

International Emergency Psychiatry Challenges



Disaster Medicine, War, Human Trafficking, Displaced Persons

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KEYWORDS

• International psychiatry • Disaster • Conflict • Trafficking • Displaced persons

KEY POINTS

- Mental health disorders are a major cause of morbidity measured by disability-adjusted life years and a growing burden in low- and middle-income countries; but there is little existing literature on the detailed epidemiology, diagnosis, and treatment in low-resource settings.
- Differences in culture, language, and symptoms that may not fit into Western paradigms are significant barriers to identifying and treating mental health disorders in the international population.
- Preflight stressors, trauma, and prolonged displacement contribute to posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and other mental health disorders among refugees and internally displaced persons.
- Assessment and treatment of human trafficking victims should take into account the continuum of experience of patients and cultural sensitivity to the trauma and use a community-based approach that allows individuals to feel connected and validated in their experience.

INTRODUCTION

One could hardly open a newspaper in the current day and age without encountering a story about refugees. Sad and heart-wrenching, these often remind the reader of the fragility of the human condition, but also its tenacity and strong will to live. However,

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we also need to go no further than our emergency departments to see these stories unfold every day, as refugees tend to need emergency care quite often and with specific parameters that may go above and beyond the routine care paradigms providers are used to. By the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) definition, a refugee is "someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence."¹ At the end of 2015, UNHCR estimated there was a total of 24.5 million refugees and asylum seekers and an additional 40.8 million internally displaced people (IDP).¹ Each of these terms denote a different legal status, and asylum seekers with pending applications may not be afforded similar protections or resources as refugees (**Box 1**). Each population has unique characteristics due to being exposed to both acute and chronic stressors that contribute to mental health disorders.

With affected populations spanning the globe, the number of refugees has been increasing since 2011 with affected populations spanning the globe. The distribution of refugees in the UNHCR-Bureau region is shown in **Fig. 1**. An estimated 86% of refugees were hosted in developing countries. Unfortunately, these countries are often the least able to provide the resources for these vulnerable populations. **Table 1** highlights this inequity by showing the countries at the end of 2015 from where the most refugees originated to where most sought asylum and the number of refugees hosted per 1 US dollar gross domestic product based on purchasing-power-parity. Programs serving refugee populations must address these gaps by evaluating the distribution of resources and effectiveness of interventions, including mental health programs, in developing country settings.

Box 1 Definitions

- *Humanitarian emergency*: an event that overwhelms local capacity to manage and provide basic services, such as shelter, health care, and security to the affected population.
- *Refugee* (UNHCR): "someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence."
- *IDP* (UNHCR): "while they may have fled for similar reasons [to a refugee], IDPs stay within their own country and remain under the protection of its government, even if that government is the reason for their displacement."
- *Human trafficking* (UNODC): "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation."
- *Sexual and gender-based violence* (UNHCR): "violence that is directed at a person on the basis of gender or sex. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering, threat of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty."
- *Torture* (UN Convention): "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or her or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions."

Abbreviations: UN, United Nations; UNODC, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
Data from Refs. ^{1,25,26}

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