

## SCRA Public Policy Committee Rapid Response: The Global Refugee Crisis

### Overview of the Refugee Crisis

The massive arrival of Syrians to the European borders has become a symbol of the suffering of the millions of persons displaced by the wars and generalized violence that devastates our planet. At this time, more than twelve million people need humanitarian aid in Syria. Nearly eight million are internally displaced and four million are seeking asylum somewhere in the world. According to the Council on Foreign Relations (2015)<sup>1</sup> an **asylum seeker** is defined as a person fleeing persecution or conflict, and therefore seeking international protection under the 1951 Refugee convention on the Status of Refugees; a **refugee** is an asylum seeker whose claim has been approved. However, the UN considers migrants fleeing war or persecution to be refugees, even before they officially receive asylum. (Syrian and Eritrean nationals, for example, enjoy *prima facie* refugee status.) An **economic migrant**, by contrast, is a person whose primary motivation for leaving his or her home country is economic gain. The term "migrant" is seen as an umbrella term for all three groups. Europe is currently witnessing a mixed-migration phenomenon, in which economic migrants and asylum seekers travel together.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), during the month of October 2015, more than half a million people have crossed the Mediterranean looking for protection. Unfortunately many never make it. In the first half of the year 2015, more than 3,000 corpses were recovered—four times more than the previous year in the same period<sup>2</sup>. The forecasts for the coming months are even more disastrous. The UNHCR has a worldwide alert that the arrival of the winter in devastated cities, refugee camps and settlements will become cemeteries for thousands of people<sup>3</sup>.

This tragedy is just the tip of a huge iceberg. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)<sup>4</sup>, at the end of the year 2014, 38 million people had been forced to leave their homes by armed conflicts and generalized violence. In Colombia, there were 6 million; in the

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<sup>1</sup> Council on Foreign Relations (2015). Europe's Migration Crisis. Available from: <http://www.cfr.org/migration/europes-migration-crisis/p32874>

<sup>2</sup> Missing Migrant Project. Available from: <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

<sup>3</sup> Statement by UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres on refugee crisis in Europe. Available from <http://www.unhcr.org/55e9459f6.html>

<sup>4</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council. Global Overview 2015. People internally displaced by conflict and violence. Available from: <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/library/Media/201505-Global-Overview-2015/20150506-global-overview-2015-en.pdf>

Democratic Republic of the Congo almost 3 million; 3,276,000 in Iraq and more than 3 million in the Balkans. Many of these displaced people and refugees desperately seeking an opportunity for a better life elsewhere. The journey to asylum is difficult, exhausting and leaves refugees in desperate conditions.

A large percentage of the refugees are unaccompanied minors; for example, 1 in every 4 children arrives alone at the Serbian border. The children come in distraught states and have to continue suffering an endless journey where their basic needs are not being met<sup>5</sup>. The settlements that refugees inhabit are another disturbing problem. Because of the great number of asylum seekers in reception countries, especially in Southeastern Europe, they have been forced to live in refugee camps with minimal resources and poor living conditions. According to the UNHCR, these living situations need to be addressed by humanitarian agencies and governments through planning mechanism and increase response capacity<sup>6</sup>. Many rights groups contend that a number of these detention centers violate Article III of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits inhuman or degrading treatment.

Beyond the spectacle of horror and suffering which the media presents to the public, citizens perplexedly observe how governments ignore the international treaties that protect the victims of war, generalized violence and transnational organized crime (human trafficking). Recently, European leaders are seeking to forge a two-part response to the wave of humanity reaching the continent, proposing to require new residents to integrate while also trying to alleviate problems in the Mideast (Melvin, 2015, September 24). "It is clear that the greatest tide of refugees and migrants is yet to come," said Donald Tusk, president of the European Council. European leaders have agreed to provide more help to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and other countries in the region in the hopes of at least inducing some people who are fleeing conflicts and poverty to stay in the Middle East. Tusk said that 1 billion Euros (about \$1.12 billion) would be committed to the region in cooperation with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the World Food Program (Melvin, 2015, September 24). However, as with the sovereign debt crisis, national interests have consistently trumped a common European response to this migrant influx. Some experts say the European bloc's increasingly polarized political climate, in which many nationalist, anti-immigrant parties are ascendant, is partially to blame for the muted humanitarian response from some states (Park, 2015, September 23).

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<sup>5</sup> Save the Children. Available from:

<http://www.savethechildren.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=8rKLIXMG1pI4E&b=9241341&ct=14762743>

<sup>6</sup> Statement by UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres on refugee crisis in Europe. Available from <http://www.unhcr.org/55e9459f6.html>

The crisis in Europe is also having negative repercussions in the United States. There has been growing political opposition to the resettlement of Syrian refugees in some American communities, with a large number of Governors blocking state funding to stop the process. In addition, over the last three years, there has been a significant increase in migration of unaccompanied minors and families from Central America into the U.S. Between October of 2013 and September of 2014, the U.S. government apprehended 68,334 children accompanied by a parent at the southwest border, representing a 361% increase in the number of family apprehensions over the previous fiscal year. More than half of all children who entered family detention in Fiscal Year 2014 were six years old or younger (LIRS & WRC, 2014, October). This process is continuing and likely to increase because these families and children are fleeing violence, domestic and/or family abuse, and dangerous gang-related activity from which their governments have been unable to protect them (Stinchcomb & Hersberg, 2014 November). Unfortunately, the current election rhetoric from conservative candidates has brought undocumented immigrants to the forefront of negative opinion in the U.S. and more recently has extended to members of the Islamic faith. Anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic sentiment is growing.

#### **Link with SCRA Mission and Values**

For the Society of Community Research and Action (SCRA), Division 27 of the American Psychology Association (APA), one of its' main principles is to "support every person's right to be different without risk of suffering material and psychological sanctions" (Rappaport, 1977, p. 1). In fact, one of SCRA goals is *to promote an international field of inquiry and action that respects cultural differences, honors human rights, seeks out and incorporates contributions from all corners of the world, and is not dominated by any one nation or group.*<sup>7</sup> In addition, community psychologists are committed to social changes that promote social justice and greater inclusion for historically marginalized groups and will see that commitment manifest in the various aspects of the field's work. Community psychology has focused its research and conceptual development on issues that affect the lives of individuals and groups suffering from oppression and marginalization (e.g., Martin-Baro, 1989; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Watts & Serrano-Garcia, 2003; Montero & Sonn, 2009). Many of these groups are migrants and displaced populations (APA, 2012). The work of community psychologists is based on their respect for diversity and multiculturalism, the empowerment of individuals, groups and communities, and the design and implementation of community initiatives that promote equity and social justice (Trickett, 1994).

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<sup>7</sup> SCRA who we are. Available at: <http://www.scra27.org/who-we-are/#U75UFvmfDhjQOXIa.99>

To give weight to these principles, the SCRA promotes partnerships to ensure dissemination of scientific knowledge to promote social justice, to create opportunities to involve researchers, professionals, policymakers and communities in the political process and to assure accountability in implementing this knowledge effectively into public policies (Nelson, 2013). We are urging members to take individual action in their own communities. With regards to the refugee crisis, SCRA calls its' members for immediate actions to:

1. Request city mayors to welcome Syrian and Central American refugees into your community. Your city could become a “safe haven” for refugees and immigrants. Denounce the governors who are trying to sabotage the resettlement of Syrian refugees in your state. This unworthy reception is a breeding ground for the development of racist and xenophobic attitudes among the local populations.
2. Write Op-Eds and letters to the editors in your local newspapers denouncing anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric and voicing your support for refugees.
3. Denounce hate speech when you hear it, particularly if it incites hatred or violence against a particular immigrant group.
4. Call your state and local representatives to let them know that you are concerned about hate speech against refugees and Muslims. At this time, contacts with your legislators will be informational in nature, not for or against any specific legislation.
5. Encourage community leaders and service providers to meet the needs of refugees populations, ensuring services and care that is sensitive to their cultural roots, recognizing the special needs of those who are victims of systematic violations of their human rights (Marmot, 2007; WHO, 2010). Community psychologists can offer guidelines to support service providers that can be utilized in multicultural contexts (Brodsky & Cattaneo, 2013; Dana & Allen, 2008; Suarez-Balcazar, Balcazar, García-Ramírez & Taylor-Ritzler, 2014).
6. Raise awareness in the university community about initiatives aimed at overcoming the conditions of oppression and suffering of those displaced by war and generalized violence (i.e. Betancourt et al., 2012; Birman, Simon, Chan & Tran, 2014; Brodsky et al., 2011). Encourage evidence-based interventions to promote the psychosocial well-being of refugees and displaced people (Fisher & Sonn, 2007; Ingleby, 2005; Prilleltensky, 2008). Support displaced populations in efforts to take advantage of their strengths, preserve their cultural legacy and reconstruct their communities (Reyes & Sonn, 2011).

7. Participate and collaborate with local, national and international agencies working with refugee and displaced populations. Promote the formation of coalitions among multiple stakeholders including academic institutions, community workers, policymakers, refugees and displaced persons (Brodsky et al., 2011; Maton, 2008) to contribute to a Global Approach on Migration and Mobility<sup>8</sup>.

To conclude, these partnerships will work to implement the general policy response approved by the IOM<sup>9</sup> in collaboration with UN agencies, such as UNHCR, UNICEF, OHCHR, and UNODC with the following goals: (a) to reduce deaths and human suffering during and as a result of migration and to protect the human rights of migrants; (b) to reduce negative factors including irregular migration and to enable a true choice between migrating safely and not migrating; (c) to create the conditions for migration to take place in safe and dignified ways; and (d) to create the structural conditions and make systemic changes to enable positive outcomes of migration for all those involved. The SCRA denounces the unfair treatment of those who enter our borders requesting refugee status. By refusing to welcome them, our governments are contributing to the development of racist and xenophobic attitudes among the local populations.

Signed:

**Manuel Garcia Ramirez**, Ph.D. University of Seville, Spain

**Fabricio E. Balcazar**, Ph.D. University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

**Mona M. Amer**, Ph.D. The American University in Cairo, Egypt (Chair, SCRA International Committee)

**Héctor Berroeta**, Ph.D. Universidad de Valparaíso (Chair, Red Inter-Americana de Psicología Comunitaria)

**Serdar M. Degirmencioglu**, Ph.D. Doğuş University, Turkey

**Terri Mannarini**, Ph.D. University of Salento, Italy

**Isabel Menezes**, Ph.D. University of Porto, Portugal.

Disclaimer: The views here are that of Division 27 (Society for Community Research and Action) of the American Psychological Association and do not represent an official position of APA.

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<sup>8</sup> European Commission. Migration and home affairs. Available from: [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/international-affairs/global-approach-to-migration/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/international-affairs/global-approach-to-migration/index_en.htm)

<sup>9</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM). Addressing complex migration flows in the Mediterranean: IOM response plan. Available from: [http://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/press\\_release/file/IOM-Response-Plan-for-the-Mediterranean-and-Beyond-Oct2015.pdf](http://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/press_release/file/IOM-Response-Plan-for-the-Mediterranean-and-Beyond-Oct2015.pdf)

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