

# Special efforts are needed to address trauma in refugee youth

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In a study of children and adolescents referred for mental health services at US trauma treatment sites, there were important differences in the experiences of refugee youth who were displaced by war-related violence relative to immigrants and those born in the United States.

Refugee youth had higher rates of exposure to forced displacement, community violence, and traumatic loss. Refugees also exhibited distinctive patterns of symptoms compared with their immigrant and US-origin peers—for example, higher rates of traumatic grief, phobia, dissociation, and somatization, and lower rates of sexual behavior problems, oppositional defiant disorder, and substance abuse.

The findings suggest that refugees report a distinct pattern of trauma exposure and have specialized treatment needs.

"It's critical that [mental health providers](#) understand that distress can present in many forms including somatic complaints, grief, and social problems and that refugee children and youth today also face increased bullying given the current political context," said Dr. Theresa Betancourt, lead author of the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* study.

"Helping families navigate their new environments successfully can be a critical step in engaging [refugee](#) communities and also building relationships needed to address unmet [mental health](#) needs due to past trauma and loss. Some of the best models we have seen across the country employ outreach, family-based prevention/family home visiting, and school-based models to meet refugees where they are and to help

them build their new lives and hopeful futures."

**More information:** Theresa S. Betancourt et al, Comparing Trauma Exposure, Mental Health Needs, and Service Utilization Across Clinical Samples of Refugee, Immigrant, and U.S.-Origin Children, *Journal of Traumatic Stress* (2017). [DOI: 10.1002/jts.22186](https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22186)

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