



FINDING HOME IN THE EMPIRE STATE

*A Survey and Assessment of the Needs of
Afghans Newly Resettled in New York State*

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INTRODUCTION

On August 15, 2021 the Taliban captured Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, and completed a months-long campaign to finally seize control of the country's government. The United States was in the middle of withdrawing the last of its forces. For the next few weeks, Kabul International Airport transformed into a chaotic scene as U.S. military personnel, Afghan military and government allies, and Afghan civilians attempted to flee. Many people ran to the airport without any belongings. Some women burned their diplomas, fearing persecution for obtaining an education; individuals associated with the government similarly destroyed identifying documents. Many slept in the airport for days, moving from gate to gate as the Taliban threatened to breach the complex. As of December, 2021, the US Government [estimated](#) it had evacuated over 82,000 Afghans to the United States, with an untold additional number evacuated through private citizen efforts. As of that same date, [over 1,800](#) had been resettled in New York State.

Methodology

The aim of this report is to document the current needs of Afghan evacuees who are now residing in New York state since August 2021, and to highlight the need for increased funding for resettlement, legal, and other services for the Afghan community. The information shared in this report was collected through the following means:

- Aggregate data from the legal screening clinics conducted by Immigrant ARC and its members in Albany, Rochester, and Syracuse. Data from Buffalo, the fourth major resettlement city in New York State, was not available at the time of writing of this report.
- Responses of a survey of needs sent to the major refugee resettlement agencies in New York State. Five agencies completed the survey.
- Qualitative interviews with 42 Afghan families in the early months of resettlement.
- The personal experiences of the author, who was evacuated through the US Government's official efforts in August, 2021.
- Feedback from other Immigrant ARC member organizations.

IMPORTANT VOCABULARY

ASYLUM: A status non-citizens can apply for if they are physically present in the United States and have suffered persecution or fear that they will suffer persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion (actual or imputed), and/or membership in a particular social group. This status provides a path to permanent residency.

TEMPORARY PROTECTED STATUS (TPS): a status the US Secretary of Homeland Security can designate to a country due to temporary conditions (such as an armed conflict or natural disaster) that make it unsafe for nationals to return. Beneficiaries of TPS are authorized to work in the US, are not removable from the US, cannot be detained by DHS on the basis of their immigration status, and may be granted travel authorization. This status does not provide a path to permanent residency.

SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISA (SIV) FOR AFGHAN NATIONALS: The Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, Section 602(b), created a new special immigrant category for Afghans who were employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government in Afghanistan between Oct. 7, 2001, and Dec. 31, 2023 for a minimum of one year and who have experienced or are experiencing an ongoing serious threat as a consequence of their employment. This visa provides a path to permanent residency.

BACKGROUND ON TARGETED ETHNIC GROUPS: Because the Taliban are mainly ethnically Pashto, Pashto groups are less likely to be targeted for persecution. Hazara groups are likely to be targeted due to religious differences from the Taliban; Hazara groups tend to practice Shia Islam, whereas the Taliban are a Sunni-practicing group. Tajik groups are also likely to be targeted by the Taliban due to the groups' history of resistance against the Taliban.

GENERAL FINDINGS

- The Afghan evacuee community is quite diverse, and therefore has diverse needs. Some community members have come to the U.S. with advanced degrees and significant work experience — their needs include transferring their credentials or formulating a plan to invest in continuing education in the U.S. to practice in their field. Some community members have not completed high school — their needs include studying for their GED, or connecting with work opportunities that do not have particular educational requirements. Many individuals do not speak English. 5 major resettlement organizations reported a wide variety of needs for their Afghan clients — from job training and ESL programs to child care and discounted public transportation fare.
- 80% of Afghan evacuees in NY state have viable asylum claims.
- Nearly half of Afghan evacuees in NY state have some type of US-government affiliations.
- Seventy-four percent of Afghan community members interviewed reported mental health concerns. Particular stressors included worry about family members remaining in Afghanistan, and worry about obtaining employment and legal status in the U.S.
- 84% of Afghan community members hope to settle permanently in the United States.
- 55% of Afghan interviewees reported having either no job or a job that does not pay enough to sustain them.
- Many Afghan community members are still awaiting their work authorization; Afghan-serving organizations report struggling to hire and train staff to meet the large demand.

DETAILED FINDINGS

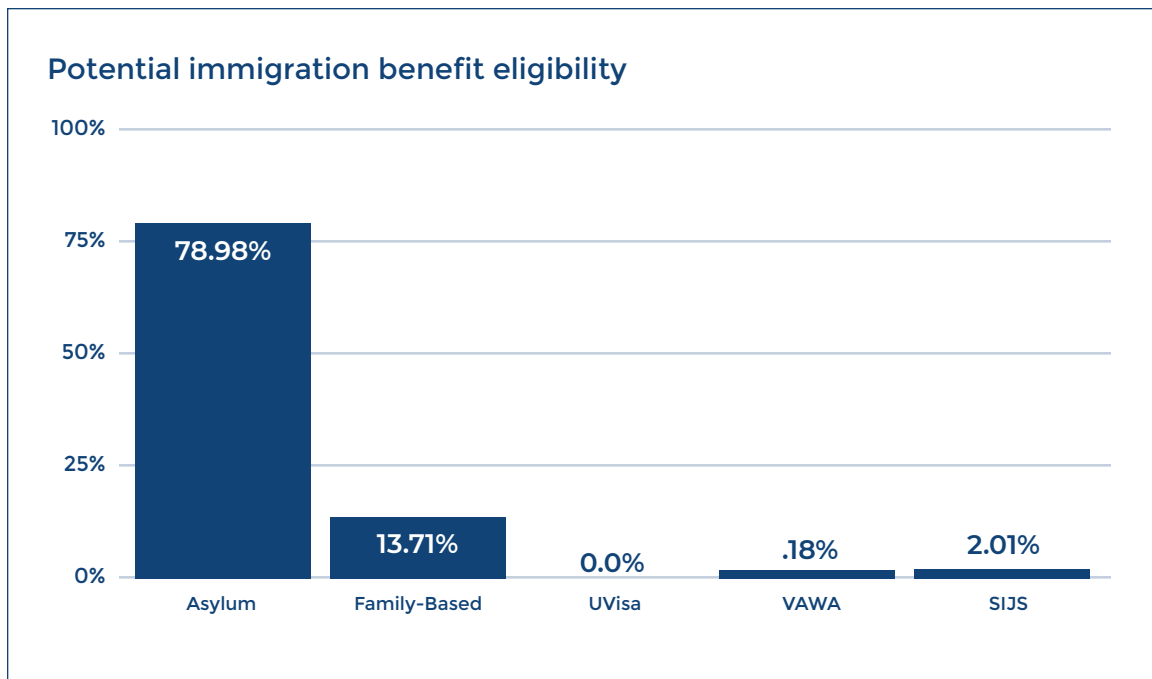
Survey of Afghan-serving organizations

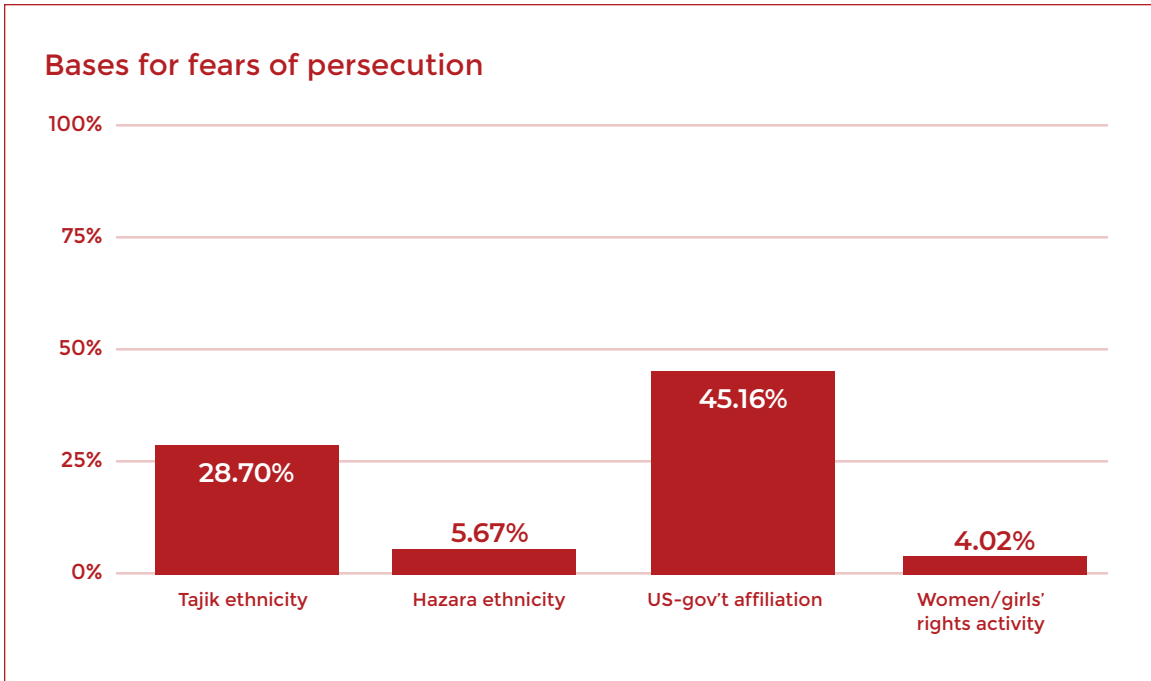
Organizations across New York State have been hard at work connecting clients to housing, food assistance, healthcare, work authorization documents, job training, English classes, and enrolling children in school. However, in Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse, as of April 2022, some organizations reported that clients were still having trouble accessing housing services, food assistance programs, child care assistance, discounted public transportation fare, health insurance, K-12 ESL programs, and job training programs. One organization reported, “We are struggling with the huge scale-up in clients, and are trying to hire and train new staff.” Organizations across New York State report a need for English classes and job training programs, both for general career readiness (e.g. resume writing, interview and workplace etiquette, conducting a job search) and in specialized industries.

Legal Clinic Data

Totals

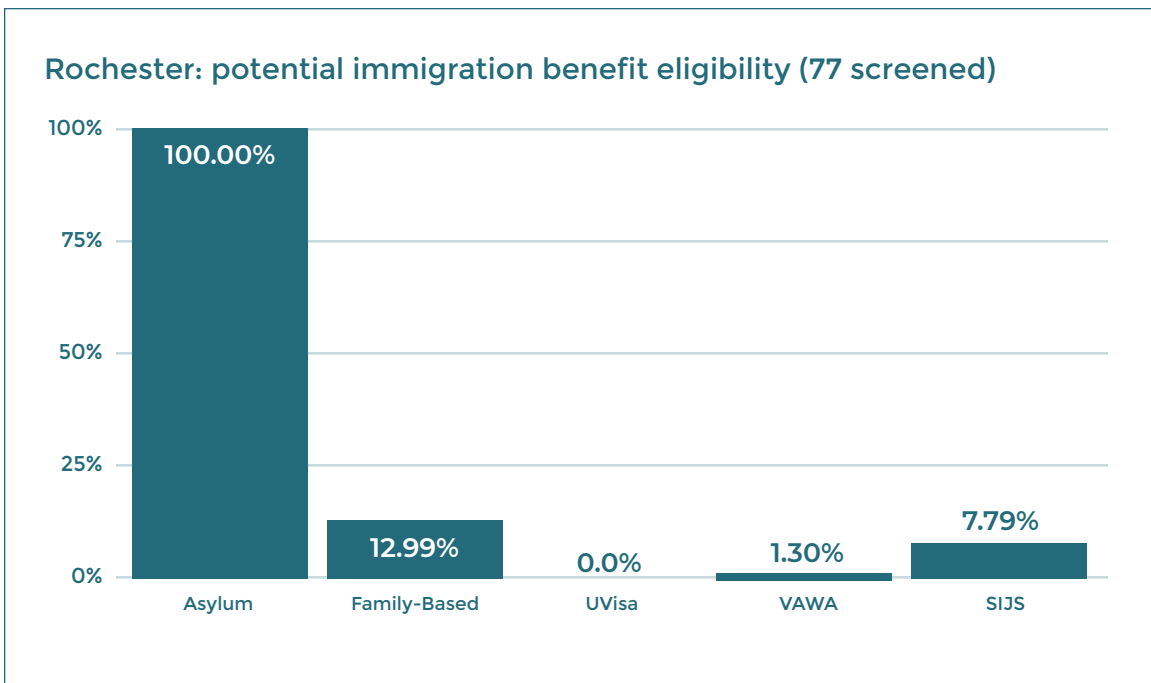
In total, I-ARC and its members screened 547 Afghans resettled in New York.



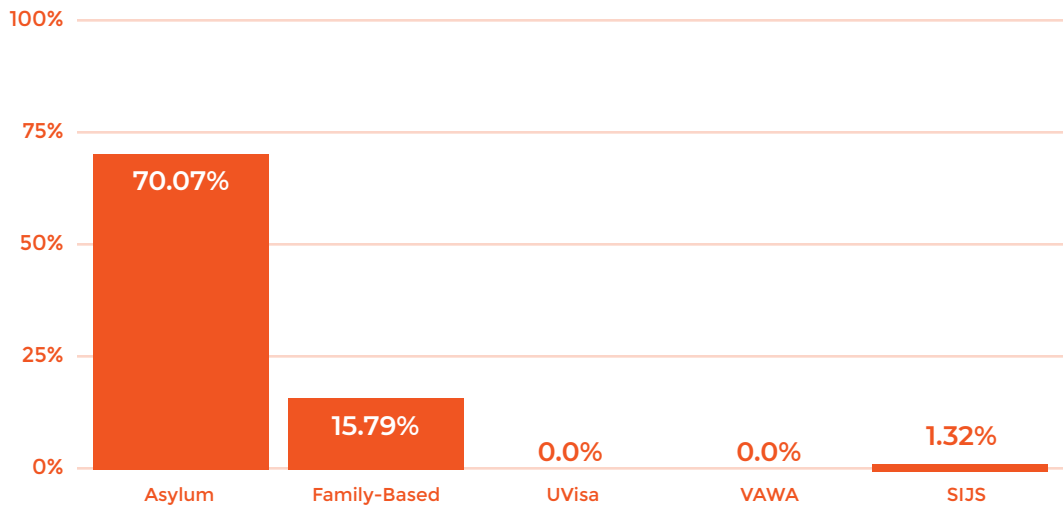


Regional Breakdowns

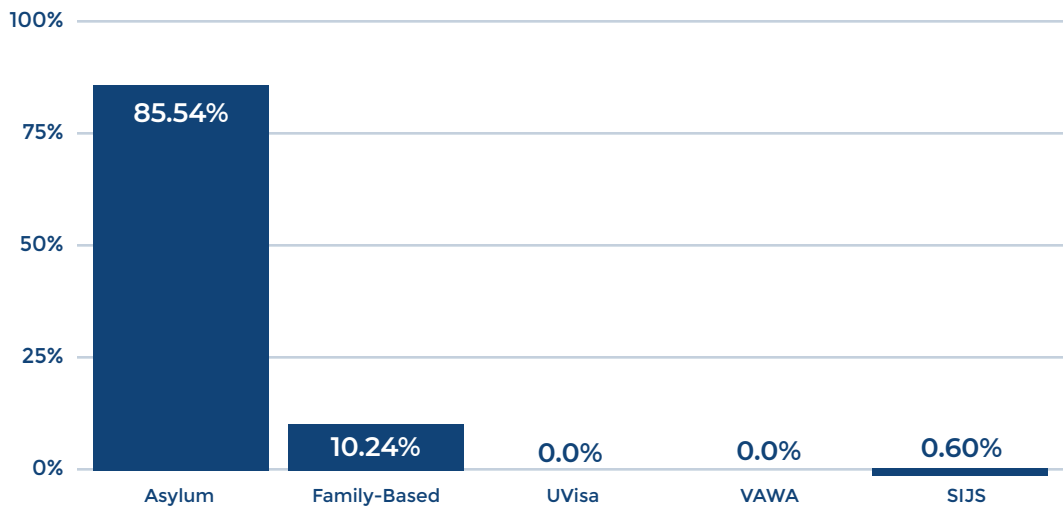
Rochester, Albany, Syracuse and Buffalo are the major New York cities currently resettling Afghan evacuees. Buffalo data is not currently available, as legal clinics are still ongoing.

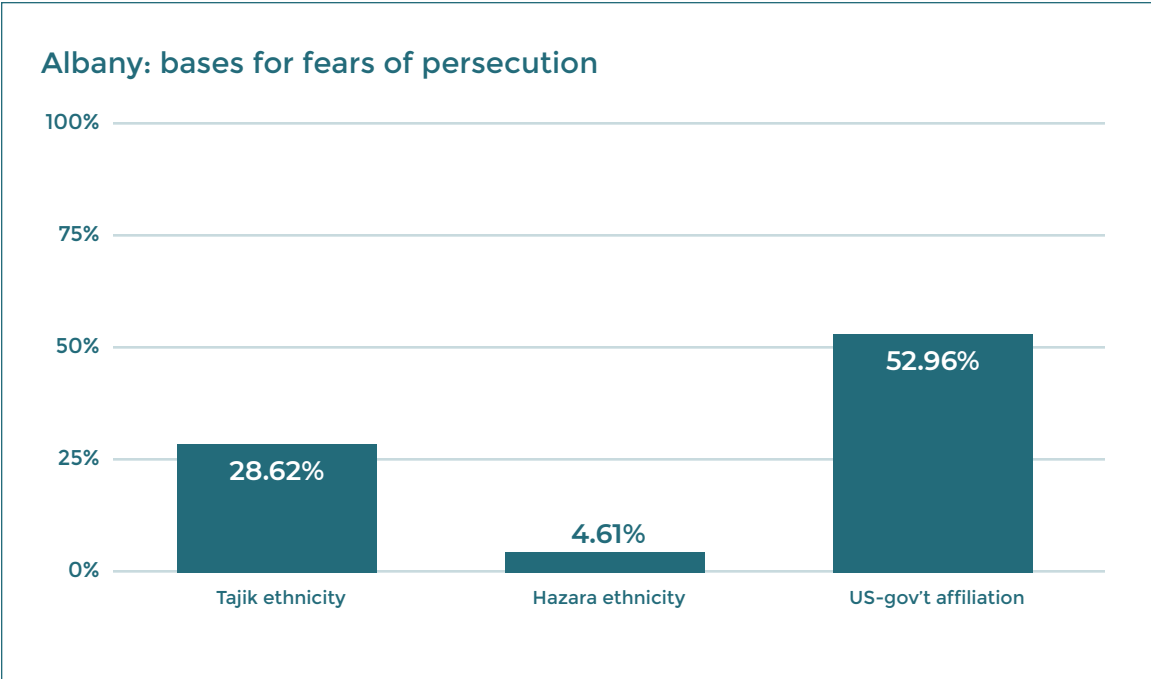
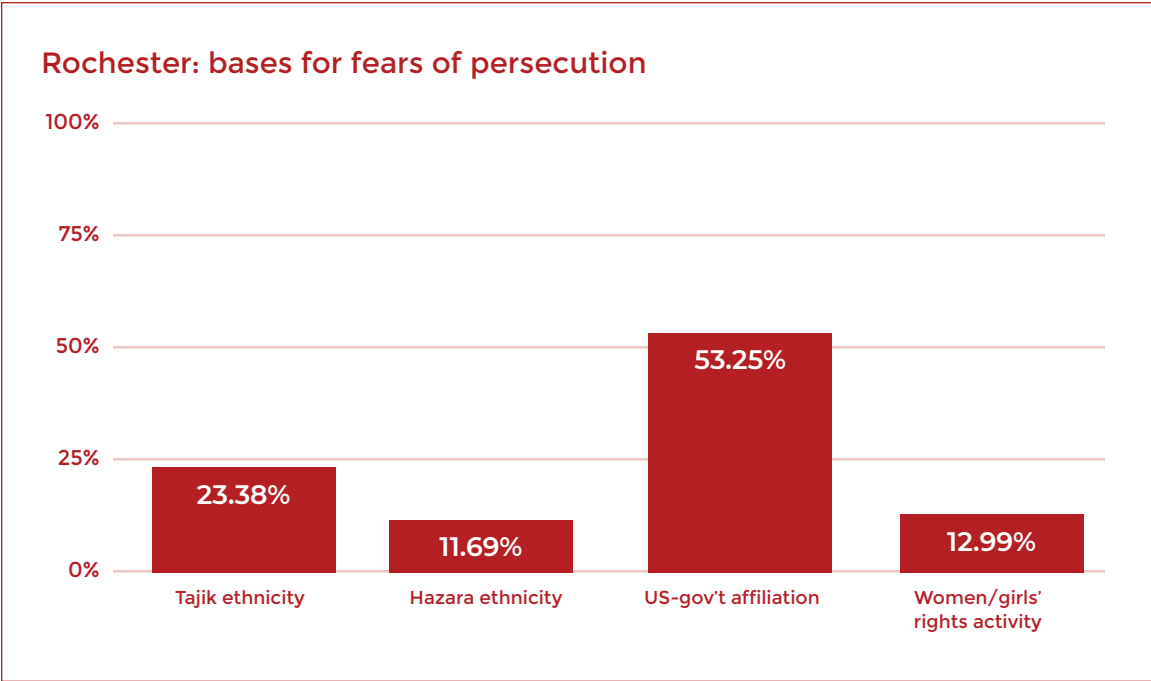


Albany: potential immigration benefit eligibility (304 screened)

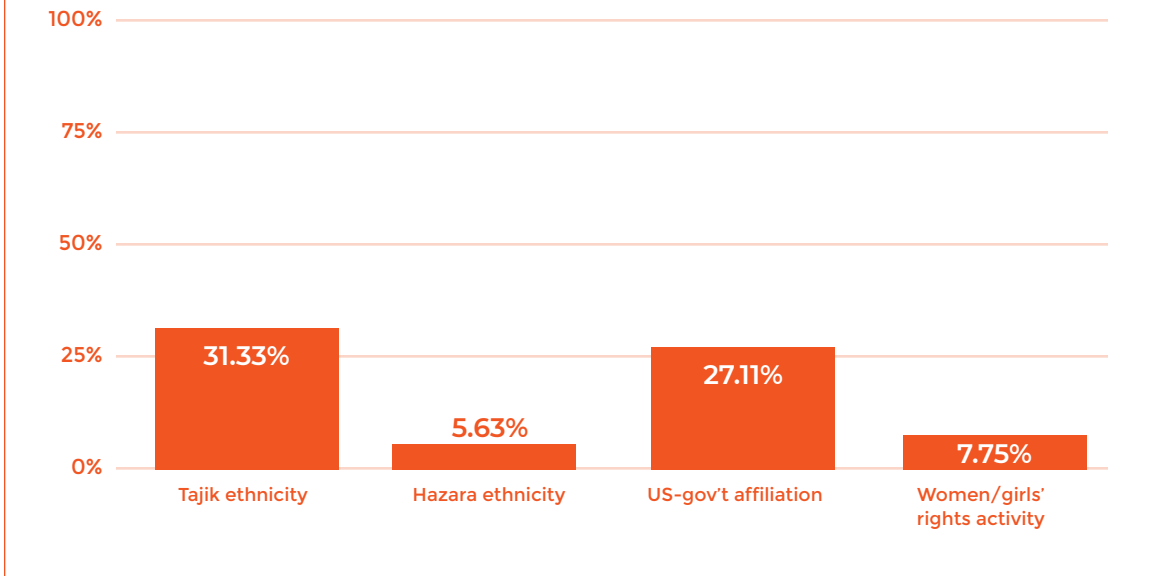


Syracuse: potential immigration benefit eligibility (166 screened)





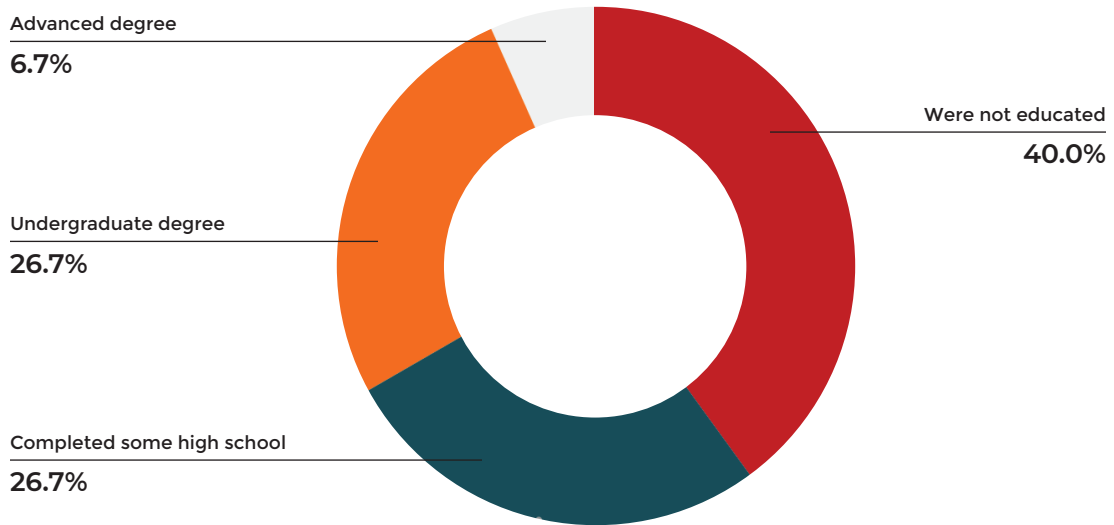
Syracuse: bases for fears of persecution



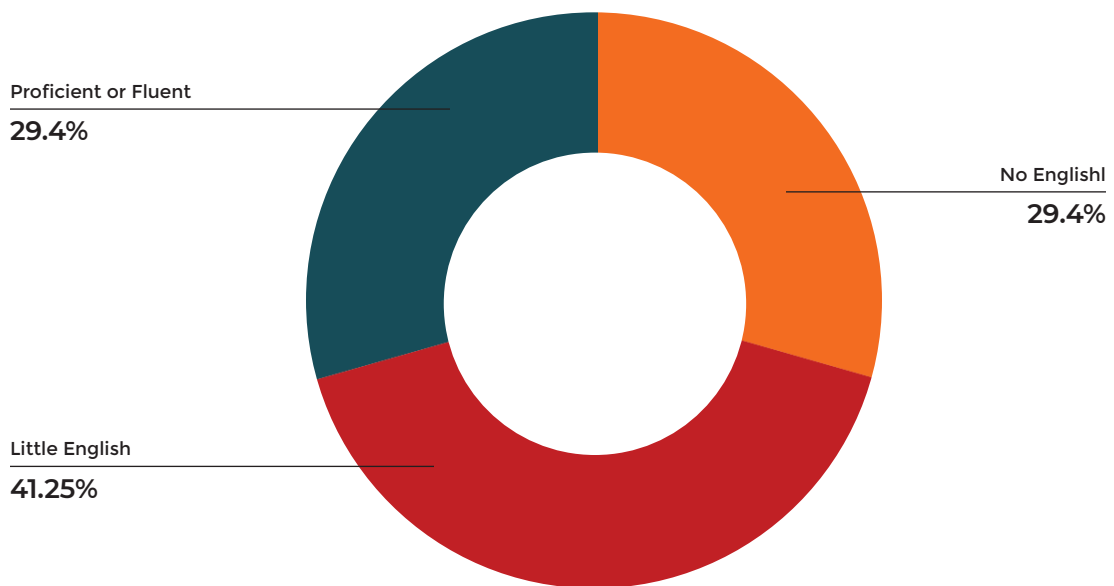
Interviews with Afghan community members

Demographic information

40% of respondents were not educated, 27% completed some high school, 27% have an undergraduate degree, and 7% have an advanced degree.



29% speak no English, 41% speak little English, and 29% speak English proficiently or fluently.



Experience

Stays in military camps ranged from 2-4 months, with most interviewees reporting that camps were heavily crowded. Some reported issues related to the overcrowding, such as accessing enough food and sleeping in crowded tents with flooding when it would rain. Out of 17 Afghan community members interviewed, 15 reported mental health concerns, an average of 88%. Particular stressors included worry about family members remaining in Afghanistan, and worry about obtaining employment and legal status in the U.S. 82% of Afghan community members surveyed hope to settle permanently in the United States. 53% of Afghan interviewees reported having either no job or a job that does not pay enough to sustain them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. PROVIDE ACCESS TO LEGAL SERVICES** According to our survey of Afghan community members across New York State, concerns about legal status are nearly ubiquitous. Many evacuees are eligible for asylum and other permanent pathways to citizenship, but the length and complexity of the U.S. immigration process and the shortage of capacity and resources for non-profit legal services organizations have made providing funding for legal services and large-scale recruitment of pro bono attorneys from the private sector top priority.
- 2. PROVIDE ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES** The traumatic process of fleeing Afghanistan, as well as the ongoing stressors of living in fear for family and friends remaining in Afghanistan and the uncertainty of permanent status in the United States combine to create serious mental health concerns for the Afghan community. Mental health services, particularly culturally competent and trauma-informed care, are vital.
- 3. HELP FIND SAFE, LONG-TERM HOUSING** Emergency housing arranged by resettlement agencies is often not a sustainable solution. However, a lack of credit history has been a significant barrier to finding better long-term housing, in addition to affordability and safety considerations.
- 4. PROVIDE JOB TRAINING AND PLACEMENT ASSISTANCE** Another major need is better job opportunities for Afghan communities, which can be generally divided into two categories:
 - a.** The first category includes those who have higher education and considerable expertise and work experience that unfortunately does not translate easily into the same field in the United States. For example, there are a number of Afghan evacuees who are trained pilots, but are unable to easily receive recertification, so are currently working outside of their field. Creating training courses and other recertification pathways is vital to allow Afghan community members to sustain themselves in higher paying roles.
 - b.** The second category includes people who don't have higher education and special expertise. These community members need training to learn specialized and technical skills such as welding, car repair, quality control, etc. so that they can benefit from better job opportunities.

5. PROVIDE ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION Language learning opportunities for adults, particularly those with flexible schedules so that community members do not have to choose between work and English classes, is also vital.

6. ENSURE ALL SERVICES ARE PROVIDED IN A CULTURALLY COMPETENT MANNER AND ACCESSIBLE TO WOMEN The particular needs of Afghan women must be taken into account in a culturally competent approach. Many Afghan women follow a cultural practice of not working outside the home, and/or lead busy lives managing household necessities such as cooking, taking care of children, etc. For women who may not leave the home to work, but need to generate additional household income, providing culturally appropriate all-women spaces to learn skills such as sewing, cooking American food, and other similar skills is vital.

7. PASS THE AFGHAN ADJUSTMENT ACT Finally, the legal needs of resettled Afghans are placing enormous strain on providers who were at capacity before recent newcomer needs mushroomed in 2021 and 2022. Currently, all evacuated Afghans are in the United States with a temporary, 2-year protection from deportation and work authorization that will end on or around August, 2023. To streamline the process to allow Afghans to stay and resettle long-term and to relieve pressure on providers, Congress must pass the Afghan Adjustment Act, which will provide a simple path to legal permanent residency and US citizenship and was introduced with bi-partisan support August 10, 2022.

More Resources

- Immigrant ARC's Afghan Resource Pages: <https://www.immigrantarc.org/afghanistan>
- Evacuate Our Allies coalition: www.evacuateourallies.org
- AfghanEvac coalition: www.afghanevac.org



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