A BRIEF HISTORY OF AFGHAN REFUGEES IN CANADA

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OVERVIEW

Afghanistan's long history of violence and political insecurity has resulted in a large proportion of its population being displaced. Starting in the late 1970s, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan prompted many Afghans to flee their country (Přívara & Přívarová, 2019). Through the 1970s and 80s, approximately 3 to 5 million Afghan refugees escaped the war in Afghanistan and sought refuge, mainly in Iran and Pakistan (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2023a), where the majority remained in refugee camps. Political conflicts and power shifts between the Taliban and the Afghan government have been ongoing throughout the decades (Goodson, 2001; Rubin, 2006). The most recent conflict left many behind. During the recent conflict, an estimated 2.6 million Afghans made it out of their country while another 3.5 million became Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP). According to the UNHCR (2022), after four decades of conflict and war, nearly 24 million Afghans require help and support and one in four Afghans is or was previously a refugee (National Geographic, 2011).

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Canada has welcomed 1,088,015 refugees since 1980 (UNHCR, 2023b). According to the 2016 Census, 482,610 Afghans were living in Canada (Statistics Canada 2017). The refugee population in Canada is comprised of a variety of nationalities and ethnicities, highlighting the diversity of the refugees. During the most recent conflict in Afghanistan in 2021, the Taliban assumed power once more, endangering ethnic minorities and the rights of women (Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange [CORE], 2021). In response to the conflict, the federal government promised to bring 20,000 Afghan refugees to Canada. Following an election in 2021, the federal government promised to increase the number of Afghan refugees to 40,000 (Marchand, 2022). At this time, more than 28,870 Afghan refugees have arrived in Canada, the majority (52%) settling in Toronto and Calgary (Begin et al., 2023).

AFGHAN REFUGEES IN CANADA

Canada has a long and complicated history of both providing and denying refuge to those in need, beginning in the late 18th century (Canadian Council for Refugees [CCR], n.d.; Dench, 2000; Government of Canada, 2021). People from all over the world sought and continue to seek refuge in Canada. When Canada began to record migration movements, 25% of all immigrants in Canada were refugees (CCR, n.d.; Dench, 2000; Government of Canada, 2021). Immigration, Refugee, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) records refugee admissions in Canada; Between 1980 and 2016, admission numbers fluctuated between 14,000 and 55,000 per year. Because of the dangerous and unlivable conditions in refugee camps, many refugees seek to secondarily migrate to another country (Barfield, 2012). Many Afghans who seek better living conditions arrive in Canada.

Prior to the 1980s, there was little research into refugees in Canada, and even less research into

Afghans in Canada. Afghans began to arrive in Canada in large numbers at the turn of the 21st century. Throughout the 2000s through today, the number of Afghans arriving in Canada annually remains between 1000-3000 per year (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2016). When the Taliban came to power in 2001 (Barfield, 2012), many more Afghans fled the country. In Canada, the number of Afghan refugees in 2001 rose to 4,067 (IRCC, 2016). Throughout the last five years, the number of Afghans arriving in Canada continuously increased due to various natural or political conflicts and hardships in the country (Přívara & Přívarová, 2019). Over time, the number of Afghan refugees that have been admitted to Canada has also increased, rising from 6,000 in 2019 to 20,000 by the end of 2022 (IRCC, 2022). During the past few years, the Canadian government has published more detailed research on the demographics of Afghans in Canada. At present, the provinces with the largest Afghan population are Ontario, followed by Alberta (Government of Canada, 2023).

REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT IN CANADA SINCE 2020

Canada continues to be one of the major countries for the permanent resettlement of refugees (Esipova et al., 2020). The country faced challenges when it came to bringing in and resettling newcomers in the country when the pandemic started, and new challenges evolved (Esses et al., 2021). Similar to other countries across the world, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada closed its borders to non-essential travel in early 2020 to curb the spread of the virus and the death toll. As a result, the federal government implemented different policies, one of which focused on factors for immigration decisions, and which immigrants could be admitted into the country.

Refugees are among the many newcomers who face economic and social challenges (Alrob & Shields 2022), and these challenges were amplified by the pandemic and its related restrictions. Afghan refugees were among the largest group of refugees who arrived in Canada amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The added health protocols including quarantine and vaccination requirements resulted in additional delays in resettling and integration after their arrival. The measures to curb the pandemic also increased hardships in the process of finding housing, finding employment and language barriers, accessing some settlement programs and services among others.

As with most refugee plights, the world's attention span is short. International attention has recently shifted away from Afghanistan towards other conflicts. The 2022 war between Russia and Ukraine shifted to provide immediate aid for Ukrainian refugees to integrate into Canadian cities. While Afghan refugees have been welcomed in Canada, Canadians are less likely to have knowledge of the conflict in Afghanistan, despite the fact it has been ongoing for over 40 years. As a result, the wait to enter Canada becomes longer and the slower pace of arrivals lengthens the time they spend in displacement and delays their integration into Canada.

WHAT IS COMING NEXT? WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP THE UPCOMING AFGHANS?

With Canada still short of its target to bring 40,000 Afghan refugees to Canada, many Afghans

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are expected to arrive in Canada in the next months (Government of Canada, 2023). Our recent research with the Association for Canadian Studies reveals that among the Afghans who made it to Canada since 2021, the most pressing integration issues they have reported have to do with finding affordable rent/living accommodations, connecting with family, finding community, employment, and learning English and/or French (see Wilkinson et al., 2023 for more details). While the English and French language programs are oversubscribed and the waitlists to enroll are long, finding affordable and permanent accommodations, finding a job and developing social connections are the most pressing issues Afghan refugees report in their initial resettlement.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS?

In conclusion, it is important to have more resources and information available for settlement and newcomer services, and for the general public to learn more about the history of Afghanistan in Canada, and the turbulent history of Afghanistan leading many to come to Canada. While Canada has welcomed many refugees over the years, it has also denied many entries, and many refugees require more support to settle and adapt to their new residence. Further research into interprovincial migration can also contribute to understanding the resources Afghan refugees might need upon arrival and most importantly, aid with affordable housing and sustainable employment, and the reasons that lead them to leave their original destination. Policy should also focus on prioritizing family reunification and simplifying the process of arrival for Afghan refugees to help with their integration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Resettlement of Afghan Refugees Study was funded by Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada, PNT Region (grant S21484907U) and by the Canada Research Chair Program (Migration Futures). The Association for Canadian Studies provided valuable assistance in data collection, cleaning and tabulation. Piper Larsen from the University of Manitoba managed the invitations to the Afghan refugees. The authors are responsible for the comments and analyses made in this paper.

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