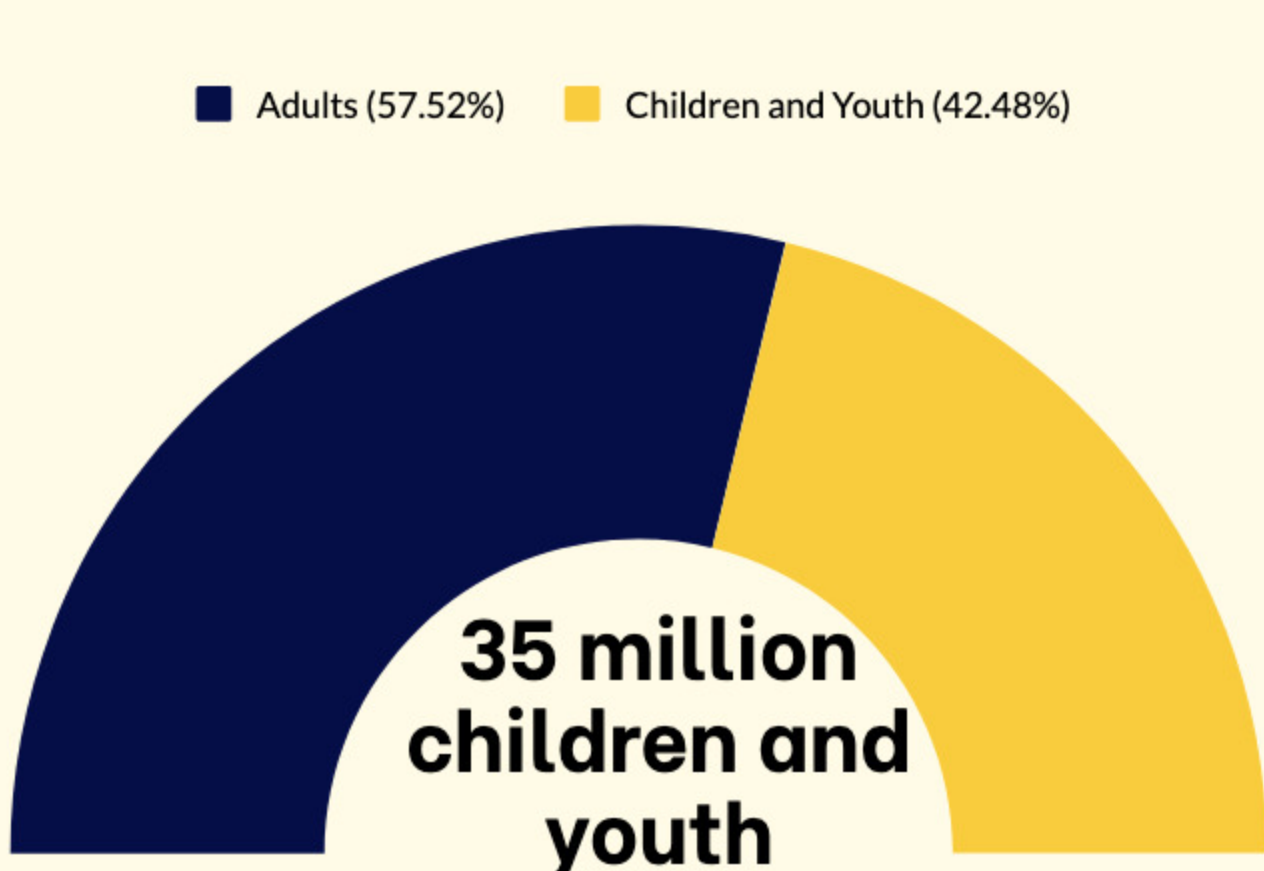


# Barriers and Potential Solutions to mental healthcare access for youth refugees and asylum seekers

Geneveave Barbo  
RN, MN, MCLSc, PhD student  
g.barbo@usask.ca



**In 2021, over 84 million people worldwide were forced to leave their homes and countries due to conflicts, human rights violations, and natural disasters**



**Youth refugees and asylum seekers<sup>1</sup> have a higher risk of mental health difficulties**

- post-traumatic stress disorder
- anxiety
- depression

<sup>1</sup> The term 'youth' is commonly defined as individuals between the age of 15 to 24 years old.

While a refugee is "someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted" and an asylum seeker is a person who is in the process of claiming refugee status

(Bersaglio et al., 2015; Kadir et al., 2019; Mohamed & Thomas, 2017; Papadopoulos & Shea, 2018; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2010, 2021)

## Youth refugees and asylum seekers encounter numerous barriers to accessing mental health support

### Cultural barriers

There is a variability in healthcare providers' cultural competence. Some might have not received the appropriate training.

### Difficulty navigating healthcare system

All countries have diverse healthcare systems. Refugee and asylum seeker youth do not necessarily know in advance which country will be hosting them; hence, they are unable to learn the host country's healthcare system a head of time.

### Language barriers

Youth generally do not speak the same language as health providers in host countries.

### Stigma

Certain communities have negative beliefs towards mental health conditions, which may impede their help-seeking behaviours.

### Financial costs

Services and medications are at times only partially or completely covered by public healthcare.

### Discrimination

Attitudes of xenophobia<sup>2</sup> and racism towards refugees and asylum seekers persist, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Other resettlement stressors

Fear that seeking mental health support might have legal ramifications and affect their migration/citizenship requests.

### Distrust of services

Youth might be originating from countries where their governments are dishonest, making them wary about government-funded healthcare systems.

<sup>2</sup> Xenophobia represents the fear, hatred, or hostility towards outsiders, foreigners, or non-native born individuals within a given population (Arya et al., 2021; Baak et al., 2020; Cheng et al., 2015; Colucci et al., 2014; Kadir et al., 2019; Marshall et al., 2016; Yakushko, 2018)

## Potential Solutions to access barriers



### Mandatory cultural competency training

All healthcare providers and allied staff should undergo mandatory cultural competency training on an ongoing basis.



### Available interpreters

Interpreters are valuable to communicating with refugees and asylum seekers who do not speak the host country's language, but providers must be cautious about confidentiality concerns.



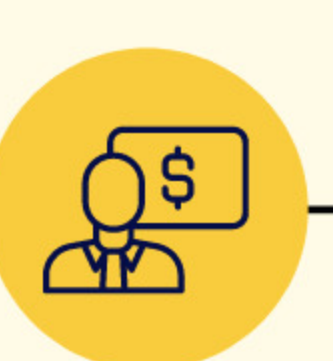
### Designated healthcare navigators

Navigators may serve as the first point of care for youth for whom they can build a therapeutic relationship with, enabling them to ask their questions concerning mental health and associated services.



### Enhance mental health literacy

Courses on health, mental health, and healthcare services must be integrated into youth's school curriculum and public service announcements.



### Increase funding and subsidies

Implementation of programs that are tailored to youth refugees' and asylum seekers' financial needs and healthcare expenses.



### More research and knowledge translation

Increased research on youth mental health service is required to better understand the barriers and facilitators to access.

(Arya et al., 2021; Colucci et al., 2014; Marshall et al., 2016; United Nations Network on Migration, 2022)

### References

- Arya, N., Redditt, V. J., Talavtikar, R., Holland, T., Brindamour, M., Wright, V., Saad, A., Beukeboom, C., Coakley, A., Rashid, M., & Pottie, K. (2021). Caring for refugees and newcomers in the post-COVID-19 era: Evidence review and guidance for FPs and health providers. *Canadian Family Physician Medecin De Famille Canadien*, 67(8), 575-581. <https://doi.org/10.46747/cfp.6708575>
- Baak, M., Miller, E., Ziersch, A., Due, C., Masocha, S., & Ziaian, T. (2020). The role of schools in identifying and referring refugee background young people who are experiencing mental health issues. *Journal of School Health*, 90(3), 172-181. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12862>
- Bersaglio, B., Enns, C., & Kepe, T. (2015). Youth under construction: The United Nations' representations of youth in the global conversation on the post-2015 development agenda. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies / Revue Canadienne d'études Du Développement*, 36(1), 57-71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2015.994596>
- Cheng, I.-H., Drillich, A., & Schattner, P. (2015). Refugee experiences of general practice in countries of resettlement: A literature review. *British Journal of General Practice*, 65(632), e171-e176. <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp15X683977>
- Colucci, E., Szwarz, J., Minas, H., Paxton, G., & Guerra, C. (2014). The utilisation of mental health services by children and young people from a refugee background: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Culture and Mental Health*, 7(1), 86-108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17542863.2012.713371>
- Kadir, A., Battersby, A., Spencer, N., & Hjern, A. (2019). Children on the move in Europe: A narrative review of the evidence on the health risks, health needs and health policy for asylum seeking, refugee and undocumented children. *BMI Paediatrics Open*, 3(1), bmjpo-2018-000364. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjpo-2018-000364>
- Marshall, E. A., Butler, K., Roche, T., Cumming, J., & Taknint, J. T. (2016). Refugee youth: A review of mental health counselling issues and practices. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, 57(4), 308-319. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cap0000068>
- Mohamed, S., & Thomas, M. (2017). The mental health and psychological well-being of refugee children and young people: An exploration of risk, resilience and protective factors. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 33(3), 249-263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2017.1300769>
- Papadopoulos, I., & Shea, S. (2018). European refugee crisis: Psychological trauma of refugees and care givers. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, 14(1), 106-116. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMHC-08-2016-0032>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2010). Convention and protocol relating to the status of refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/basic/3b66c2aa10/convention-protocol-relating-status-refugees.html>
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2021). *Global trends in forced displacement in 2020*. <https://www.unhcr.org/60b638e37/unhcr-global-trends-2020>
- United Nations Network on Migration. (2022, January). *Promising practices in the provision of essential services to migrants*. [https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd416/files/docs/provision\\_of\\_essential\\_services\\_-\\_good\\_practices.pdf](https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd416/files/docs/provision_of_essential_services_-_good_practices.pdf)
- Yakushko, O. (2018). Hatred of strangers: Defining xenophobia and related concepts. In O. Yakushko (Ed.), *Modern-day xenophobia: Historical and theoretical perspectives on the roots of anti-immigrant prejudice* (pp. 11-31). Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00644-0\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00644-0_2)