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How the Afghan Evacuation Can Inform Efforts to Improve ORR Care of Unaccompanied Children

The Afghan evacuation in August of this year has presented tremendous challenges to civil society and to the U.S. government agencies that provide services for resettled individuals. The refugee resettlement system was already facing profound challenges to undo the cuts in operational capacity suffered in the past few years, and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) has been further stressed by record numbers of arrivals of unaccompanied children. The evacuation was messy and, although it moved 100,000 people out of harm's way, has led to an ongoing series of urgent decisions by ORR and other agencies.

At the confluence of these challenges are Afghan unaccompanied children. Afghan unaccompanied children are special because they qualify for services provided to unaccompanied children as well as services given to refugee children. Yet because the unaccompanied children program and refugee program are usually distinct, new obstacles and complications have occurred. Many are granular and procedural, while a few are structural (for example, international reunifications). The U.S. government has been reluctant to provide significant data on Afghans at military bases in the country and at so-called "lily pads" – temporary sites in third countries – ORR has provided approximate figures of around 1000 Afghan unaccompanied children who have entered the United States, and several hundred more who are waiting for flights.

The confluence can also present opportunities for learning and for improvements in ORR. In moments of continual crisis, it can help to identify opportunities that emerge alongside the urgent needs. This brief identifies four such opportunities: building data on children's and families' outcomes, extending knowledge on children's needs, iterating on telehealth delivery, and building an evidence base for best practices in the welfare of unaccompanied children. While ORR has ultimate control over what data is collected, the recommendations are potentially useful for a wider range of research projects that might (1) create or corroborate an evidence base of best practices for unaccompanied children, or (2) build the institutional knowledge necessary to gather data rigorously or to operationalize best practices.

Opportunity #1: Build data on outcomes for unaccompanied children

Since 2009, more than 600,000 unaccompanied children have entered ORR care. Of the children whose cases are completed, around 60% of unaccompanied children have won a legal right to remain. Yet good data is sparse on many outcomes for unaccompanied children: Good data is inadequate for medium- and long-term school performance, college attendance, health measures, and employment. Many challenges exist to collecting good data, and much existing data derives from a nonrepresentative subset of children and families who have legal representation. For example, more children with legal representation available for data collection at any given moment, because children with legal representation remain in the United States for longer periods as their cases proceed. In turn, immigrant families who can access legal representation for children are more privileged than those families who cannot. Consequently, already-sensitive research is impeded by the difficulties in obtaining a proportionate sample of children and in confounding factors of parents' relative privilege, which can be hard to measure between immigrant families.

In contrast to the overall population of unaccompanied children, all or nearly all Afghan unaccompanied children will remain in the United States. The sampling problem disappears. The confounding factors – think of them as access to money, health, and time – are also reduced, because Afghan unaccompanied children are a more homogeneous population and because Afghans will receive refugee-like benefits. Consequently, any outcomes data from the population of Afghan unaccompanied children can help to corroborate or contradict existing beliefs about what happens to unaccompanied children after they leave ORR care, and which interventions are helpful or unhelpful.

Opportunity #2: Extend knowledge on the medium-term care needs of unaccompanied children and their families

When families and children reunite, they commonly experience a honeymoon period. Child and sponsor are commonly excited to explore a new life together, to begin new roles in their community, and co-imagine positive futures as they get accustomed to the next stage of their lives. The positive emotions in this period are normal and healthy. But this period also suppresses long-term needs. Only later do the needs that could benefit from psychosocial support emerge, commonly manifesting as child-sponsor conflicts, grief for losses (family, friends, home country, cultural losses, even favorite activities), trauma responses, or simply longer-term needs for attachment that can be a challenge to fulfill in circumstances where families are stressed by money, legal cases, or housing insecurity.

ORR funds post-release services (PRS) to bridge gaps and ensure that children and sponsors have access to the resources they need. However, post-release services are generally limited to 90 days. Visibility into children's needs and families' needs over the medium-term tends to shrink, in part because PRS workers are no longer visiting and in part because families move. A few cases receive longer supports, such as those with mandated home studies. Because Afghan unaccompanied children will receive longer-term benefits from the refugee resettlement program, the Afghan resettlement offers an unusual opportunity for longitudinal data collection among unaccompanied children and, crucially, their sponsoring families. The population of Afghan unaccompanied children is also large enough to draw inferences but small enough to remain manageable for longitudinal data collection.

Opportunity #3: Iterate on telehealth delivery and tele-delivery of mental health services

Generally limited to 90 days, PRS can ease a child's landing in a new community and often to a new family. But children's and families' needs extend beyond 90 days of service and, as noted above, sometimes only emerge long after reunification. When children and families require longer-term or ongoing support, access depends on the physical availability of supportive services in their local communities. In areas where many supports are available—typically, major metropolitan areas or areas of high ethnic settlement where mutual-aid societies have taken root—families will tend to find them. But in areas where services are generally sparse or are inaccessible for immigrant families, for example when services are available but only in English, lack of accessibility prevents families from receiving needed support, and leads to worse outcomes for children and their sponsors. In short: If resources are unavailable in the community, families and children do not have access to needed services.

In their response to the Afghan resettlement, Afghan community groups have offered a wide variety of telehealth services and tele-delivery of mental health services. Telehealth is necessary because Afghan language support is available in only a few communities, most of which are far from the military bases where Afghans currently stay, and because most Afghans at bases speak little English. Likewise, many of the local communities where Afghans will resettle have only sparse language support. If ORR and resettlement agencies can take up telehealth for Afghans, the lessons learned should inform future practices for ORR to assist getting needed services, especially family and group therapy, to unaccompanied children who live in communities where local availability is poor. Likewise, the lessons learned can inform efforts to improve services for unaccompanied children with significant disabilities and who require some support that their families could access remotely.

Opportunity #4: Build the evidence base on unaccompanied children

Afghans are a distinct population from those who ORR normally serves in the UC program. This difference is an asset, if data is gathered conscientiously. The historical population of arriving unaccompanied children are largely from Latin America, and most observers expect that the population composition of unaccompanied children will return to long-term trends. Consequently, researchers will have many chances to gather data on Latin American unaccompanied children but very few to gather data on other populations—which can be crucial for corroborating effects most broadly. The first step to building an evidence base is consistent data gathering on transitional supports for children into their new lives. ORR has recently been criticized by Congress for its data collection, retention, and management practices (among other things). The Afghan unaccompanied-child population provides a chance to learn how to do data gathering better, but at a manageable scale. Finally, over the longer term, a rigorous and detailed evidence base is necessary to make systematic improvements in ORR care and improve the lives of thousands of children.

United States Issue Updates

Human Rights Experts at the UN Condemn U.S. Expulsion of Haitian Migrants

A group of Special Rapporteurs for the United Nations declared the actions of the United States against Haitian migrants likely violations of international law. Fleeing violence and instability in their home country, Haitian migrants have been traveling in large numbers to fulfill their right to seek asylum in the United States. However, the United States has been expelling them by aggressive means without an evaluation of their circumstances or protection needs. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has justified these expulsions under Title 42, a public health provision instated by the Trump administration to allegedly prevent the spread of COVID-19 by halting migration across the southern U.S. border. In a letter to the U.S. government, the experts stated, "International law prohibits arbitrary or collective expulsions...all migrants, no matter their nationality, race or migration status, must be guaranteed the protections called for under [international law.](#)"

Internal DHS Reports Catalogue Abuse by U.S. Border Officials

After a public records request to USCIS through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), Human Rights Watch obtained 160 reports filed by federal asylum officers from 2016-2021 relaying intimate details of abuse against asylum seekers by U.S. border patrol agents and CBP officers. Abuses ranged from instances of Border Patrol agents kneeling, kicking, hitting, and sexually assaulting asylum seekers, to CBP officials withholding food from people in custody who would not sign particular paperwork that they did not understand. Within the records also appears to be a USCIS tally of 27 "possible CBP and ICE [US Immigration and Customs Enforcement] Due Process Violations" from 2017-18, many of which describe officials preventing asylum seekers from lodging claims. For more information, read Human Rights Watch's analysis [here.](#)

Immigration Arrests Fall Within the United States as Border Immigration Arrests Surge

Data from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) indicates that immigration arrests inside the United States fell to the lowest level in more than a decade in fiscal year 2021. 72,000 people were arrested inside the United States this year, a 30% drop from fiscal year 2020 when 104,000 arrests were made. This lower figure is likely due to new limits set on immigration enforcement by the Biden administration, including an order for a 100-day deportation pause, though that was ultimately blocked by a federal judge. Despite this drop in the interior of the United States, arrests at the southern U.S. border have surged -- about 1.66 million people have been apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border in fiscal year 2021, making it the busiest year on record. The majority of arrests were of Mexican citizens, and citizens of Northern Triangle countries.

Private and Community Sponsorship Program Launched to Support Afghan Refugees

On October 25th, the [Biden administration announced,](#) in partnership with the Community Sponsorship Hub, the launch of The Sponsorship Circle Program. The initiative enables private citizens to gather fellow community members together to form a sponsorship circle, which would serve as a foundation of support for Afghan families and individuals in the first 90 days of resettling into the United States. Sponsor circles are responsible for helping to secure housing, help adults find jobs and children enroll in schools, and for providing each individual Afghan with \$2,275, among other things. If Afghans elect to participate in this program, they will eschew Afghan Placement Assistance (APA) benefits through refugee resettlement agencies, but will still be entitled to federal benefits such as TANF and SNAP. The Sponsor circle model is similar to community and private sponsorship programs for refugees that Canada has utilized since the late 1970s.

Around the World in International Migration

Military Coup in Sudan Leads to Mass Protests

Sudan's military seized power in the country on October 25th, leading to widespread protests. After the ousting of long-time dictator Omar Al-Bashir in 2019, a transitional government was set up in which the military was to temporarily share power with a civilian-led government. The coup was led by the country's top military general, who was mandated to turn over power to a civilian in the coming weeks as part of the transition to an all-civilian government. The general stated that the coup was necessary because certain political factions had been trying to turn the people against the military, and that his takeover was an attempt to prevent civil war. However, the coup has led to mass protests in the streets that have injured over 100 people and killed at least 10 so far. Reports of soldiers opening fire on protestors and arresting political opposition leaders have led to calls by the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, United Nations, and African Union to end the violence.

Violence Escalates in Myanmar's Border Towns, Causing Mass Exodus to India

Since Myanmar's military took over in a coup in February, thousands of civilians have fled the country. Recently, the military has begun to move into towns on the border between Myanmar and India, causing entire towns to flee across the border. The military is purportedly seeking out members of the People's Defense Force, a group of armed civilians who oppose the military takeover. However, soldiers have been entering villages and burning homes indiscriminately.

Despite India's policy to turn away asylum seekers, Indians in the border towns to which people are fleeing have largely welcomed the refugees, in part due to shared ethnic and cultural ties. As Indians take in and provide assistance for increasing numbers of refugees, Human Rights Watch warns that resources may soon become scarce and that pressure may mount to force people back over the border into Myanmar.

Asylum Seekers Trapped Between Belarus and Poland

In response to an increase in asylum seekers attempting to cross into Europe, Poland and Belarus are at a stand-off, with neither country willing to take in the migrants. Most of the migrants are coming from Middle Eastern countries, and at least 32 Afghans have been counted among them. Despite the migrants' desperate straits, neither Poland nor Belarus will accept them, leaving them in limbo living in forests along the border. The temperatures in the region continue to drop as winter approaches, and the migrants are in desperate need of shelter and humanitarian aid. However, the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) has so far been denied access in both countries, except for a few brief trips into Belarus to deliver life-saving aid. At least eight migrants have died so far, and UNHCR has called for both Poland and Belarus to honor their international obligations to allow people to seek asylum at their borders.

Conflict Escalates in Ethiopia as Military Commences Air Strikes in Tigray

On October 18th, the Ethiopian military began conducting air strikes in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray. The strikes represent a new phase in the recent escalation of the conflict, which has also included the Ethiopian government throwing humanitarian organizations and United Nations officials out of the country. While the Ethiopian government claims the strikes were aimed at TPLF training facilities and other strategic TPLF-affiliated locations, the TPLF itself has stated that the attacks were conducted with disregard for civilian lives. As a result of the bombings, last week the United Nations was forced to cancel a humanitarian flight that would have delivered urgently needed assistance to the region. Since the failed flight, the UN has suspended all flights to Tigray.



USCRI's Action and Resources on Afghanistan

For more information about the crisis in Afghanistan, resources for Afghan allies, and updates, please check out the links below:

[Resources for Afghan Allies](#)

[Human Faces of the Crisis in Afghanistan](#)

[USCRI Statement Calling for Extension of Evacuations](#)

[USCRI Snapshot: Humanitarian Parole for Afghan Evacuees](#)

Upcoming Meetings & Events

Punishing Immigrants: ICE and the Prison Industrial Complex- Nov. 1

On Monday, November 1 at 6:00 PM EST, there is a lecture on immigration enforcement and the call to defund the police. The event speakers will explain the differences between criminal and immigration law, as well as their intersections. For more information and to register, [click here](#).

Immigrant: Courage Required- November 11

On Thursday, November 11 at 7:30 PM, author Golara Haghtalab will discuss her memoir "Immigrant: Courage Required" at Lost City Books. The memoir is a story of Golara's journey as an immigrant from Iran navigating her new life in the United States. For more information and to register, [click here](#).

UndocuAlly Training- Nov. 12

On Friday, November 12 at 12:00 PM EST, George Mason University will conduct a training to learn the history of undocumented communities, and past and present legislation to help them. For more information and to register, [click here](#).

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If you have any questions or comments, please contact the Policy and Advocacy Division at policy@uscrimail.org.