



Partnership for the  
Advancement of  
New Americans

# SAN DIEGO COUNTY REFUGEE EXPERIENCES REPORT



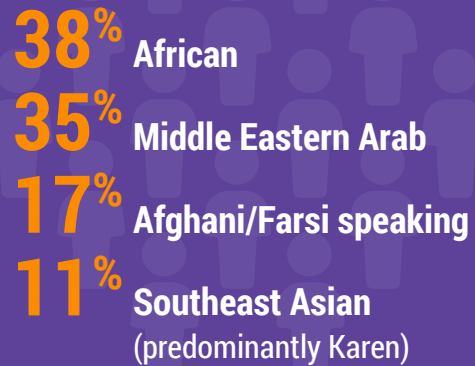
Executive Summary

By Hodayra Yusufi, Deputy Director, PANA

Technical assistance provided by Rebecca Fielding-Miller, Assistant Professor University of California,  
San Diego Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health and Human Longevity Science  
Published on 22 March, 2021



Of those interviewed:



## PURPOSE

The Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans (PANA) fights to advance the full economic, social, & civic inclusion of refugees in the San Diego region, throughout California, and across the country. PANA conducts a biennial survey with refugees in San Diego County to better understand the needs of our communities. The results of these surveys and discussions drive the organization’s priorities for the following two years.

## PROCESS

Using a **77-question survey**, we assessed the state of the refugee community in San Diego through interviews with refugee and first-generation community members. The survey was completed in the fall of 2020 by **544 participants**, and asked key questions regarding health, employment, housing, COVID-19 implications, education, and sense of safety and belonging.

A subset of 60 survey respondents was invited to a total of seven community conversations to discuss the survey questions in depth. These conversations occurred in participants’ native languages through zoom and socially distanced in-person meetings.

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. THE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE IN THE REFUGEE COMMUNITY IS MORE THAN THREE TIMES HIGHER THAN SAN DIEGO COUNTY’S UNEMPLOYMENT RATE.

“We don’t want to apply to new positions because we are worried about the health risk and exposing our family to COVID.”

- Afghan father in employment community conversation

Survey respondents were asked if they had worked for pay at a job or business in the previous week. Twenty-two percent indicated they had not worked for pay in the past week and were actively looking for work. The California Employment Development Department reported the unemployment rates in San Diego County as 6.6% during a similar time,<sup>1</sup> indicating the unemployment rate among refugees in our sample was more than three times higher than the county’s rate.

Survey results demonstrated that refugees continue to predominantly work in public-facing service jobs such as security, health care services, and transportation. The COVID-19 pandemic therefore presents a dual challenge: refugees are simultaneously at high-risk of COVID-19 exposure and unemployment given the nature of their jobs. Moreover, nearly all respondents who were employed throughout the pandemic earned an annual salary significantly below the regional median salary. Eighty-four percent of survey respondents are considered extremely low earners with an annual income that is at or below 30% of the median annual income for San Diego County.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. SIXTY-FIVE PERCENT OF REFUGEES IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY ARE LIVING IN OVERCROWDED DWELLINGS.

The California Department of Public Health classifies overcrowding by the number of individuals per room in a household.<sup>3</sup> More than one person per room is considered overcrowded and more than 1.5 people per room is considered severely overcrowded. Two-thirds of survey respondents are living in crowded housing, and nearly one third of those are living in severely crowded housing. Individuals who reported living in affordable housing were 66% less likely to be living in severely crowded settings.

Addressing this epidemic of “hidden homelessness,” where families are forced to live in overcrowded spaces, is a critical need that has only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Overcrowded dwellings increase the risk for transmission of COVID-19 because of the lack of space to socially distance and isolate.

## 3. FEAR PERSISTS IN THE MIDST OF XENOPHOBIC AND ANTI-IMMIGRANT POLITICAL RHETORIC.

African respondents were most likely to say that anti-immigrant rhetoric strongly influenced their ability to participate in public life: **65% felt worried about being targeted by a hate crime**, speaking up in public, or feeling unwelcome in public spaces.

- **Approximately 12% of respondents said they had definitely or probably experienced a hate crime in the United States.** In community conversations, community members stated they did not report hate crime incidents because community members felt it would be fruitless.
- **Only 10% of Afghan and 33% of African respondents reported that they had definitely not experienced a hate crime**, compared to 81% of Middle Eastern participants and 67% of southeast Asian participants.
- **Middle Eastern respondents were significantly worried about immigration status**, with 72% expressing concern about their own immigration status or that of their friends and family, particularly during the Trump administration.

“We left our home country where we were around people that looked like me. We came to America to have a better and safer life for my kids but that is not the case. I don’t feel that my children are safe in this country since they are outsiders, even though they were born here.”

– East African Mother in City Heights

“Coming to America we thought it would be better but it’s not. Just being black, police are always gonna stop you and profile you, and you’re always looking over your shoulder. I’m always going to have to live with that and my kids will too. I try to stay away from them [the police]. I know they hate us and it’s never going to change. Whether rich or poor, they’re always going to come after us because of our color.”

– Somali Youth in community conversation about safety and belonging



#### **4. REFUGEES ARE FACING A SEVERE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS.**

Fifty-three percent of survey respondents reported depression and/or anxiety. This is significantly above the estimated 44% of Californians who reported struggling with mental health issues in the same timeframe as report data were collected.<sup>5</sup> Individuals from Afghani and South East Asian backgrounds reported significantly worse mental health than individuals from African backgrounds. While women overall did not report worse mental health than men, Syrian women reported significantly worse mental health than their male counterparts.

The high numbers of respondents reporting mental health issues is particularly alarming given there were likely some respondents who, due to heightened stigma against mental health issues in the refugee community, did not report mental health issues even if they were experiencing them.

#### **5. REFUGEES MAY BE MORE VULNERABLE TO COVID-19 GIVEN LOW TESTING RATES, LACK OF TRUST IN HEALTH PROFESSIONALS, AND HIGH RATES OF VACCINE HESITANCY.**

In addition to relatively low testing uptake after exposure or medical advice, there are high rates of vaccine hesitancy in the San Diego refugee community. Only 43% of respondents would be fine taking the vaccine, while 40% reported they would refuse to take it, and the remaining 17% would be reluctant but would not refuse. African respondents were more than twice as likely to suggest they would refuse a vaccine when compared to other ethnic groups.

There were distinct cultural differences in levels of trust with governmental agencies, scientists, and respondents own healthcare providers. African respondents were the least likely to trust any entity, followed by Afghani participants. Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian participants were more likely to “moderately” or “mostly” trust scientists, government, and their own healthcare provider. Participants who “strongly” believed that their health care provider was culturally competent (understood their language and culture) were 13 times more likely to trust their advice than participants who strongly disagreed that their provider was culturally competent.



## 6. REFUGEES ARE EXPERIENCING AN INCREASE IN FOOD INSECURITY, JOB LOSS, HOUSEHOLD VIOLENCE AND ISSUES RELATED TO SCHOOL CLOSURES SINCE THE START OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

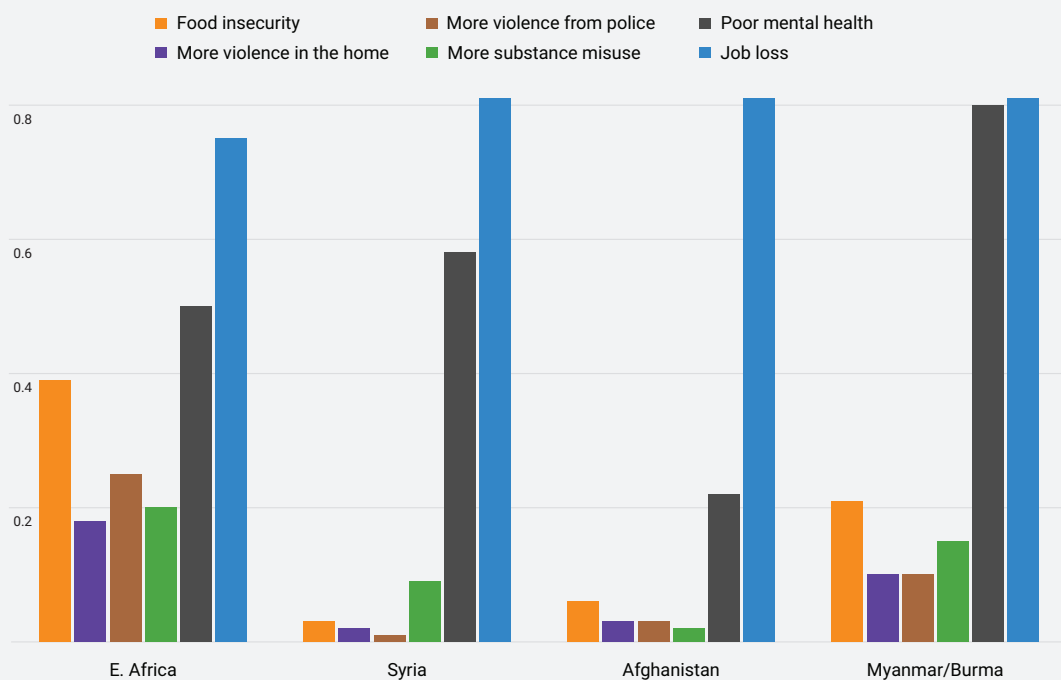
- Over 80% of respondents reported significant job loss in their community since the beginning of the pandemic and one in five reported that food insecurity had increased.
- Eight percent of respondents reported that household violence had increased since the pandemic began. Women were three times more likely to report an increase in household violence than men (12% versus 4%), suggesting that increased gender-based violence may be a significant issue.
- Participants also reported significant increases in poor mental health (50%) and substance misuse (12%).

“School is difficult. When we’re in class physically it’s easier for questions to be answered. Online schooling is hard to get questions answered.”

- Karen youth in education community conversation

School closures have significantly impacted the refugee community. While nearly all parents (over 96%) report that their children have access to the internet and a computer or tablet to complete their schoolwork, only one third reported that their children have somewhere quiet to study, and less than half (44%) report that their children have headphones. Community members also reported that for both children and adult English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, the online learning environment made it more difficult to learn the language due to limited student to teacher interactions.

### Consequences of the pandemic in my community



# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Dedicate resources to upskill refugees into family sustaining jobs.
- Prioritize rapid access to affordable housing for refugees to ensure the health and safety of refugees across San Diego County.
- End law enforcement collaborations that result in the heightened surveillance and harassment of refugee communities, and implement policies that build trust with refugee and immigrant communities.
- Invest in culturally competent healthcare providers to provide education on COVID-19 testing and vaccination to refugee communities.
- Invest in culturally competent, affordable, and accessible mental health care resources, especially for refugee women.
- Provide direct support to refugee families to navigate distance learning, including language support and devices such as headphones to students.



## Acknowledgements

We thank the Karen Organization of San Diego for their support in surveying the Karen/Burmese refugee communities in San Diego. Special thanks also go to PANA's community organizers, who put countless hours into the house meetings, surveys, and community conversations that resulted in this report.

## References

1. Molnar, Philip. (December 18, 2020). San Diego unemployment at lowest rate since COVID. *San Diego Union Tribune* online. <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/business/story/2020-12-18/san-diego-unemployment-rate-at-lowest-rate-of-pandemic>.
2. San Diego County Area Median Income (AMI) and Income Limits. (April 1, 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/sdhcd/rental-assistance/income-limits-ami/>.
3. Percent of household overcrowding (> 1.0 persons per room) and severe overcrowding (> 1.5 persons per room). (2019). Office of Health Equity Retrieved from <https://data.chhs.ca.gov/dataset/housing-crowding/resource/9cf0037a-62cd-48fc-8646-18086a1b5e53>.
4. Housing Element Background Report. (2017). County of San Diego Retrieved from [https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/pds/advance/HousingElementUpdate/Background\\_Report\\_final.pdf](https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/pds/advance/HousingElementUpdate/Background_Report_final.pdf).
5. Indicators of Anxiety or Depression Based on Reported Frequency of Symptoms During the Last 7 Days. (2021). Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm>.



Partnership for the  
Advancement of  
New Americans