

# The Traumas of Displacement

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Most refugees, regardless of geographical and historical circumstance, must cope with extreme and frequently life threatening conditions. In the past decade, much has been written of the Vietnamese Boat People and their harrowing experiences of flight. More recently have come the reports of civilian massacres and "ethnic cleansing" in the Balkans. In Africa, where famine is as much an enemy as guns and bullets, the death toll continues to rise.

An assessment was carried out on the conditions of the displacement and flight of Ethiopian, Laotian, Vietnamese, Chilean and Salvadorean refugees resettled in Winnipeg. Of the 115 refugees surveyed, fully 90 percent believed that their lives had been at least "sometimes" in danger while living in their country. Almost 60 percent reported that were "frequently" or "always" in danger. Many, either prior to or during their flight, had been imprisoned (32 percent), physically assaulted (30 percent), and/or attacked by a government or rebel force (31 percent). Over one-third reported of a death (44 percent), abduction or disappearance (37 percent) of an immediate family member, relative, or close friend.

Just over two-thirds of the sample rated the conditions of their country prior to their departure as "somewhat" to "extremely" adverse. The most cited reasons for flight, of which at least one was reported by 83 percent of the refugees, included the need to secure personal safety (40 percent), the desire to attain personal freedom (35 percent), and the wish to escape government persecution or harassment (33 percent). Only 14 percent of the refugees had sought resettlement for the purpose of bettering their own lives.

Approximately two-thirds of the sample, and 88 percent of the Ethiopian and Asian refugees, fled their countries "illegally" —the governments neither knew of nor consented to their leaving. Conditions encountered

during this period were rated as "very" or "extremely" adverse by 45 percent of the refugees. Of those who fled overland or by sea, again predominantly Ethiopian and Asian in origin, 73 percent believed that their lives had been "frequently" or "always" in danger. Exactly one-quarter of these refugees had lacked adequate transportation while 30 percent had gone without food and/or water. Attacks,

by pirates or a military force, were reported by 31 percent of the refugees.

The data clearly reveals a common experience of pain and adversity among refugees. Practitioners, as well as researchers, must be aware of both the past which many refugees bring to resettlement as well as the possible impact of trauma upon their capacity to adapt to the demands of involuntary migration. ■

**Table 1: Conditions of Displacement and Flight**

Factors	I #	II %
<b>Reasons for fleeing country</b>		
personal safety	46	40
attain personal freedom	40	35
escape government persecution	38	33
improve children's future	25	28
economic improvement	16	14
escape war	13	11
family reunification	11	10
other	8	7
<b>Feeling of danger in country of origin</b>		
never or seldom	11	10
sometimes	36	31
frequently	35	30
always	33	29
<b>Level of adversity in country of origin</b>		
none or a little	37	32
some	34	30
very	30	26
extreme	14	12
<b>Fled country legally</b>		
yes	45	39
no	70	61
<b>Feeling of danger during flight</b>		
never	12	10
seldom	22	19
sometimes	19	17
frequently or always	62	54
<b>Level of adversity during flight</b>		
none	28	24
slight	20	17
some	15	14
very	25	22
extreme	27	23

**Table 2: Experienced Events**

Factors	I #	II %
<b>Personally experienced</b>		
imprisonment	37	32
assault (inc. torture and rape)	34	30
rebel/army attack	36	31
piracy	13	11
fought in war	13	11
injury/illness	13	11
<b>Immediate family</b>		
death	21	18
abduction or disappearance	34	30
imprisonment	31	26
assault	34	30
injury/illness	15	13
<b>Relative/close friend</b>		
death	51	44
imprisonment	27	23
abduction or disappearance	42	37
assault	29	25
injury/illness	22	19
<b>Flight</b>		
lacked transport	21	18
lacked food and/or water	22	19
loss of direction	20	17
bad weather	16	14
refused landing	9	8

**Notes:**

I — Number of refugees sampled  
II — Percentage of sample

David G. Hutton is currently working on an interdisciplinary doctoral program in refugee disaster relief at the University of Manitoba. This research note is based on data collected as part of his master's thesis.