



In new report, Rhode Island's Afghan refugees detail their evacuation, resettlement experiences

Co-authored by researchers at Brown and Providence's Refugee Dream Center, the report includes passages from 32 interviews with Afghan refugees and offers eight recommendations for leaders involved in resettlement.



In early 2022, researchers at Brown University conducted 32 interviews with Afghan refugees who resettled in Providence. All photos: Nick Dentamaro/Brown University

PROVIDENCE, R.I. [Brown University] — In August 2021, nearly 76,000 Afghan refugees navigated bureaucratic confusion, experienced painful family separation and witnessed harrowing violence as they fled Kabul in the wake of the Taliban's return and were airlifted to American military bases. More than 300 are now safely settled in Rhode Island, but they are still grappling with a myriad of challenges.

That's according to a [new report](#)

(https://watson.brown.edu/chrhs/files/chrhs/imce/research/RDC%20Report_FINAL.pdf), co-authored by researchers at Brown University and leaders at Providence's Refugee Dream Center. Drawing on 32 [interviews with refugees](https://www.brown.edu/news/2022-03-15/refugees) (<https://www.brown.edu/news/2022-03-15/refugees>), now settled in Rhode Island, many of whom were employed by the United States government in Afghanistan as pilots, soldiers, cooks or translators, the report also offers eight recommendations for local, national and global leaders involved in refugee resettlement.

The report's lead author is Alexandria Nylen, a research associate at the [Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies](https://watson.brown.edu/chrhs) (<https://watson.brown.edu/chrhs>), within Brown's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs.

Nylen said the refugees' stories provide a richer understanding of how the withdrawal of American troops, and the Taliban's subsequent rise to power, affected individuals and families in Afghanistan. They also contain valuable lessons for military leaders, nonprofits, nongovernmental organizations and policymakers who work together to relocate those caught in the crossfire of conflict worldwide.

“Even though their physical move to the U.S. happened more than a year ago, the Afghan evacuees’ resettlement in the U.S. — bureaucratically, socially, emotionally — is an ongoing process that is far from over,” Nylen said. “It is our hope that the insights from their interviews, combined with our own background research, can help all of us improve refugees’ experiences, from evacuation to resettlement.”



Alexandria Nylen, left, said the refugees’ stories provide a richer understanding of how the withdrawal of American troops, and the Taliban’s subsequent rise to power, affected individuals and families in Afghanistan.

The anonymous interviews reveal that many of the Afghans now settled in Rhode Island are still experiencing anxiety and post-traumatic stress following their hasty exit out of Kabul, Nylen said. A few refugees related the panic and shock they felt when they learned the Taliban was closing in on Afghanistan’s capital city. Many recalled witnessing bomb explosions and violent skirmishes at the city’s airport as the Taliban tried to block citizens from entering. Almost all expressed pain and guilt at leaving extended family behind in Afghanistan to

pursue relative comfort and safety in the U.S.: They knew their family members could face regular threats and questioning from the Taliban, given the refugees' ties to the American government.

"They did everything for us," one anonymous refugee said, describing the employees at one U.S. military base camp. "Food supplies, clothes, supplied housing, everything. But the bad things: remembering of families. Memories keep coming to our minds. Families are far; we are very far from them, that restlessness."

Nylen said the interviewees' revelations highlight a need to expand the availability of culturally competent mental health care for refugees.

"Previous studies tell us that Afghan refugees might not make connections between the trauma they experienced in the past and their current mental health, or they simply understand that trauma in different ways," Nylen said. "I think it's important for us to not only provide these refugees with the mental health care they need, but to also understand how their cultural background might influence the way they process trauma."

Uncertain futures, economic anxieties

Family separation and memories of deadly conflict weren't the only sources of anxiety and stress: Some interviewees also expressed anxiety about the uncertainty of their legal status in the U.S. Nylen explained that while many former Afghan U.S. government workers were granted a Special Immigrant Visa, which offers a pathway to permanent residency, many other evacuees didn't have time to apply for the visa before leaving Kabul and were instead granted humanitarian parole for two years. While some evacuees are eligible to

receive an SIV once they file the proper paperwork, a large number are not considered SIV-eligible. What happens when their two years are up, Nysten said, isn't clear: If parolees apply for asylum, they will join a 1.6-million-applicant backlog, and they could wait five or more years for a hearing.

“There's a lot of anxiety around understanding what benefits they can access and what routes they need to go to pursue more permanent citizenship,” Nysten said. “The evacuees have unfortunately had to show a lot of resilience in the face of so much uncertainty.”

If we want refugees to become integrated into American society as friends, neighbors and business owners who contribute to our economy and our rich cultural life, it's incredibly important to understand what resources they need in order to thrive here.

ALEXANDRIA NYLEN — Research Associate, Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Studies

Many months after their resettlement in Rhode Island, many evacuees still face economic uncertainty, too. Most came to the U.S. with little or no knowledge of English, and that language barrier has made it difficult for them to find work. Many interviewees explained that they were in urgent need of work to cover rent and food in Rhode Island, and to support family members abroad.

“If someone is coming to ask me, ‘What do you want to do in America?’ I told them I just want to make money and support my families because in Afghanistan, [they have] no job, no money, and also nobody is going to help them,” one anonymous refugee said.

Another echoed that sentiment: “We have to work... the family that we have back home, they're expecting us to send them money.”

Nylen said that many of the evacuees have skills that, when combined with a basic command of English, could be highly transferable to the Rhode Island economy; several, for example, are expert mechanics who maintained both military machinery and U.S. embassy cars. In the report, Nylen and her co-authors suggested holding a Rhode Island job fair aimed specifically at refugee populations, who often possess valuable labor skills that fulfill local needs.

The evacuees' economic challenges, Nylen said, are examples of the many ways in which the vast gulf between Afghan and American cultural norms can create bumps in the refugee resettlement process. In Afghanistan, men are the primary earners of the household, while most women stay at home. That has created challenges for Afghans in Rhode Island, where the cost of living can be too high for one lower-wage income to bear. Women interviewees expressed a willingness to work, Nylen said, but many have no prior job experience.



Researchers at Brown partnered with the Refugee Dream Center, a nonprofit in Providence, on the report.

Afghan households are also structured differently than American households, Nylen said, which caused confusion and heartbreak amid the evacuation process. The U.S. military specified that Afghan employees could evacuate with immediate family only, Nylen said. Most Americans understand that “immediate family” means one’s spouse and children. But to Afghans, “immediate family” means one’s entire household, elders and more distant relatives included. That prompted many evacuees to bring their extended family to the Kabul airport, only to experience an emotional separation from some loved ones.

“Not all societies think at the nuclear family level, as we do — many are collectivist societies in which intergenerational households are the norm,” Nylen said. “It’s really fundamental that we understand that different social structure and take it into consideration when we make decisions about how to evacuate and resettle refugees, even if that just means educating immigration officers or individuals at the policymaking level so that they can communicate what ‘family’ means more clearly.”

Giving refugees a seat at the table

Nylen said the partnership between Brown researchers and the Refugee Dream Center has already yielded plans to improve refugees’ experiences. For example, the organizations plan to work with Rhode Island’s Refugee Health Program to translate some mental-health resource documents into Dari and Pashto, the most commonly spoken languages in Afghanistan.

But insights from the research project aren't just applicable to Rhode Island and its newest Afghan refugees, Nylén said. The interviewees' comments offer valuable insights into opportunities for improving refugees' experiences across the globe, and the researchers' accompanying recommendations are relevant to all government agencies, nonprofit organizations and lawmakers supporting refugees.

Nylén hopes stakeholders take special note of the report's recommendation to involve refugees themselves in all major decisions.

"If we want refugees to become integrated into American society as friends, neighbors and business owners who contribute to our economy and our rich cultural life, it's incredibly important to understand what resources they need in order to thrive here," Nylén said. "We cannot understand that without bringing refugees into the decision-making process."

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