

## National Youth Settlement Framework:

# Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds

### **Introduction**

This resource has been developed as a supplement to the MYAN Australia's *National Youth Settlement Framework* (NYSF), providing additional information about the particular needs of and circumstance for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. It can be utilised as a stand alone resource or read in conjunction with the NYSF.

### **The MYAN (Australia)**

The Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) is Australia's national peak body representing multicultural youth issues. The MYAN works in partnership with young people, government and non-government agencies at the state and national levels to support a consistent approach to addressing the unique needs of multicultural young people in policy and practice. The MYAN works across the youth and settlement sectors, because it is at the intersection of these sectors that good settlement outcomes for young people are achieved.

The MYAN has representatives from each of Australia's states and territories and facilitates a national approach to youth settlement through its affiliated state/territory-based networks and organisations.

### **Background**

This Information Sheet provides a general overview of the key issues for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds which have been identified by the MYAN through its national policy and advocacy work.

One in four Australian young people are from a refugee or migrant background.<sup>1</sup> This group of young people have enormous potential to be active participants in and contributors to Australian society. Their engagement as active citizens in Australian society has significant and long-term benefits for each young person, their families, communities, and a diverse and socially cohesive Australia.

However, young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds often face particular challenges in accessing the support and opportunities they need to navigate the demands of settling in a new country. The settlement process is complex and can be highly stressful for individuals and families and for young people, the challenges of settlement are compounded by the developmental tasks of adolescence. Their settlement needs are distinct from adults and they commonly face additional and more complex transitions than their Australian-born counterparts. These needs often go unrecognised as they are commonly seen as a sub-set of the broader youth and settlement sectors.

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<sup>1</sup> Centre for Multicultural Youth (2014a) The CALD Youth Census Report 2014: The First Australian Census Data Analysis of Young People from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds. Carlton, Victoria: CMY.

Between 2010 and 2015, young people comprised approximately 20% of all those arriving through the combined Family, Humanitarian and Skilled migration programmes and approximately 30% of the total intake through the Humanitarian Programme.<sup>2</sup> In the same period, approximately 1,650 unaccompanied humanitarian minors were referred to the Unaccompanied Humanitarian Minors Programme.

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds make up an important proportion of the youth population in Australia and are a diverse group with varying needs and circumstances. They often face numerous and more significant transitions than their Australian-born counterparts prior to arriving in Australia, and subsequently face another set of complex transitions upon settling into Australia. For example, settling into a new culture and society and into a new schooling system, as well as transitioning between English Language Schools and mainstream schools.

## **Key Considerations**

### **Adolescence**

Adolescence is the period of life for young people aged 12 to 20, or in some definitions, up to 25, and is understood as a time where young people experience significant physical, psychological and intellectual growth. In Western and Westernised countries, adolescence is viewed as a distinct transitional stage in a young person's life, which is characterised by separation and individuation from parents and caregivers, major physical changes such as growth spurts and sexual maturation, identity formation, emotional and cognitive development and determining career and other life goals. This is a critical life stage, where these changes inform the development of a sense of identity, and where the brain undertakes significant growth.

Although most cultures have rites of passage and initiation ceremonies to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, the existence of adolescence as a distinct transitional stage varies across cultures. For young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, the developmental tasks of adolescence are compounded by the refugee and migration experience and the challenges of settling in a new country. Most will face the extra challenge of developing a bi-cultural or multi-cultural identity, and may find that the general expectations of Western society, where young people move to independence to pursue individual goals, are not always appropriate for them.

Further, young people who have experienced trauma or loss may find their capacity to achieve what are considered normal development goals (e.g. developing a positive sense of self, developing good relationships with others or developing mastery in their chosen areas) is diminished by their experiences and the challenges of settling in a new country.

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<sup>2</sup> Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (2015) Information Sheet: Refugee and Migrant Youth Arrivals to Australia, July 2014 – June 2015.

## The refugee and migrant experience

Young people from refugee backgrounds arrive in Australia through the Humanitarian Programme, either via the off-shore resettlement component or on-shore protection. The on-shore component provides protection to those seeking asylum in Australia through Australia's obligations under the 1951 Convention<sup>3</sup> relating to the Status of Refugees.

Young people arriving in Australia through the Humanitarian Programme have been forced to flee their country of origin because of war or persecution and arrive in Australia with or without immediate or extended family. The refugee and asylum seeking experience is commonly traumatic, and many young people from refugee backgrounds are likely to have experienced:

- Protracted periods living in unsafe and insecure environments (e.g. refugee camps, immigration detention or sometimes multiple transit countries) with limited or no access to health care, education/schooling, housing, income, social connection and sometimes food.
- Separation from family or significant others and/or extreme human loss (often unexplained), including the death or disappearance of family, friends, community members and loss of home, country and security.
- Subjected to traumatic experiences, including being victims of, or witnessing torture, death, sexual assault, severe deprivation, and extended periods of fear. This may include a dangerous journey to Australia by boat.
- Arbitrary and authoritarian treatment in relation to rights to food, water, mobility, safety, income, education and employment.
- Disruption in family roles and relationships.

Additionally, young people who have sought asylum in Australia will have spent time in Australian detention facilities, in community detention, on temporary visas, or at an offshore processing centre, while awaiting the outcome of their application for protection. Even though Australian immigration detention facilities provide a level of safety and security, as well as access to education and health care, the experience of seeking asylum is highly stressful and one of acute uncertainty, which often compounds the effects of pre-arrival trauma and can add to the complexity of the resettlement process.

The refugee and asylum seeking experience can have a significant impact on the physical and mental health of young people and their families, resulting in anxiety sleep disorders, ongoing and intense feelings of shame, guilt, and sadness, a sense of having no control over one's life, fear, and lack of trust.<sup>4</sup>

For young people arriving in Australia as migrants, while they have not fled

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<sup>3</sup> Australia's Humanitarian Programme offers protection for refugees and others in refugee-like situations and has two important functions: (i) the onshore protection/asylum component fulfils Australia's international obligations by offering protection to people already in Australia who are found to be refugees according to the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and (ii) the offshore resettlement component expresses Australia's commitment to refugee protection by going beyond these obligations and offering resettlement to people overseas for whom this is the most appropriate option. For more information see Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2015) Fact sheet – Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Programme. Available at <http://www.border.gov.au/about/corporate/information/fact-sheets/60refugee>.

<sup>4</sup> The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc. et al. (1996) A Guide to working with young people who are refugees. Brunswick, Victoria: VFST. Available at <http://www.foundationhouse.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/WorkingwithYoungPeoplewhoareRefugees.pdf>

persecution, and therefore their experiences prior to arrival in Australia differ from young people from refugee backgrounds, most will have had no choice, by virtue of their age, about leaving their country, culture, family and friends.

It is important to note that, despite the trauma of the refugee experience and the challenges of resettlement, young people come to Australia with a range of strengths, which may include broad international and cross-cultural knowledge, multilingual skills, adaptability and resourcefulness, and a strong desire to achieve and succeed.<sup>5</sup>

## Settlement

The process of settling in Australia can be complex and protracted, involving a range of demanding and often stressful tasks. These include learning a new language and negotiating education and employment pathways (many with a history of disrupted or no formal education); understanding and navigating a completely unfamiliar culture and society, including complex social systems (such as Centrelink, health services, Australian laws) that require a high level of accountability; and, understanding and managing pre-settlement trauma.

Additionally, most new arrivals, particularly those from refugee backgrounds, have limited or no (Australian) social capital<sup>6</sup>. This includes culturally and contextually distributed forms of knowledge essential to daily living such as how to rent a house, catch public transport, apply for a job, grocery shop, pay a bill, participate in a Western-based education and employment system, and engage with Medicare, Centrelink and other government services, banks and real estate agents.<sup>7</sup>

There are also a number of factors in the host country environment that affect settlement outcomes for refugee and migrant communities, including government policy (e.g. immigration detention, restrictions on family reunion), community and media attitudes towards migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, access to employment, education and housing, access to community services, and racism and discrimination.<sup>8</sup>

## Settlement and adolescence

Assumptions are often made that young refugees and migrants are particularly resilient, and more able to quickly recover and adapt to Australian life than their adult counterparts. While it is important to acknowledge their strengths and the many ways in which refugee and migrant young people cope with settlement stresses, they often do so carrying an enormous degree of responsibility at a particularly vulnerable time in their lives.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2002) *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook to Guide Reception and Integration*, Part 3.3 Investing in the Future: Refugee Children and Young People. Geneva: UNHCR. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/4a2cfe336.html>, p. 264

<sup>6</sup> Social Capital is defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups" (see <http://www.oecd.org/insights/37966934.pdf>)

<sup>7</sup> Refugee Council of Australia (2011) *Discussion Paper: RCOA submission on Australia's 2012-13 Refugee and Humanitarian Program*. Melbourne: RCOA.

<sup>8</sup> Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (2006) *Settling In: Exploring Good Settlement for Refugee Young People in Australia*. Carlton, Victoria: CMY

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

The settlement needs of young people are different to those of adults because of the particular life stage and developmental tasks of adolescence. These developmental tasks are compounded by cultural dislocation, loss of established social networks, the practical demands of settlement, and the traumatic nature of the refugee experience.<sup>10</sup>

While the developmental tasks and changes of adolescence are understood differently across cultures, the experiences unique to young refugees and migrants that may exacerbate the usual challenges and pressures associated with adolescence include:

- Negotiating identity formation against a backdrop of bi or multi-cultural membership, as well as acculturative stress associated with adapting to a new culture, language and systems.
- Managing shifting family roles associated with parents' dependence on children for support navigating Australian culture, language and systems.
- Increased exposure to risk factors for mental health problems that typically emerge during adolescence. Common risk factors include lack of family cohesion, poor mental health of parents/caregivers, social isolation and lack of peer and community support networks.
- Reluctance to seek help for problems emerging during adolescence due to poor service knowledge, distrust and stigma associated with needing and seeking help.
- Adapting to new family forms, structures and dynamics. Many young people live in splintered families, in families where former roles and dynamics have been significantly altered or disrupted, and in families where the primary caregivers are experiencing psychological distress associated with various pre-migration and post-migration stressors. Young people often feel a need to shield parents from further distress and additional worries, choosing to keep their concerns to themselves.
- Determining career and other life goals in the context of conflict with parents about independence, autonomy and freedom.
- Negotiating family relationships in the context of new concepts of independence, autonomy, freedom and child and youth rights. Young people exposed to new concepts of child/youth rights must develop their own unique fusion between the cultural values of their own and adopted society.
- Managing intergenerational conflict associated with faster acculturation to Australian society and culture. While most young people would like to explore and engage with Australian culture, this often causes concern among parents and caregivers who fear losing their own culture and language.
- Managing additional and more complex transitions to social participation than their Australian-born counterparts. For example, adjusting to a new education and employment system, often with disrupted or limited formal schooling prior to arrival in Australia.
- Managing changes in values and expectations surrounding gender relations which often recognise more rights and freedoms for women.
- Managing new parental expectations surrounding academic performance and achievement. Academic pressure can present a significant source of distress,

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<sup>10</sup> Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council (2002) Strategy for Refugee Young People. Canberra: Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs

particularly for those: who arrived in Australia as adolescents with very little lead up time to Year 12, who have come from a context of limited or disrupted education, with low English language proficiency, and who do not receive any additional academic or language support at school.

- Negotiating socioeconomic disadvantage associated with forced displacement and resettlement. Many young people live in working poor or welfare dependent households and are housed in substandard, insecure, poorly located and overcrowded housing. While socioeconomic disadvantage affects most new arrivals regardless of age, it is especially acute for young people who need resources (e.g. for sporting, leisure, and social activities) to fit in with their peers and find belonging in their adopted country.

## Unaccompanied minors

Unaccompanied minors are young people (under 18) who have arrived in Australia with no close adult relative able or willing to care for them. Unaccompanied minors have become a more significant proportion of young people entering Australia through the Humanitarian Programme. Many of these young people have spent time in detention facilities and or community detention while awaiting the determination of their refugee status.

For young people who settle in Australia as unaccompanied minors, settlement challenges are negotiated without the immediate support and care of family and/or significant others. This is a particularly vulnerable group of young people who can be very isolated and be dealing with feelings of intense loss and grief, insecure housing, lack of access to adequate sport or recreation opportunities, while also navigating a complex service system and guardianship and/or care and support arrangements. The lack of family reunion options often has particular implications for this group – on their physical and mental health and their capacity for a long-term view of settlement in Australia or motivation to build connections to support settlement, including engagement in education, training and employment.

## Barriers to accessing support

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds commonly face a range of barriers to accessing services and opportunities that are not experienced by Australian - born young people. Some of these barriers are structural, some relate to the challenges associated with settling in a new country and others relate to general vulnerability to social exclusion at key transition points during adolescence and young adulthood. Barriers include:

- Limited or low English language skills.
- Different cultural norms and values surrounding help - seeking or accessing government support.
- Lack of social and cultural capital (e.g. information, networks and conceptual and practical knowledge of government-funded support, the service system or youth-focussed programs).
- Unfamiliarity with, or lack of trust in, youth services and programs, including from parents/family members.
- Racism and discrimination – explicit, implicit, structural or individual.
- Lack of culturally competent or responsive practice within organisations.

## **Supporting young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds**

The MYAN Australia has developed the *National Youth Settlement Framework* (NYSF) to support a targeted and consistent approach to addressing the needs of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds explored in this resource. The NYSF provides conceptual and practical information to facilitate good practice in youth settlement and support young people to become active and engaged participants in Australian society.