

An Examination of a Global Failure to Secure the Rights and Protect the Mental Health of Refugee Children

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Overview

- Explore how the realities refugee children face often conflict with the rights they are promised and the impact this has on their mental health
- Identify areas where current research is lacking
- Highlight the work that is currently being done

UNCRC Article 22 (First Section)

“States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee in accordance with applicable international or domestic law and procedures shall, whether unaccompanied or accompanied by his or her parents or by any other person, receive appropriate protection and **humanitarian assistance** in the enjoyment of applicable rights set forth in the present Convention and in other international human rights or humanitarian instruments to which the said States are Parties.” (Developmental Initiatives)

What is Humanitarian Assistance/Action?

“Humanitarian action is intended to ‘save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain human dignity during and after man-made crises and disasters caused by natural hazards, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for when such situations occur.’” (Development Initiatives, 2018)

Problem with Implementing Article 22

- Countries do not address all aspects of refugee children's well-being
- Countries do not alleviate major suffering caused by these "extra" aspects
- Intersectionality of risk factors not considered, only single-axis concerns

Mental Health of Refugee Children

Hodes, Jagdev, Chandra, & Cunniff (2008) [United Kingdom]

Comparing adversities and “psychological distress” in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) and accompanied refugee children (ARC)

Self-reported questionnaire data from 78 UASC and ~250 ARC (Harvard Trauma Questionnaire, Impact of Event Scale, and the Birleson Depression Self-Rating Scale)

UASC experienced more traumatic events & showed more PTSD symptoms than ARC

Older UASC had more PTSD symptoms, while older ARC had fewer PTSD symptoms

Mental Health of Refugee Children

Nielsen, Norredam, Christiansen, Obel, Hilden, & Krasnik (2008) [Denmark]

Does length of stay/number of relocations affect mental health of refugee children?

Self (246 four to sixteen year-olds) and teacher reports, including questions pertaining to emotional symptoms, hyperactivity, conduct problems, peer-problems, and pro-social behaviour (239)

Seeking asylum for more than a year and/or being relocated 4+ times increased risk of developing mental health issues compared to indigenous European children

Critiques: Children did not get psychological assessments, and may have been intimidated into over-/under-reporting symptoms

Mental Health of Refugee Children

- Forced refugees experience grief from “personal loss...[and] loss of their culture” (Eisenbruch, 1988)
- Refugee children often encounter acculturative stressors in their host countries, which puts them at a greater risk for mental health issues (Betancourt et. al, 2015)
- Exposure to violence a risk factor for mental health, while stable home life and support socially are protective factors (Fazel et. al., 2012)

Where the Research is Lacking

- Generally lacks longitudinal data
- Relies on self reporting rather than psychological assessment data
- Does not always account for concurrent factors (e.g. effect of parental mental health on the child, etc.) affecting refugee children

Suggestions from Literature to Better the Conditions of Refugee Children

- Offer mental health services, both in and outside of school, to refugee children
- Foster better relationships between refugee children, their peers, and their teachers
- Decrease and eventually eliminate detention centers

What's Currently Being Done

- Refugee Empowerment Program (Memphis, Tn)
- World Relief Memphis
- Refugees can call Tennessee home

Why Refugee Children Are Important

No child deserves to be left unprotected, no matter their status as native-born or refugee/asylum-seeking. Children are our future, and every child deserves a chance to fulfill their potential.

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