems of both their cultural community and within the broader Australian community. Whether young people feel accepted and able to create a sense of belonging and identity will depend on factors such as:

- Racism and stereotyping in the broader community (including in schools and the media);
- Access to culturally appropriate sport & recreation opportunities;
- Positive dialogue between young people and community/religious leaders about expectations.
- Opportunities for meaningful participation in community debates, structures, groups and environments.

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