



ISSUES PAPER

Late Arrivals

**The needs of refugee young people who resettle in
later adolescence**

Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues

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Late Arrivals: The needs of refugee young people who resettle in later adolescence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 OVERVIEW

This paper explores the significance of age as a factor in the successful settlement of refugee young people who arrive in Australia.¹ The Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (CMYI) has found that many young people who have arrived at an older age (i.e. in late adolescence - 15-24 years) are faced with an array of additional pressures, demands and stresses that are particularly acute. These include more significant pressure to achieve educationally, less previous experience of education and higher level of family responsibilities than those who arrive at a younger age. These and other barriers impact significantly on the settlement experience of refugee young people.

This paper seeks to document and explore the significance of these factors on the settlement experiences of young people aged 15-24 years. The paper examines:

- fundamental assumptions of youth and family work;
- the interface between chronological age, adolescent development and settlement; and
- the impact of the policy focus on early years for newly arrived adolescents and their families.

It also outlines a number of strategies and policy recommendations to improve the settlement outcomes and life opportunities for these young people.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

The issue of settlement in the context of late adolescence has been regularly identified by those workers who provide direct service to refugee young people. It has, however, received little discussion or examination in either a policy or program context. Concerns about this particular age cohort have also been raised a number of times through a network of youth workers funded to work specifically with migrant and refugee young people facilitated by CMYI in 2003-5. Young people presenting at the Sudanese Youth Forum held by CMYI in October 2004 also highlighted some of the on-arrival needs of older adolescents.

Following initial consultations around emerging issues with CMYI's direct service staff, a further consultation was held in March 2005 with 22 specialist workers in the community, education and government sectors with expertise in working with newly arrived and refugee young people to further explore the settlement needs of older adolescents. These consultations form the basis of this paper along with a small-scale literature search.

¹ The Australian youth sector generally defines youth as between 12 and 24 years.

2. THE YOUTH CONTEXT: ADOLESCENCE

2.1 OVERVIEW

It is clear that refugee young people who arrive in Australia while in late adolescence face a number of issues, however their presence more broadly raises a series of dilemmas for the youth and family service sector, and for the Governments who fund them. In particular, much of our understanding of the notion of youth or adolescence is predicated on a Western concept of adolescence as a time of increasing independence. This section seeks to explore the applicability of our received understandings of adolescence for the refugees settling in Australia.

2.2 THE CONCEPT OF ADOLESCENCE

Aside from the focus on independence, following the work of numerous sociologists, the predominant Western understandings of adolescence itself as a universal stage experienced by all human beings has been challenged, particularly in a cross cultural context.

In the West the concept of youth as extended childhood has developed relatively recently, having evolved in pre-industrial times and applied first to the European aristocracy and then during the industrial revolution to working class young people. Prior to that there was no 'adolescent' stage between childhood and adulthood.

2.3 INDEPENDENCE IN ADOLESCENCE

There are certain challenges central to adolescence, typically characterised by human growth and biological changes. Within the Anglo-Australian context, adolescence is associated with a shift from dependence on parents/guardians to independence. This often leads to the young person moving out of home and increasingly making autonomous decisions. The Western framework for adolescence can become a point of conflict however for migrant communities.

For many migrants the focus on the growth of independence is at odds with other cultural notions of the process of transition to adulthood as a fulfilment of roles and responsibilities, and the development of a greater sense of inter-dependence within the family.

Family members migrating to Australia are often concerned about this emphasis on encouraging independence, separation from the family and formation of the individual identity. This concern causes distrust in Government initiatives (such as Centrelink youth allowance payments) and fears about the negative influence youth services play in supporting young people.

Despite a strong collective and family focus in many cultures, some young people, such as the orphaned 'lost boys' of Sudan, have had independence forced upon them and have had to carry an adult burden from a very young age. They have sometimes had to take care of their

own personal needs such as finding food, shelter, money or work for many years while separated from family members.

Some cultures also emphasise independence as a cultural value. Good cross-cultural youth work practice indicates the need to both recognise the independence young people are often capable of, while supporting them to develop interdependence rather than independence in the family and community context.

According to one extensive study of Sudanese unaccompanied minors in refugee camps (Barnen 1994), many of the 'lost boys' seem to have fared well in coping with a horrendous series of life events including the loss of parents, month-long dangerous journeys on foot, and witnessing horrific events, partly because they came from a nomadic culture which taught independence from a young age.

2.4 ADOLESCENCE AS TRANSITION

The concept of adolescence as a transition time from childhood to adulthood is not recognised across all cultures. The expectations and relationship between child and adult within the family can vary from culture to culture. Young people's experience of the transition is dependent on a range of factors such as class, gender, age, migration and other life experience, position or role in the family, marital status, or cultural expectations of responsibility. Some communities may incorporate a transitional adolescent period; others consider the child to simply become an adult at certain life stages, such as at the time of marriage.

The roles of an adult and child are also understood in a variety of ways. As the eldest male, a relatively young person in his teens may be expected to take on roles considered adult in an Australian context, in advocating on behalf of his family or in disciplining siblings, whereas the youngest sibling of a family may be considered a child well into their early twenties because of their position in the family.

It is important in the context of refugee youth resettlement to acknowledge that youth or adolescence is to a degree socially constructed, that concepts of adolescence vary across and within cultures, and that in some cultures adolescence does not occur at all. Youth is probably best understood therefore in terms of a specific set of social relations, culture or context. The implications of this understanding are varied. Settlement and youth services need to engage with newly arrived communities with an understanding that 'youth' may not be a familiar concept. They need to recognise that some newly arrived young people may not identify with the term, while others will take this identity on wholeheartedly. There is also a need to recognise that in many cultures, children and adolescents may be required to take on adult responsibilities within the family and may have been doing so for many years.

2.5 DELAYED OR SUSPENDED ADOLESCENCE

Delayed adolescence is a factor for some young refugees in their early twenties. While their actual age may indicate the onset of adulthood, the issues they are addressing may have been faced by their Australian born counterparts in their early teenage years. They will often require youth support services for a longer time. Their development may have been disrupted by the impact of the traumatic nature of the refugee experience and existence 'on the run', long periods in camps or second countries in situations of severe deprivation, cultural dislocation, or loss of established social networks.

3. THE SETTLEMENT CONTEXT: THE IMPACT OF THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

3.1 OVERVIEW

Given the transition from child to adult is coupled with a cultural transition and settlement demands, it is important that policy makers and practitioners grapple with the interface between chronological age, adolescent development and settlement needs. The focus on chronological age alone does not account for the complexity of needs for this group.

3.2 TRAUMA RECOVERY

There is an unresolved question about whether or not young people are more resilient in coping with negative life events. The age of a child at the time of the loss of a parent, or experience of war, deprivation or trauma, will certainly have a significant impact on a young person's recovery and psychological wellbeing, but the effects are not necessarily straightforward. Knowledge of, and insight into, horrific events young people or other family members have experienced may mean they are better able to make sense of events and therefore be less traumatised. The converse may be equally true. Older young people may feel a greater sense of guilt or burden of responsibility for the survival and recovery of the whole family. War and displacement creates risk for all children, but adolescents may be at particular risk by virtue of the level of maturity that they have attained. They may be particularly adversely affected by experiences such as under-age military recruitment, sexual exploitation, and involvement in harmful child labour practices.

It is critical that supports for older young people are aware that the effects of trauma may be varied and significant. While it may not be immediately obvious that an older adolescent is traumatised, it may be that they have simply found more effective ways to hide the effects with age.

4. THE SERVICE CONTEXT: EARLY INTERVENTION TO CRISIS SUPPORT

4.1 A GAP IN THE SERVICE SECTOR

There is significant unmet demand for support services for newly arrived young people well beyond the 18 year cut off, which is a common eligibility criteria for many youth services.

Given the complexity of settlement and support needs, and the interactions between developmental, social and education age, it is vital that youth services maintain more flexibility to provide support for 18 to 24 year olds. This will require an understanding from funding bodies that a number of young people who are newly arrived still require youth specific supports due to their complex needs.

For this age cohort there seems to be a gap between early intervention and crisis youth services. For example, migrant and refugee young people aged 16-24 who are disengaged from education and employment due to a range of issues, require access to generalist outreach support services of a type that, in the main, do not currently exist.

These young people who often frequent shopping centre malls and other public and private spaces, may not be in need of crisis support, but they may nonetheless have significant needs. If supported an early stage, these young people are less likely to require assistance during a later episode of homelessness, drug use, or involvement in the justice system.

4.2 EARLY INTERVENTION VS. CRISIS SUPPORT

Following research into the effectiveness of early intervention strategies around social issues such as lack of literacy, drug and alcohol use, and crime, there has been a growing Government policy focus on the early years of life. The needs of children aged 0-8 years and their families have become a significant funding priority in family and community services.

While it is clear that early intervention is useful in ensuring better outcomes for at-risk populations, interventions also need to occur at transitional junctures or following critical life events in order to reduce any risks and strengthen the protective factors in a given person's situation. Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) funded Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Scheme (IHSS) services and the Community Settlement Support Scheme (CSSS) both offer some important supports for newly arrived young people and families. The Newly Arrived Support Service (NAYSS) initiated by the Federal Department of Family and Community Services is another important service delivery mechanism for young refugees.

Despite these initiatives, newly arrived adolescents and young adults require further supports after their initial settlement period, such as in the transition from English Language School or

AMEP to other education pathways, and at the early stages of problems that may arise over the following years such as during episodes of family conflict. The early years focus needs to be met with a recognition of the needs of new arrivals in their later years.

5. THEMES

5.1 OVERVIEW

A range of inter-related factors play a significant part in a young persons successful resettlement. They include whether or not they are accompanied by their parents, their pre-migration experience (including previous education and refugee related trauma), the quality of family support and resettlement assistance provided, their migration status, access to resources and life opportunities, cultural and family expectations, and/or individual life skills and temperament.

Many workers in the community sector have observed that some issues more acutely impact or are uniquely experienced by older adolescents when compared to those who have migrated at a younger age. Issues relating to education and employment, family and peer relationships, financial and legal concerns, are all significant for newly arrived young people in their older adolescence.

In addition, refugee young people on temporary protection visas (TPVs), many of whom have arrived as unaccompanied minors at a later stage in adolescence, face additional barriers to those who have arrived with off-shore visas. Many older teenagers on TPVs who could be at school have been in the difficult position of having to choose between work and study due to economic pressures related to their uncertain migration status. Despite their increased need for support they are not able to access settlement support services or full time HECS-based tertiary education courses for longer than two years. Due to limited educational opportunity, these often highly motivated young people are not able to gain a higher education and develop skills that would allow them to relieve Australia's skills shortage. Their life prospects are severely curtailed. (For a further elaboration of Issues faced by these young people see *Adrift or Afloat* (CMYI, 2006).

5.2 EDUCATION

For most overseas-born families, education is a key to a better life, and many hold very high aspirations for their children in Australia. Education is often a pathway out of the poverty experienced overseas, and a means by which to help the whole family into the future.

Many schools are seeking to accommodate the learning needs of newly arrived students in a number of ways, however there are systemic limitations to the support they are able to offer. Newly arrived students at a secondary school age are enrolled in the New Arrivals Program at an intensive English Language School or Centre where they generally gain a great deal of highly appropriate support to develop English literacy and numeracy skills. Increasingly these students, especially those from Sudan and other African countries, are arriving with a background of no previous education. Their situation offers a whole new set of difficulties for schools seeking to

accommodate their needs. Teaching second language acquisition to older students with no previous education or literacy in any language can require very different approaches and training.

Pathways

Career expectations and education pathways planning are key issues for older newly arrived young people who have had little time to learn English and adjust to the Australian schooling system before family pressure to undertake VCE begins to exert itself. Those who arrive at primary school or early high school age are often able to gain literacy and numeracy skills, and may be able to more effectively catch up on lost years of education over a number of years. Their older peers often miss this opportunity, and there are still few established education pathways that are able to meet their specific needs. This is an area of growing concern given the trend in young people arriving through the humanitarian program with no or very little previous schooling.

There is often a lack of information available about education pathways for parents from migrant and refugee communities, and many education providers find that even when parents are aware of alternatives to mainstream high school certificates, such as the VCE in Victoria, parents are often reluctant to allow their children to choose alternative pathways. Young people themselves often have high expectations and seek to complete VCE and University.

For those too old for secondary school, there are a growing number of options, however there are still a number of limitations to their effectiveness. Adult models such as generalist AMEP classes have been found to be less successful at engaging newly arrived young people, who need to learn among peers. The recent requirement for AMEP funded service to provide youth specific courses has made substantial inroads in the area of educational support for older refugee young people. A number of highly successful TAFE courses, such as the NMIT Good Futures Project, have also been developed that accommodate the literacy and welfare needs of this peer group. However few of these courses are funded to provide recreation or have the capacity to provide some of the specialist programs that are often available in schools.

Family Expectations

Families with teenagers can often have high expectations about their child's progress and success that may be unrealistic. This can result in some young people struggling in courses that are beyond their academic level and/or level of English.

Young people and their families are often unaware of the impacts that disrupted education, low literacy and difficulty adjusting to a new system, culture and language can have on students who have migrated at a later age. The process of learning may not be well understood depending on the parent's own educational background.

Transition

While some good TAFE and further education options are being developed, there is a lack of school-based core funded transitional support or bridging programs for new arrivals that have pathways back to VCE; the desirable outcome for many refugee families.

Young people who want to maintain family pride often experience the combination of high expectations, concerns about alternative pathways, and reduced educational opportunity to fulfil expectations as an extreme pressure. It is essential that alternative pathways within school and TAFE/adult learning environments are developed, funded and promoted to newly arrived communities in order to reduce the pressure on young people and improve their educational opportunities

5.3 EMPLOYMENT

Lack of Australian Work Experience

Having spent little time in the formal education system, it is very difficult for older refugee young people to enter the Australian work force. They often have life and work experience that could be valuable to the Australian community and are highly dedicated to work. However they often lack the formal qualifications that their adult community members have had the chance to gain prior to their refugee experience. Those who have spent years in a refugee camp are especially at risk of long-term unemployment.

Many newly arrived young people in their late teens and early twenties seek part time employment while studying English, but find that employment assistance is only available to those registered with Centrelink as unemployed. They are often prevented from gaining part time employment, which is a crucial stepping-stone to future full time employment, due to the lack of flexibility in funding for job network providers.

Better assessment of young people's employment skills and background also needs to occur. This group often requires assistance to develop the evidence potential employers often seek - that their skills are valuable and transferable to the Australian context. This requires specialist job network assistance and careers counselling, both of which need to be further developed to accommodate the needs of this group.

Young people also need to be exposed to a range of careers through work experience programs of the type usually offered to Year 10 schools students. Placements as part of language education would also be valuable in assisting them to develop the networks and workplace understanding that supports people to secure future employment. More work also needs to be done at a local, state and federal level with employer groups to encourage them to offer employment to refugee young adults.

The New Apprenticeships Scheme is currently under-utilised by refugee young people. Further promotion of the benefits of apprenticeships and traineeships needs to be undertaken. The teaching of language units within apprenticeship training and in pre-apprenticeship courses would also make these employment pathways more viable for young refugees.

5.4 FAMILY

Responsibility

While all refugee young people face an array of difficulties adjusting to a new family composition on arrival in Australia, the responsibility felt by older young people, especially those who are the elder sibling, or the oldest living in the family home, is often acute. The need to support family members through work, financial assistance and advocacy is felt by young people themselves who are often highly devoted to their families. There is a pressure for these young people to provide for the economic and social wellbeing of the whole family.

A number of groups have added difficulties in maintaining positive family relations. For those who have reunited with family members after many years of separation, adjustment is more difficult. Adults may feel unprepared to care for the child that has now become a teenager who desires a greater level of freedom and autonomy. Older adolescents often report difficulty getting their parent to understand that they are no longer a child. These families need support to get to know one another and re-establish relationships.

Many older children take on a role in caring for and disciplining young siblings. Some do so as a guardian in the absence of parents. Schools often report that older siblings will attend parent teacher evenings on behalf of the family. Many of these young people are playing an important role in providing the care and protection of younger children but often do so under difficult circumstances. They may have little information about the services and systems within which they are expected to interact, and be uncertain about 'parenting' in the Australian context, both in a practical sense and in relation to legal responsibilities.

Older young people may be more confident with English than their adult family members. This means they are called on by family to take on advocacy roles – providing settlement assistance and interpreting support in interactions with services and government organisations. This can impede a young person's own educational and life opportunities, and can lead to a power/role shift within the family which eventually can lead to family conflict.

Fear for Family Members

Adolescents are also highly affected by worry about family members, and at times fears for family may have a significant impact on their concentration at school and their mental health in general. This is especially the case for young people whose families are in danger overseas, who are seeking asylum or are on temporary visas, therefore facing a high degree of uncertainty and constant fear of return to an unsafe situation. The impact on family members needs to be

acknowledged and minimised through the provision of permanency for refugees and assistance for young people to both maintain contact with family and provide them with financial assistance. International intervention into humanitarian situations is also of vital importance to the resettlement of young people in Australia.

Maintenance of Cultural Identity

Families make huge cultural shifts following migration to a new country. They often find negotiating the balance with their children between freedom and responsibility, cultural maintenance versus adjustment to Australian culture, and the rights of the individual versus the responsibility to the collective (family and community) to be highly contentious.

Families with older adolescents face these issues more deeply and sooner after arrival than those with younger children, given that teenagers will often seek greater independence than their younger siblings. Issues relating to time spent away from home (at night clubs and parties), friendships and sexual relationships, money, education and employment and the family car, are all of relevance to Australian born parents with teenagers. For families who have recently migrated, these issues are exacerbated. These issues are often connected with deep fears about young people being physically unsafe in an unknown environment and losing their culture. These fears are often present in families with children well into their early twenties, although early intervention services such as Reconnect are not available for this age group.

Cross-Cultural Parenting

Older adolescents and their families require particular supports on arrival to negotiate these complexities in a new cultural context. At the moment, very little of this support is offered to newly arrived families, which means many blame their children and struggle alone with significant problems. IHSS providers have reported in some recently arrived communities family breakdown is occurring very soon after arrival. The result is sometimes family breakdown, family violence and related homelessness, and loss of social support for young people.

On the whole, there are few generalist state support programs for parents and carers of adolescents, and even fewer that have specifically been adapted to address the needs of CLD communities, let alone those who are newly arrived. Despite some excellent cross cultural parenting program models available nationally, and some effective interventions at a local level, there is no consistent framework or funding for the delivery of cross cultural parenting/family support programs targeting newly arrived communities with adolescent children.

5.5 PEERS

Relationships with peers can be complex for older adolescent migrant young people. This is partly due to the intersections between their chronological age, physical and emotional development, refugee or migration experience and resettlement context, which can often lead

to identity confusion. Some may not be readily able to identify a distinct peer group. Older young people who have disrupted or no previous education continue to be placed in classes according to chronological age rather than academic level due to school concerns about their relationship with peers and their social development needs.

Some older adolescents are very comfortable with younger peers and enjoy the opportunity to spend time in mixed age groups, as they would in their community overseas. Those in their twenties who want to spend time with 14 year olds can be seen with suspicion by some, but this may feel very normal for some young people who may enjoy the freedom to be a child in a way they were never able to through the refugee experience.

This is an area of some sensitivity given that those who have lived independently or worked in adult environments for many years before migration may resent being associated with younger children. Community workers and education providers need to remain aware of the complexity of peer relationships for older young people, and offer choices for them to participate in mixed age activities as well as with those of a similar or older age. They need opportunities to form relationships with other refugee young people with whom they may strongly identify, as well as migrant and Australian born young people. The age limitations placed on social and recreational youth programs need to be flexible to accommodate newly arrived young people. Collapsing classes to accommodate a range of ages with a similar educational need may also provide some solutions.

5.6 FINANCIAL ISSUES

Responsibility Vs Need

Older refugee young people often face a series of financial dilemmas. They are often caught between the desire to be responsible and contribute to the economy of their family, both here and in desperate circumstances overseas, and spend money on their own needs. Many have high expenses, especially if looking for work. These young people are spending money on food and housing, educational/work expenses, clothing and social activities, while some have had little previous experience managing money, banking and budgeting. They may not have the same financial capacity as other young people in Australia, but it is understandable that they want the same things; holidays, clothes, cars and mobile phones. At the same time there may be strong expectations for young people to manage the family's money and take responsibility for financial matters.

Money is often a source of conflicts in family where those over 16 seek Centrelink youth allowance in their own name, so that they have greater financial independence. This issue intersects with concerns about freedoms versus responsibility and the individual versus collective approach. Families need more assistance to handle these complex parenting issues.

Financial Debt and Remittance

Financial pressures are strong for older adolescents for a number of reasons. The impact of debt from loans for airfares is felt by many newly arrived community members, and is a particular burden for teenagers and young adults who find it much harder to repay loans, especially if they have no overseas qualifications or work experience. Youth housing services have also reported homeless young people over 16 in transitional housing sending remittances overseas which means they have insufficient funds to cover their rent.

Some financial issues relate to young people being considered adults at 18 for legal purposes. Many over 18-years-olds who are able to sign a contract with a mobile phone company or other business have not understood their rights and liabilities and have accrued massive debts in a short period. Young people are often interested in buying a car, and again lack information resulting in exploitation by unscrupulous second hand car dealers or those making private sales.

Centrelink

Negotiating around income issues with Centrelink is often a complex task for these young people who are often without assistance and faced with daunting bureaucracy. Those who are older or independent often seek to negotiate the system on behalf of the whole family, and in relation to their own payments many have accrued substantial debts through lack of information and assistance to ensure they provide updated information about changes in circumstances. Those older young people in transition between school and TAFE and education and employment/unemployment are at particular risk.

Youth workers report a consistent under-utilisation of interpreters by Centrelink staff, and young people are regularly sent automatically generated letters in inaccessible English that may be incorrect or very difficult to understand.

While Centrelink has made some significant inroads in the customer relations area in the recent past, there needs to be much stronger cross cultural awareness training of staff, and better utilisation of expertise in working with newly arrived youth within Centrelink offices.

Multicultural Service Officers usually have good links with communities, cross cultural practice and understanding of the issues, however this is rarely transferred to staff in the youth area or working with customers at the front counter. There could be much greater sharing of good practice between staff and officers who are responding well to newly arrived youth and those who need further assistance to develop awareness. This approach would require further research with the community sector in gaining feedback about issues with Centrelink for CLD young people, and a framework for good practice.

5.7 LEGAL ISSUES

There are a number of legal issues which young people between 15 and 24 years of age face that require systemic change. In general, new arrivals lack information about the law in Australia and need practical information sessions to help them negotiate an often-confusing array of legal requirements. Common legal issues for refugee youth relate to consumer rights, road laws, housing, policing, public space, credit and violence.

Young People & Police

Despite some excellent work done by Victorian Police in the past five years, particularly through the Multicultural Liaison Officers and the provision of recreation programs for CLD youth, there are still significant concerns that young people and youth workers raise about police relations.

As with Vietnamese young people, older African young men in particular commonly report being stopped and asked for identification, which they experience as a form of harassment and racism. Given the high proportion of Sudanese young people in our current humanitarian intake, and the number of emerging communities from Africa who have experienced violence at the hands of police and the military overseas, this is an issue of concern.

Much has been written about the perception that CLD young men spending time in groups are perceived to be a 'gang'. Further work needs to be done to shift these perceptions. Often young people in groups are simply socialising. Young people have a right to access public space as do other members of the community. At the same time, early intervention strategies across the State are also needed to prevent clashes that do arise from time to time between groups of newly arrived, Australian born or settled communities.

Transport Issues

Many older adolescents are eligible to gain their learners permit and probationary licence, however they have little support to gain practical driving experience and face numerous literacy barriers to sitting the driving test. They often can't afford to pay for professional driving instructors and have no family members to assist them. Some of these young people are driving without a licence and lack of information about the law, coming into early contact with the police and court system and accruing debts through fines.

Court System

Those who come into contact with the justice system are often un-represented in court and gain little assistance to negotiate the legal system. CMYI welcomes moves by the Children's Court to investigate the issues and barriers that refugee youth face in that jurisdiction and potential improvements in court systems. The adult court system is also seeing a number of young people over eighteen within a short time after arrival, and further investigation of the issues they face could yield both improvements to the court system, and also a better understanding of the early

intervention and prevention strategies required post resettlement to reduce the number of young people coming to the attention of police and the courts.

Legal Age and Actual Age

Another issue relates to young people who are older than is indicated on their official documentation. This problem sometimes relates to administrative errors made at the overseas post relating to the fact that few refugees have any official birth records or access to their official documentation.

For most young people this discrepancy comes about due to a complex array of issues. Some families make the decision to list a young person as having a different age so that they are registered as younger than their chronological age. This decision is rarely a choice made by the young person himself or herself. However, it is the young person who carries the emotional burden and frustration of having to maintain secrecy. Those who are in their early twenties can understandably find the expectations from family to behave as a sixteen year old extremely frustrating.

While it is very difficult to ascertain the underlying decision-making processes that families go through in making this choice, it is possible to surmise a number of motivating factors:

- Families may be concerned about the educational prospects of older young people. If they are younger they can spend more time in school, and perhaps have a chance to eventually attend university.
- There might be a feeling that the younger the child, the more likely they will receive greater life opportunities in general in the new country.
- Families may feel that polygamous relationships are not accommodated within the Australian migration program. They may have to leave the birth mother of a child at home and migrate with only one of the mothers in the family. Changing a young person's age may be required to fit with the other ages of children and the mother to make a viable family unit.
- There may be a desire to maintain more social control over the young person so that they are seen as dependants for longer, remain in the family home and be therefore less likely to have relationships out of marriage.

Many families do not realise the impact of this decision on a young person in terms of the disruptions to their settlement, their confusion in relating to peers, the pressure to maintain the secret, and the degree to which it effects harmonious family relationships. In many of these situations the young person may seek assistance following significant protracted family conflict to leave home.

Workers are often in the difficult position of seeking to advocate for the young person who wants to have their official age changed, while minimising the potential impact on the family. Others have reported serious conflicts in relation to a young person's access to support and services based on age discrepancy issues.

Young people who prove there are older to reduce some of the profound confusion they face, may become ineligible for the very services they require at this stage – whether that be child protection intervention, education services, Centrelink benefits or youth support services. Greater flexibility is required to support those found to be older beyond strict age cut off times where there are high or complex needs.

It is interesting to note that Lao and Cambodian young people faced the same issue in the 1980s. At that stage DIMA would require that a young person provide a statutory declaration, signed by a youth worker or teacher to prove their actual age so that their official records could be adjusted. DIMA is now undertaking bone testing at overseas posts where there is any concern about the age of an applicant, which may reduce the problem at the source. However further investigation is needed into the causes of the decision to change a young person's age so that effective solutions can be found. Meanwhile, more information is required to clarify the legal rights of young people to have their documentation changed, and an assurance that the family will not be punished.

6. CONCLUSION

All refugee young people require specialist settlement support in the first years of their arrival and assistance to access generalist community services over time. Many of the issues they face are common across all age groups, however there are specific risk groups within the wider youth population that require further consideration. Those who arrived from between the age of 15- 24 are one such group.

It is essential that older adolescents do not fall through the gap between the youth and adult service sector, or between generalist community and settlement sectors. Recent changes to the community sector and government policy, such as the youth focus within AMEP, the growth in literacy and numeracy bridging programs, and the national Newly Arrived Youth Support Service (NAYSS), bring some hope that their needs will be better need. More must be achieved however. Co-ordination within the community sector, co-operation across and between government departments at state and federal levels, and the development of specialist responses must all occur in order to accommodate the needs of older adolescents and their family members.

These young people have the capacity to make a significant contribution to the social, cultural and economic fabric of Australian society if given the chance.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following actions are recommended in order to better meet the needs of young people aged 15-24 arriving through Australia's Humanitarian Program.

1. Explore the interface between chronological age, adolescent development and settlement needs.
2. Administer funds for English language programs in TAFE, AMEP and school settings more strategically to meet the learning needs of the individual refugee young person with eligibility based on English language competence, prior education and learning needs rather than age or a limited time allocation.
3. Incorporate a refugee "loading" in the New Arrivals and ESL programs at secondary levels with extra funding allocated for those with disrupted education.
4. Fund bridging courses in mainstream school and TAFE environments to provide additional assistance towards literacy in between intensive assistance and mainstream education to create supported pathways for refugee young people with lower level literacy.
5. Increase the age cut off of specialist and generalist youth services to accommodate newly arrived over eighteen year olds with complex needs.
6. Ensure that early intervention support is provided following particular life events – such as migration to a new country or transition into mainstream schooling environments as well as in the yearly years of life.
7. Ensure governments at all levels recognise the needs of newly arrived older adolescents and develop policies that provide for their social, cultural and economic wellbeing.
8. Develop a national framework for the funding of parenting support programs for newly arrived parents and extended family members/carers of adolescents.
9. Develop research around the causes of discrepancies between a young person's chronological age and their official documentation.
10. Provide information for the youth and settlement sector outlining the implications of a young person verifying their age, including the consequences for other family members if a young person is found to have a different age to that on their official documents.
11. Further develop and integrate holistic assessment processes for all young people on arrival through the humanitarian program to flag those at risk, providing referrals for more extensive case managed support.

12. Provide funding for group recreation and other related programs that accommodate a wide spectrum of developmental needs in AMEP youth and TAFE settings.
13. Provide more options for cross age related youth activities and multi age classrooms in schools.
14. Ensure greater focus on refugee young people within adult services, such as job network providers.
15. Provide English language training as a component in apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships and extend the age eligibility for apprenticeships to young refugees 21 to 25 years old.
16. Ensure a co-ordinated State Government approach to promote the value of apprenticeships, VET, VCAL and other VCE alternatives to refugee young people and their families.
17. Develop labour market programs for newly arrived young people to gain casual and part time employment while studying in order to gain Australian work experience and move into future full time employment.
18. Develop benchmarks for services and government departments around the use of interpreters and the provision of culturally appropriate support for adults, to reduce the burden of care on adolescents.
19. Provide greater practical assistance through settlement services for young people living independently to gain living skills.

8. CASE STUDY

Case Study

Ilias is a 17-year-old Assyrian young refugee from Iraq living in Melbourne's North. He arrived in Australia as a 15-year-old after having lived with his family in Turkey for many years.

In Turkey Ilias had not gone to school, but worked as a carpenter from age seven to fourteen, often spending ten hours a day carving chairs.

On arrival in Australia he had no English, and after less than a year in an English Language School he moved into year 10 at the local secondary school.

He was struggling to catch up with his classmates after having almost no previous schooling, and found progress with reading and writing frustratingly slow. His teachers were exasperated because Ilias was getting into fights at school and acting out in the classroom.

The most significant conflict he had was with his woodwork teacher who told him 'that's not the way we do it here', and wouldn't let him show his expertise in the area based on his years of work experience.

The school encouraged him to leave and attend a bridging or TAFE course, but he knew his parents would not accept these alternatives, and desperately wanted him to do VCE and go on to University. He was left with few viable choices, and was starting to feel hopeless about his future.

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