

# The social impact of family separation on refugee settlement and inclusion in Australia

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## Executive Summary

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# Executive Summary

Family reunion is an important component of successful migrant settlement. Yet in Australia, some humanitarian migrants are at a disadvantage when applying for family reunification visas. Emerging evidence reveals that family separation can have negative effects on an individual's well-being and compromise the settlement process for new migrants.

The aim of this report is to examine the relationship between family reunion and successful settlement for refugees. Conducted by the Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre and supported by the Oxfam-Monash Partnership, this report provides foundational evidence to inform policy on family reunion in Australia, with a specific focus on the impact of family separation and resettlement on social inclusion outcomes for refugees.

This report comprises three data analysis methods: a systematic review of available scholarly and grey literature; an analysis of the 'Building a New Life in Australia' (BNLA) survey of humanitarian migrants; and two in-depth, case studies with refugees in Australia.

A number of barriers to refugee migrant settlement and the impacts of family separation on individuals and families were identified in this report. Costs and lengthy processing timeframes associated with family reunification visas hindered refugee settlement opportunities and potential. Prolonged family separation was associated with longer term difficulties achieving settlement milestones. Mental health concerns were related to family separation and employment and educational variables.



# Key Findings

## Literature review:

- ▶ Family separation has negative effects on settlement success including ongoing trauma and prolonged uncertainty;
- ▶ Family separation can limit migrants' economic and social participation;
- ▶ Female migrants are particularly vulnerable to the negative consequences of family separation.

## The BNLA analyses:

- ▶ Humanitarian migrants in frequent contact with family members overseas and those able to send remittances overseas to friends and family were more likely to be in regular employment;
- ▶ Humanitarian migrants experiencing family separation and waiting for family overseas to join them in Australia reported a higher probability of mental illness and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD);
- ▶ The effects of family separation were greater for women who are more likely to be single parents, unemployed and experiencing financial hardship, and are therefore less likely to be sending money to family overseas. All of these factors pose a risk to their mental health;
- ▶ Family reunification was mentioned by approximately a quarter of participants who answered open-ended questions about their hopes and dreams.

## Case studies:

- ▶ Interviewees separated from families reported feelings of stress and suicidal ideation;
- ▶ They experienced lengthy and disappointing family reunification application outcomes, which caused anxiety and distress;
- ▶ Participants felt welcomed and happy with their life in Australia but felt family reunification would make settlement easier.

## Recommendations

Family is key to successful resettlement of refugees in Australia and elsewhere in terms of enhancing social inclusion, integration and cohesion. Specific policies targeting family reunification would benefit humanitarian migrants and potentially lead to better settlement outcomes. To achieve these outcomes, and drawing from our research, we provide the following recommendations:

- ▶ **Recommendation 1:** Reducing costs and streamlining the family reunification process, including broadening the definition of family and concepts of dependency in line with UN High Commissioner for Refugees efforts to address a variety of family configurations.
- ▶ **Recommendation 2:** In recognition of the mental health impacts of family separation, funding specialised mental health support services tailored to refugees experiencing family separation.
- ▶ **Recommendation 3:** Providing better support for women refugees experiencing family separation, including access to employment, education, English language classes, child care and other needs.
- ▶ **Recommendation 4:** Greater campaigning and awareness raising around the benefits of humanitarian migrants in Australia and the importance of family in the migrant settlement experience, with a particular focus on the potential of employment, education and job training.

