Experiences Resettling Eritrean Youth Through the US Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Program

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Published online: 26 April 2016
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Abstract Over the past 40 years, more than 13,000 children and youth have received services through the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program. The USA is one of few countries around the globe to offer resettlement of unaccompanied minors. This paper presents the findings and experiences of Eritrean youth served by the US URM program. Based on interviews with 16 local service providers, recommendations were developed to better serve and protect the human rights of Eritrean youth both overseas and domestically. Beginning in 2013, the USA began to see a significant increase in the number of unaccompanied and separated Eritrean refugee youth referred for resettlement, specifically from the Mai Aini refugee camp in Ethiopia. The authors anticipate this trend will continue in coming years, and recognized the need for a data-informed approach to serving their specific needs. This study also addresses a gap in the literature due to a lack of research on the outcomes of children and youth enrolled in the program.

Keywords Eritrea · Unaccompanied minor · Refugee · Foster care · Human rights · Children's rights · UNHCR · Refugee resettlement

Introduction

Two national refugee resettlement agencies studied the experience of Eritrean youth resettled through the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors (URM) program. The goal of the project was to better understand the unique needs and strengths of this population so that national resettlement agencies can better support local service providers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) overseas.

This paper (1) introduces the URM program and structure of the study, (2) outlines the background and context for Eritrean refugee minors, (3) presents findings from the research, (4) highlights human rights violations, (5) offers recommendations for improvement, and (6) concludes with thoughts on future areas to explore.

Refugee Resettlement

According to the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is someone who has a well-founded fear of persecution for the reason of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, and is outside of his/her country of origin, and is unable or unwilling to avail oneself to the protection of that country (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2016). Because refugees cannot return home, they are in need of a safe place to live and many countries around the globe accept refugees into their communities. The US refugee resettlement program, currently operated through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), has been welcoming refugees into the USA and providing these vulnerable people with the opportunity to enhance their future through resources and service provision.

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Unaccompanied Refugee Minor Foster Care Program

By US definition, an unaccompanied minor is any child who (1) has not yet attained 18 years of age, (2) entered the USA without a parent or legal guardian, and (3) is not destined to join a parent or a close non-parental adult relative in the USA who is willing and able to care for the child (Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) 2012).

The USA is the only country that resettles unaccompanied minors through a foster care system grounded in child welfare best practices. Created in 1975 to serve the unique needs of child refugees, the URM program thoughtfully combines the adult refugee resettlement system's acculturation services with the US existing child welfare framework. Youth are provided services in parity with each state's current child welfare services, such as Title IV-B and Title IV-E programs (Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) 2010).

While the URM program has changed vastly over the years, it has maintained its unique structure. There are currently about 1400 youth in care; where in the height of the program (1985) there were 3282 youth in care. A greater variety of youth have become eligible over the years based on their legal status and changes in federal policies. Recent legislation allowed certain youth access to the program based upon their legal eligibility, greatly increasing the number of youth entering the program annually. "The William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008" (TVPPRA) makes a child who has been granted special immigrant juvenile (SIJ) status by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and who was in HHS custody... at the time dependency was granted eligible for the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program" (Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) 2010).

The URM program is currently open to children who are designated by Department of State or ORR as:

- Refugees
- Asylum seekers
- Victims of human trafficking
- Cuban/Haitian entrants
- U-visa recipients
- Eligible children with Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS)

Literature Review

Resettlement of Unaccompanied Children

As a population, unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) have experienced traumatic events such as war, torture, assault, abuse, and separation from or loss of their biological

families. Those who enter URM foster care programs must overcome past challenges while managing new cultural expectations. As noted in the UNHCR publication, *Refugee Children: Guidelines on Protection and Care*, "refugee children face far greater dangers to their safety and wellbeing than the average child. The sudden and violent onset of emergencies, the disruption of families and community structures as well as the acute shortage of resources with which most refugees are confronted, deeply affect the physical and psychological wellbeing of refugee children" (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 1994; p. 1). This is demonstrated by research into the experiences of refugee children. A study of Bosnian refugee children found that 93 % met the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), while another study of Cambodian children found high levels of cumulative trauma (Goldstein et al. 1997; Mollica et al. 1987). These mental health issues demonstrate the need for culturally adaptive and trauma-informed care for refugee children.

Overall, the literature revealed a dearth of research on the outcomes or care for URMs. The majority of available literature focuses on the acculturation, identity, and adaptation of the influx of URMs from Sudan, a group commonly known as "the lost boys" (Luster et al. 2009). Due to limited research, the most similar population to URMs are unaccompanied children (UC) resettled in the USA after the Vietnam War. Research indicates nearly 40–50 % of these minors changed placements due to cultural differences, past trauma, and clashing expectations (Linowitz and Boothby 1988). Despite advances in the US child welfare system and the refugee resettlement process, research continues to demonstrate similar issues in acculturation and adjustment for URMs in the USA. For example, having viewed their 18-year-old peers being placed in apartments without adult supervision, some youth seemed surprised when they were not given similar levels of autonomy in the foster family once they reached age 18 (Luster et al. 2009). These false expectations create difficulties as refugee children, specifically adolescents, are resettled into family environments with parental authority after years of independent living in a refugee camp.

Acculturation is defined as "the process of cultural and psychological change that follows intercultural contact" (Berry et al. 2006; p. 305). The process of acculturation leads to adaptation, and this entire process involves an interchange with an individual's identity. Research from 2011 continues to demonstrate barriers to acculturation and subsequent adaptation for refugee children. Former URMs describe primary factors which have hindered their post-resettlement functioning in the USA, including difficulty adjusting to new environment and culture, language barriers, challenges related to education, negative experiences in foster care, conflicts with peers, separation and loss of family members, multiple responsibilities in early adulthood, and challenges related to employment.

This list of challenges for refugee children is non-exhaustive yet demonstrates the myriad of obstacles faced as URM are resettled to US foster families.

Importance of Social Work

Upon resettlement, these URM youth are served by foster care agencies in 23 states across the country. These foster care sites are licensed child welfare agencies in their state, and the role of social workers is recognized and appreciated. When looking specifically at this population, the social work values of service, importance of human relationships, and competence (including cultural competence) are critical in working with Eritrean refugees in foster care (NASW 2016).

Impact of Immigration Policy on URM Program and Youth

In the absence of immigration reform, unaccompanied refugee children have little assurance of their future and whether or not it may entail resettlement to another country. Each year in consultation with the Congress and other governmental actors, the President makes a determination for the number of refugees to be admitted into the USA. In 2016, President Obama requested to resettle 85,000 refugees (United States Department of State et al. 2015). While this number will help to bring many people into a stable living environment, it is not enough. In 2013, refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people worldwide exceeded 50 million people, more than in World War II (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2014). It should be noted that approximately half of the 19.5 million registered refugees globally are children and youth (Save the Children 2015). Their number is growing dramatically as a result of escalating crises in places where violence, persecution, and conflict are uprooting entire populations. The plight of unaccompanied minors is demonstrated by a record 25,300 asylum applications submitted by children who were separated from or unaccompanied by parents in 2013 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2014).

Amid uncertainty surrounding immigration policy and reform, millions of children continue to remain in refugee camps worldwide. The camps are often short staffed and ill-equipped to manage the profuse needs of unaccompanied children. Additionally, because youth must enter the URM program prior to their 18th birthday in order to receive benefits and status, there is urgency to process and place URM. It can often take multiple years to resettle unaccompanied youth in the USA after being processed as a refugee, with children often languishing in refugee camps without parental care or necessary resources.

Eritrea

Eritrea is a small country located on the northeastern shore of Africa next to the Red Sea, between Ethiopia and Sudan. In 2013, the World Bank (2016) reported a population of over 6.3 million, but within just 1 year, over a million had fled Eritrea, reducing their population to 5.1 million in 2014. The rapidly fleeing population may create long-term effects on the economy and condition of the country.

Although relatively unreported in the Western media, the conflict and political repression in Eritrea continues to result in an exodus of 5000 Eritreans each month, according to the UN News Center (24 June (2015). Eritreans flee multiple and compounding factors, including religious persecution, mandatory military enrollment, sexual exploitation and forced marriage, and economic need. Eritrean refugees recount experiences of torture, false imprisonment, social pressure, and unexplained disappearances (Groll 2015; Women's Refugee Commission [WRC] 2013). Eritrea was officially at war with Ethiopia between 1998 and 2000, but conflict has continued under the current government. The President, Isaias Afewerki, has been in power since 1993 and has militarized the state and mandated registration in the military, leading to indefinite service for many young men.

Escape itself can be life threatening, and unaccompanied children face even greater risks than families or adults. Eritrean youth made up the largest numbers of URM referred for US resettlement in federal fiscal year (FFY) 2015. As a result, it is extremely important that the experiences and vulnerabilities of these youth be explored in depth.

Human Rights Violations

Violations Faced by Refugees

Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was the first document to set out human rights for all peoples. Although not a signatory at the time of the declaration, Eritrea became a UN member state on May 28, 1993.

Article 14 of the UDHR states, "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution" (United Nations (UN) 1948). In many cases, unaccompanied minors and refugees who flee are denied refugee status and continue to live in refugee camps fearing of punishment for leaving their home country (WRC 2013). As Eritreans flee and enter bordering countries, they can be treated in various ways, many of which violate their human rights. The military in Eritrea actively recruits both adults and children, often by forced conscription and indefinite service. By not allowing their citizens autonomy to enter and leave, the government of Eritrea violates Article 4 of the UDHR which states, "No

one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms” (United Nations (UN) 1948).

In general, refugee camps and detention violate some human rights of the vulnerable populations living there. According to Article 25 of the UDHR, “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services” (United Nations (UN) 1948). Many refugees are detained and do not receive these amenities. Access to rights, such as medical and social services, vary widely due to high demand and scarce availability in refugee camps.

UNHCR also ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. The CRC sought to identify children as unique individuals with rights. Again in 1993, Eritrea signed the CRC after becoming a UN member state. Country conditions in Eritrea are a cause for concern, as they violate many stipulations in the CRC. A non-exhaustive list of rights violated in Eritrea and for refugee children as a whole includes:

- Article 6.2—States parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child;
- Article 11.1—States parties shall take measures to combat the illicit transfer and non-return of children abroad;
- Article 20.1—A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.

For Eritrean refugees who flee to Sudan, the process for a refugee status determination takes so long that most people flee again in need of basic resources. There are complex rings of human trafficking and limited opportunities for livelihood in these areas (WRC 2013). If asylum seekers cannot maintain their basic needs while fighting their refugee case, the system has failed them.

Violations in Mai Aini Refugee Camp

Mai Aini camp in northern Ethiopia was home for nearly half of the Eritrean youth resettled through the US URM program. While Eritreans flee to nearby countries, including refugee camps in Ethiopia, such as Shimelba, Shire, Mai Aini, Adi-Harush, and Hitsats, some also flee to urban settings in Egypt and other countries.

Children in Mai Aini face significant protection concerns. The Ethiopian economy does not have the capacity to absorb the number of refugees entering the country and meet their needs, which has led to kidnapping, trafficking, and forced recruitment by opposition groups, all to which children are the most vulnerable (WRC 2013). Refugee camps often breed

hopelessness and fear for lack of a future. Poor living conditions, a lack of sufficient nutrition, and the extended resettlement process exacerbate these feelings.

To offer a level of protection, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) manages group-care facilities for unaccompanied and separated children in the Mai Aini camp. Over 1000 of the 1400 unaccompanied in Mai Aini reside in 137 houses separated by age and gender, located in a segregated area of the camp and protected by guards (WRC 2013). The IRC employs approximately 50 social workers at a time to provide case management, best interest determinations (BIDs), and child-feeding programs. The IRC places children younger than 13 in groups of at least eight and employs a “house mother.” Often another refugee, the house mother assists with cooking, schoolwork, and cares for younger children who cannot do so on their own (WRC 2013).

Mai Aini, with the help of Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), provides a number of services that are often absent in other camps. Primary and secondary school are offered, but dropout rates range from 17 % in primary school to 56 % in secondary school (WRC 2013). These rates include youth who flee the camp or resettle to a third country. Rapid turnover of teachers also contributes to high dropout rates. Other services include medical care and access to recreational space. As a form of mental health support, there are two areas with computers, a library, and organized activities such as dance, sports, and theater are available, in addition to traditional counseling services.

Methodology

Purpose of Study

In late 2013, the USA began to see an increase in the number of unaccompanied and separated Eritrean refugee youth referred for US resettlement, notably from the Mai Aini refugee camp in Ethiopia. Eritrean URM were the largest referred population for resettlement by the USA in FFY 2015. Considering the large numbers of youth arriving to the URM programs from the same camp in a relatively short period of time, the national agencies working with the URM program undertook this project to conduct comprehensive data collection to learn more about unaccompanied Eritrean youth and the experiences of programs resettling them.

The primary purpose of this study is to improve integration outcomes for Eritrean youth through better informing stakeholders and service providers about how Eritrean youth adjust in URM foster care. Also, this study aims to provide recommendations to enhance the process both pre-departure and post-resettlement to enhance appropriate services tailored to the population’s unique needs and strengths.

The secondary purpose is to begin to address the lack of research on the longer-term outcomes of children served through the URM program. Since the program's inception, over 13,000 children and youth have received services (Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) 2012). Yet, minimal research exists on the outcomes of youth receiving services in the program.

Participants

Each local URM program director identified the most appropriate person to interview based upon the local structure and the staff member(s) with the most contact and knowledge of the Eritrean youth resettled through their program. If a program had multiple staff working with these youth, they were invited to have a small group interview.

The arrivals for each individual URM location were tracked, to determine eligibility to participate. The arrival period was set for 1 year, April 1, 2014 and April 1, 2015, and qualitative semi-structured interviews began shortly after this time. Out of 23 URM programs, there were seven sites with fewer than four Eritrean arrivals, and so these locations were excluded from the study due to low number of clients to discuss and lack of ability to determine trends. Therefore, participants were staff at 16 of the 23 total URM programs across the country.

Measure

The interviewer informed agency staff of the research purpose and confidentiality and offered the opportunity to skip any questions at the beginning of each qualitative semi-structured interview. The interview consisted of 19 questions covering various topics about resettlement, culture, and adjustment to the USA and was developed by the research team. The questions are included in the “Appendix” of this paper for reference.

Sample

During the federal fiscal years (FY14 and FY15), which ran from October 1, 2013 through September 30, 2015, a total of 447 URMs entered the URM program as new arrivals. Of the 447, 34 % ($n=154$) were Eritrean, representing the highest country of origin resettled to the US URM program during that 2-year period.

The study period for this project was April 1, 2014–April 1, 2015 when 94 Eritrean youth entered the URM programs. The staff members were interviewed and asked questions about this sampling of youth:

- Males represented 80 % ($n=75$), and females 20 % ($n=19$).

- Nearly 77 % ($n=72$) were identified as Eritrean Orthodox Christian, 18 % ($n=17$) as Muslim, and about 5 % ($n=5$) as non-Orthodox Christian.
- The majority of youth ($n=79$) were resettled from the Mai Aini refugee camp in Ethiopia while the remaining 15 were from urban settings—13 resettled from Cairo, Egypt, and two from urban cities in eastern Africa.

Findings/Results

This study exposed important findings that can inform services for Eritrean youth both in refugee camps and after resettlement. The research also highlighted the strength and resiliency of these youth as they overcome significant challenges. In a number of instances, interviewees expressed their appreciation and admiration for the outgoing nature of the Eritrean youth they served.

Pre-departure and Cultural Orientation

Cultural orientation is one important tool used to prepare refugees for the variances in cultural norms among their country of origin, country of refuge, and the receiving community. It is particularly important for refugee youth; it starts a successful transition process and manages expectations for life in URM foster care. Many youth fled governed, dictated circumstances and found total freedom in refugee camps. As they prepare to enter the structured care of URM foster care programs, they are not equipped developmentally, mentally, or emotionally to process their rapidly changing circumstances. They need assistance to adapt to life in a new country.

This study revealed the variance of cultural orientation across different settings. The UNHCR Resettlement Handbook states: “all resettlement countries are encouraged to provide refugees they have accepted with an orientation prior to departure” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2011). However, no such requirement exists and often children do not receive cultural orientation prior to departing for the USA.

In addition to the formal cultural orientation training, unaccompanied youth need accurate information about what to expect in the USA and in the URM program. All 16 programs expressed that children did not sufficiently understand the reality of life in America, the structure and expectations of foster care, or the legal, educational, and social systems they must navigate. These misunderstandings are caused in part by the lack of social networks that children can access for accurate and substantial information. Adult refugees leverage extensive networks of family and friends around the world to share information about the journey and their situation upon arrival to the USA. Unaccompanied youth

tend to have much smaller social networks, providing a limited view of life in the USA.

Without other sources of accurate information, many youth base their idea of the USA on pop culture, movies, books, music, and the promise of a better life. Similar among many refugee populations, URM youth have high expectations, and caseworkers and foster parents struggle to manage them. Some children feel a sense of entitlement to the lifestyle portrayed in the media but fail to recognize its rarity in real life. Programs shared that their clients were often disappointed when placed with families who did not have the means to offer the expensive electronics or clothing requested. These misunderstandings can disrupt family dynamics and make the adjustment process more difficult.

When social networks are utilized, youth hear stories of adults in resettlement and believe their experience will be similar. They expect to receive homes, cash assistance, and luxuries. Because foster care is not common knowledge around the world, and so few of the refugees served enter URM there is little known. Some youth anticipated that foster care would be similar to life in the camps. They would live in their own home without government or social restrictions. They are unnerved and disappointed by the reality. Instead of their own apartment, youth live with a family that imposes “house rules.” Without accurate information on the receiving community, children do not anticipate the focus on education, nor are they prepared for the social norms and legal systems in the USA. Education—often difficult and novel—takes priority over earning money. This creates further complications for the transition process.

Most children do not sufficiently understand the structure or expectations of foster care. All 16 programs in this study noted that Eritrean youth were not adequately prepared for arrival to a foster family placement, and 11 programs reported that youth had a significant misunderstanding regarding foster care. One program staff suggested that “it would be nice if they received more accurate information on what life would be like in foster care.”

Transitioning to Life in the USA

The URM program seeks to establish stability and permanency, supporting the transition to the USA by providing caring, culturally competent, and strengths-based foster care. Interviews with program staff demonstrated that lack of supervision and structure in the Mai Aini refugee camp impacted the Eritrean youths’ transition to life in the USA and their adjustment to foster care.

Eritrean youth in 12 of the programs interviewed have had various difficulties adapting to life in foster care. Challenges include conflicts with authority figures and foster parents, difficulty following a schedule and attending school, and leaving the home without alerting foster parents. Although data are

insufficient to confidently suggest correlation, our interviews do seem to indicate some effect is due to lack of cultural orientation standards.

Despite these specific challenges and the difficulty of integration more broadly, our interviews suggested that Eritrean youth do experience successful transitions over time. Thirteen of the programs reported that the Eritrean youth are successful in attainment of life skills and that the youth are very dedicated to learning. One program commented on a sense of adventure, describing Eritrean children as “good-natured, and up for trying anything.”

The national agencies administering the program identified five recreational and social interests that appear to be commonly shared among Eritrean youth. All of these interests and activities strengthen youths’ resiliency and help them to transition to life in the USA.

- Education: Eritrean youth are generally found to succeed at their schoolwork and express dedication to learning.
- Soccer: Interviews indicated widespread love of soccer among Eritrean youth, both to play and to watch, which creates bonds with many other youth in the program.
- Recreation: Athletics are a common interest, and Eritrean children tend to enjoy outdoor activities such as running and swimming.
- Arts: Several Eritrean youth have demonstrated an interest in art, drawing, dancing, music, and acting as ways to express their creativity and imagination.
- Religion: The majority of Eritrean youth turn to their religion as a source of strength and an important personal interest.

Residential Placements

Each URM program works to ensure stable, appropriate placements for youth as they arrive into the foster care program, regardless of the level of care. Among the sites interviewed, group care and basic foster homes were the most common initial placements.

Eritrean youth have experienced higher rates of disruption in placements than other nationalities resettled in recent years. One program mentioned: “All [youth] have moved at least once. Some disruptions were because of mismatch, and some because of child’s expectations. Secondary placements have been much more stable.” Ultimately, many youth struggle to adapt to their placements. One program reported better success in adjustment of youth in group care, as opposed to those in foster families. This could be attributed to a few factors: these youth were also in group care while in Mai Aini and so they are familiar with the rules of a group home, they are more comfortable and trusting when living with peers as opposed to

adult parental figures, and they have a need for peer connections with people from the same culture.

As more Eritrean youth have been referred and arrive into URM care, the programs have made adjustments. Because of the higher rate of placement disruption with these youth than with other refugee populations, programs are becoming more mindful of foster family placement matching upon receipt of an Eritrean case referral and placing Eritrean youth together in the same foster home to reduce feelings of isolation.

Service Needs

Eritrean youth require slightly different services than other URM populations resettled. Many of their needs can be addressed through service planning and assistance by foster parents. Interviews indicated four areas of focus: (1) mental health stability, (2) standard physical concerns, (3) sufficient support for the youths' education and future, and (4) the need for youth to be more involved with other Eritreans, including adults and role models in the community.

Supervision

The factors that complicate the transition process also influence the necessary level of supervision. Independence and a sense of adventure can lead Eritrean youth to unintentionally put themselves at a greater risk. Eritrean youth tend to demonstrate a willingness to try new things and explore their neighborhoods. Staff expressed the concern that the youth do not realize the potential danger and do not have the independent living skills to match their confidence. Overall, staff felt that youth from Mai Aini have lower independent living skills when they arrive to the USA than other refugee youth.

Four programs reported that the Eritrean youth need more supervision upon initial placement than typically provided for other refugee youth populations in order to keep them safe in the community and orientate them to rules. Due to their desire to be independent, they may not ask for help even when it is needed. One respondent said: "Youth are used to managing their own time so foster parents have expressed frustration that Eritreans...resist efforts of foster parents to discipline them and help the youth organize their lives."

Mental Health

Many refugee youth arrive in foster care with substantial mental health needs. Three programs specifically reported that the Eritrean youth require greater mental health assistance than do other refugee youth entering the program. For children resettled from camps, difficult living conditions and experiences of political persecution and torture lead to significant unresolved trauma.

Youth's access to and utilization of mental health services prior to resettlement varied. Children in Mai Aini camp could access counseling services, but many were reluctant to seek treatment through the Western, unfamiliar model of talk therapy. Interviews also suggested that youth arriving from Egypt did not have any avenue through which to process traumatic experiences prior to arrival to the USA.

The URM program offers culturally appropriate services and seeks to overcome the reluctance to seek care. Although cultural standards appear to play a role in the resistance to mental health services, data are insufficient to demonstrate a statistically significant correlation. Multiple other factors may influence the decision: the framing of mental health services; personal history; and availability of a culturally or linguistically appropriate therapist. Many programs supplement formal mental health services with less-structured, more informal options. These sites report that youth appear to be more receptive to the informal avenues of processing trauma and often seek comfort in spirituality, community, and family, including fictive family. One program noted that once youth bond with their therapist, they are less likely to view the sessions as "counseling or directives," instead viewing it as conversation.

Physical Health

Eritrean youth primarily arrived with standard refugee health concerns, but the study revealed an uncommon incidence of seizure disorders. Several Eritrean youth were diagnosed with epilepsy or seizure disorders while in the camp. Some of these youth have seen a decrease in seizure episodes since arrival into the program as a result of proper medical care, monitoring, and medication management.

For the most part, however, youths' physical health needs to align with those of other refugee groups. Skin rashes, respiratory issues, and headaches were commonly reported, and a number of children arrived with physical injuries such as bruises and scars from altercations in the camp or on their migration journey. A majority of programs noted that youth have arrived very malnourished and underweight, which is logical given that adequate nutrition is often not available in the refugee camp. After a few months in the USA, youth gained weight and muscle mass and now appear to be much healthier. Other health needs include lactose intolerance, intestinal parasites, and positive tuberculosis readings.

Education

Interviews overwhelmingly confirmed the importance of education to Eritrean youth. A vast majority of the programs reported the youth are performing average to well academically and making good progress in their attainment of the English language. Six of the programs noted the drive for education and willingness to excel in school no matter how

hard it is to learn English and become acclimated to the US education system. One program reported that they are “experiencing the usual challenges in school due to lack of English but are very dedicated and motivated to learning and trying.”

The resilience of these youth appears to be a major factor in their ability to push forward. Several programs also reported that youth frequently advocate for themselves. They express eagerness to access extra educational support and tutoring above what is typically provided. However, many programs mentioned that the Eritrean youth have had more challenges than the average refugee youth in adjusting to school. Mirroring their challenges adjusting to foster care placements, many youth struggle with imposed structure. Programs report difficulty waking up early to go to school, adhering to a rigid schedule, and listening to authority figures at school. This could be related to the lack of education and structure in the refugee camp. Nonetheless, Eritreans tend to be very motivated to learn English, pursue higher education, and enter well-paying careers.

Connection to Culture and Religion

The interviews suggest that Eritrean youth in the URM program value and prioritize connections with the diaspora community and practice of their religion. Youth demonstrate a strong desire to remain connected to other Eritreans, including their peers in the program, adult members of the wider community locally, and friends resettled elsewhere in the USA. Many youth use technologies such as Skype, Facebook, or telephone to maintain connections with their friends from Mai Aini now in URM or resettlement programs in other states.

A vast majority of the programs reported that the wider Eritrean community has been instrumental in helping the youth maintain a cultural connection. Adults in the community welcome youth, serve as mentors and interpreters for them, frequently invite them to Eritrean community events, and often provide transportation to church and religious events. One interviewee observed: “The community is reaching out to the agency to ensure the kids are attending special events and are part of what is going on. Members of community are very welcoming to new Eritreans arriving—sometimes offer transportation to the kids. The youth really want to maintain the connection, and so they network to keep it alive and do it easily.”

Youth have also expressed the importance of maintaining contact with family in Eritrea. Many have voiced concerns about the ongoing safety of their family members and worry greatly about their parents and siblings. Some youth have voiced the need to send money to assist financially, which likely contributes to their desire to be successful.

All programs indicated that the youth have maintained a strong connection to their culture, and half of programs interviewed specifically noted the personal importance of maintaining the Eritrean culture. These youth want to be connected and involved with all others from their country and do not want to forget their past.

Most of the programs reported that religion was a primary factor in youth maintaining a connection to their culture, highlighting the link between the two. Many youth expressed their preference or requirement to attend an Eritrean Orthodox church in lieu of other Orthodox Christian churches. Interestingly, five programs mentioned that meeting the religious needs of the Eritrean youth was more challenging than for other refugee populations. Struggles include the child’s desire to only practice in a church of their specific sect, their wish to attend church daily, the distance between foster homes and Eritrean Orthodox churches, and religious fasting and dietary restrictions.

It is important to note that there are varying degrees of spirituality among youth, and some do not prioritize regular practice of their religion.

Discussion

The results of this study support previous research illuminating the varied circumstances and obstacles refugee minors face in acculturation and adaptation to life in the USA. It should be noted that acculturation as defined by Berry et al. (2006) “the process of cultural and psychological change that follows intercultural contact” looks different for each child. With this notion it is expected that the community should also work to welcome and adapt to its changing populations. Specifically, the findings related to care of URM’s once resettled in the USA align with assertions that refugee children are a vulnerable population and require tailored services and opportunities.

Limitations of the Study

Due to the youth’s vulnerabilities, interviewees were secondary sources, case managers, or program managers at a local service provider in order to avoid re-traumatizing the youth through the interview process. Case managers often used anecdotal information when generalizing about the Eritrean URM population; however, trends were captured after an analysis of all interview transcripts. Additionally, due to the age of the youth, consent would be needed from the guardian whom is the local county or state. This was not feasible given the timeframe and priority of gathering this information to better serve future youth.

Practice Implications

The findings of the study reveal the successes and challenges Eritrean refugee youth experience in the URM program. The research indicates that these children bring resiliency and hope for the future that position this population for success, and it demonstrates the positive impact that refugee foster care can have on a young person's life. It also suggests areas for improvement.

In order to best advance the human rights of Eritrean youth prior to and after resettlement, and to provide services that are based in social work principals of respect, cultural competency, and best interests of the child, recommendations are presented to better serve URM and the communities they join. By implementing these shifts in policy, advocacy, and practice, it is possible to mitigate the challenges exposed and improve integration of these youth after their arrival. These recommendations are important as the authors expect the URM program to resettle increasing numbers of Eritrean youth in the coming years.

Local service providers, national voluntary agencies, and overseas non-governmental organizations all must play a greater role in supporting Eritrean refugee youth and raising awareness in the communities they join.

Services in Country of Refuge

Additional funding should be allocated to provide structured recreational, educational, and mental health services in refugee camps, beginning with Mai Aini.

The experiences of unaccompanied and separated children in refugee camps significantly influence their success following resettlement. The lack of structure and adult authority in the Mai Aini camp has contributed to significant challenges in adjusting to URM foster care. Introducing structure would ease the adjustment to the rigor and rules associated with foster care in the USA. Beginning to address significant mental health needs would also mitigate the unresolved trauma of fleeing Eritrea, leaving loved ones behind, and living under difficult conditions in Mai Aini. Additionally, given the human rights violations in Mai Aini, providing funding to ameliorate these violations will better serve Eritrean youth and prepare them for resettlement in the USA.

All URM should receive cultural orientation to better prepare them for US foster care and set realistic expectations.

This study exposed Eritrean youths' general lack of understanding of life in the USA and the foster care program. When children do not receive cultural orientation or are unable to fully understand the information and what it means in the USA, they often develop unrealistic expectations upon arrival. These unrealistic expectations can cause undue pressure on social service agencies, disruptions in foster placements,

and distress for the child as he/she adapts to the reality of life in the USA.

Unaccompanied Eritrean youth must navigate, alone, a new world of different rules, expectations, and social constructs. Ensuring a better understanding of this new world and new culture will decrease the emotional stress and aid in adjustment. Pre-departure cultural orientation should become a mandatory aspect of the resettlement process for all URM, and it should include specific information related to URM foster care.

Collaborations should be strengthened among all stakeholders, including the Resettlement Support Centers, service providers working in the camp, and US-based resettlement agencies.

Cultural orientation must include information about the URM foster care program to better prepare youth. US-based resettlement agencies should provide training to overseas service providers and enhance communication about the program. With better understanding of URM foster care, the Resettlement Support Center staff will be better able to educate youth and manage their expectations. Networking with Cultural Orientation Coordinators around the world would increase access to shared information and collaboration on difficult cases. This would lead to an easier adjustment period after arrival to the USA.

Post-Resettlement Services

URM programs should develop diverse group-care placement options tailored to the strengths and needs of this population.

The majority of Eritrean youth in the Mai Aini camp live in a group-care setting prior to resettlement. They gain a sense of freedom and adulthood, as well as developing the skills to provide for themselves. They struggle with the structure and norms of traditional foster homes.

Although the US foster care system has discouraged the use of group homes, our research indicates that they are an appropriate option for this specific population. Group homes offer the space to strengthen independent living skills as well as guidance refugee youth need to function successfully as adults in the USA. The Eritrean youth placed in group home settings have expressed happiness to be in an environment similar to what they know and have usually fared better than those youth placed in foster homes.

Increasing placements in group homes would better serve this population. Our local partners should build capacity within their existing placement network, and they should also explore partnerships with existing group homes in the community to develop diverse placement options tailored to Eritrean refugee youth. Education and advocacy at the local and state levels are also needed to justify increasing group home capacity in a time when states are moving away from congregate care.

Informal support systems should be used to address mental health concerns and supplement traditional therapy.

Eritrean youth overwhelmingly arrive in the USA with high levels of trauma in their history, but traditional counseling and psychiatric services pose multiple challenges. URM programs struggle to locate culturally appropriate therapists for this population, and many youth are wary of Western ideas of mental health at arrival. Prioritizing alternative approaches to include informal mentorships and peer support groups would begin to address unresolved trauma with greater immediacy. Most importantly, youth should be offered the opportunity to participate in mental health services throughout their time in the program because they may become more comfortable with services over time.

Additional resources should be provided to support youth participation in cultural and religious activities.

Eritrean youth express a particularly strong desire to connect with the Eritrean community and actively practice their religion. URM programs focus on fulfilling that desire, and they should continue to reach out to Eritrean community leaders and adult resettlement programs locally to ensure youth are connected and supported. They should also continue to build relationships with local churches. Eritrean Orthodox churches are sparsely located, however, and programs struggle to transport youth to religious services. Funding should be increased for cultural and religious activities, specifically including transportation and staff time as part of the process.

Conclusion

The information gathered through this study represents an important step forward in understanding the experiences of Eritrean refugee youth resettled through the URM program. The recommendations put forth can improve policies and practices to better meet their needs. However, additional work is needed to develop a more rigorous analysis of the unique needs and strengths of each young refugee population.

First, our research highlights the gaps in current efforts to prepare youth resettled through the URM program. Youth need enhanced orientation, greater awareness of US foster care programs, and significant preparation prior to departure in order to help mitigate fears, concerns, uncertainties, and issues of heightened expectation.

Second, interviews suggest that new approaches to placement decisions and service provision will better serve Eritrean youth. By considering their experiences in group home settings prior to resettlement, URM programs can better tailor placement options to meet capacity. Service providers can more appropriately respond by recognizing population-specific service needs and preferences.

Last, this study indicates the need for more concrete knowledge on each population to inform local programming. It

exposes the need for a research agenda to assess and address the complex issue of serving these youth and other refugee populations. Although some characteristics are common across groups, many others vary from one young refugee population to another. This study offers one approach that could be replicated as in-depth studies of emerging priority groups.

Acknowledgments The authors would like to acknowledge that the Unaccompanied Refugee Minor (URM) program discussed in this paper is funded through both the US Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and the US Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). The URM program operates 23 programs in 15 states. At the local level, public child welfare agencies and the State Refugee Coordinator's Office are important players to the success of the program. At the national level, the program is administered by Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and US Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services who provide placement coordination, training, technical assistance, program development, research, and collaboration among the various stakeholders.

Appendix A

Interview Questions Utilized in the Study

1. Based on your experience, what do you see as particular strengths of Eritrean refugee youth?
2. What are the particular motivations of Eritrean youth? (i.e. education, work, other) Or do these vary widely by individual? What have they expressed as their needs and wishes?
3. What are your concerns about the needs of Eritrean youth?
4. What particular service needs of Eritrean youth are different from other refugee populations?
5. Based on the youth's expectations of life in foster care/ life in the U.S. upon arrival into URM, please speak to the level of cultural orientation/information about foster care you believe the youth received pre-departure. What information would have been helpful for the youth to know ahead of entering URM?
6. What differences are you seeing with Eritrean youth resettled out of Mai Aini refugee camp in Ethiopia vs. those resettled out of urban settings such as Cairo? (i.e. understanding of U.S. laws/culture, IL skills)
7. Considering the lack of supervision and structure in Mai Aini refugee camp, what impact has this had on youth in their adjustment to foster care or life in the U.S.? (i.e. rigid schedule, rules of house, feelings of hopelessness in camp and how did that translate to feelings here)
8. How have the Eritrean youth maintained their cultural connections and identity? Any specific cultural activities occurring?

9. How are the youth doing in school? In their attainment of independent living skills?
10. What are the trends in their personal interests? Recreational activities?
11. How important is religion/spirituality to these youth? What are the differences among the Orthodox Christians and Muslims? How are the youth supported in accessing/practicing their religion?
12. With whom are these youth bonding? (i.e. peers, URM staff, foster parents, community members, varies widely)
13. Some Eritrean youth have experienced particularly traumatic events, including kidnapping, trafficking and torture. What is your experience regarding providing mental health services for them? How receptive are these youth to such services (especially counseling)? Are there any significant physical health needs among this population?
14. Are family reunification options arising with this group? If so, how, and what steps have you taken to assist?
15. How have views about gender roles impacted the youth's adjustment to life in the U.S.?
16. How have you partnered with your adult resettlement program and/or engaged resettled Eritrean adults in the community to benefit these minors?
17. How are foster parents prepared to receive the Eritreans—in addition to presenting them with the BID and biodata information, what other information is provided to them? What other resources are put in place prior to a youth's arrival?
18. What placement levels are these kids entering upon arrival? Have these placements been stable, have there been changes in level of care? (group home in camp to group home at URM vs. group home in camp to foster home in URM?)
19. What should USCCB/LIRS, the U.S. Government, and/or UNHCR be considering or doing as this population continues to be resettled to the U.S.?

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