

Law Enforcement Complications for Resettled Refugees:
Information for Police Officers
Knowledge Gaps to Address with Refugee Communities

Refugee Resettlement 101

- Refugee resettlement is the most strictly vetted route of immigration to the United States. It is an 18-24 month process at minimum, but can take years longer. Refugees are screened by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, FBI, Department of Homeland Security, State Department, and National Counterterrorism Center; fingerprints and sometimes iris scans (Syria) are taken. They must have current medical clearance as well.
- Refugees have legal immigration status in the U.S. upon arrival.
- Refugees are expected to follow all U.S. laws.
- Refugees are generally not candidates for deportation; they would receive the same punishment as a U.S. citizen for committing a crime.
- Refugees go through orientations before and after arrival in the U.S., but it is not possible to learn every law of the U.S. in such a short time. There are many laws refugees may be unaware of and most do not fully understand our justice system despite best efforts to acclimate.

General cultural differences that impact law enforcement:

- Generally the people persecuting refugees back home wore uniforms: officers, soldiers, government officials, etc. Refugees are accustomed to fearing people in uniform rather than turning to them for safety and protection.
- Uniforms meant absolute power in a refugee's prior experience; no checks and balances; officers were not held accountable for abuses inflicted upon residents.
- Officers often expect bribes in refugee home countries.
- There is a common misconception in the resettled refugee community that any involvement with the police gives you a negative record, even if you are the victim.
- Refugees are often concerned that police interaction could affect immigration status (adjustment from refugee to citizenship status is dependent upon a clean record).
- May not know their home address, correct name spelling (alphabets vary), and/or birth date without looking at ID; many refugees have never had an address or assigned birth date prior to resettlement in the U.S.
- Many refugees are assigned 01/01 birthdays if their country of origin did not keep record.
- Overseas records and initial I-94 immigration document reverse month and date from the American standard of month/date/year; for example, a refugee may state that their birthday is 05/08/1986 but by the American standard we would say 08/05/1986.
- Body language varies culture to culture. Examples: 1) direct eye contact is very "American" – it is considered very disrespectful to look an authority figure (like an officer) in the eye in most refugee cultures; 2) Crossing your arms shows respect in Burma, not disinterest or arrogance).
- Refugees are often not aware they can report a crime anonymously. Loyalty to their community often makes them hesitant to report problems to the police.
- Hard to call 911 due to language barriers.
- It is more difficult to remember English when nervous.
- May be illiterate (unable to read/write) in both their native language and English.

- May say yes even if they do not fully understand; there is a strong deference to authority in refugee cultures; fear of disagreeing because disagreeing often meant retaliation of some kind upon the family or clan.
- May sign documents without understanding what the document says or what it means to sign.
- May not realize they are supposed to “protect the integrity” of crime scenes.
- Removing shoes indoors is a sign of respect; obviously officers cannot remove shoes when entering a home, but be aware this is perceived as very disrespectful so it is helpful to acknowledge this and apologize if you wish to set a productive tone.
- Certain male/female interaction may be culturally inappropriate and cause people to seem unwilling to cooperate.

Common Laws Unfamiliar to Refugees:

- Hunting and Fishing
- Truancy
- Child supervision guidelines; what age is appropriate for which responsibilities; car seats, etc.
- Domestic violence
- Trespassing
- Loitering
- Staying in car when pulled over (in most home countries, people are expected to exit the vehicle when pulled over)
- Jaywalking
- Littering
- Noise violations
- Statutory rape / age of consent
- Minor in possession / Contributing to the delinquency of a minor