

How do Refugees and Migrants Come to Understand Race and Racism in the United States?

This research gathered information from refugees and migrants from 18 different countries. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 65. Data came from interviews in Mobile, Alabama (15), and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (24), as well as surveys of 109 refugees and migrants from a nationwide survey.

Refugees learn about race from personal experiences, relationships with others, school, institutions and media influence throughout the migration journey.

This is the one of the first studies that focuses on how refugees and migrants come to understand the concept of race and racism in the U.S.

This research has implications not only for refugee adults but for all of the individuals and systems interacting with them along the stages of their migration. This understanding can contribute to more coordinated efforts to promote equity, successful integration, and anti-racism.

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1. Before Leaving

Prior experience with discrimination facilitates learning about race.

Participants report that having family in U.S. made them more aware of race.

U.S. literature is one way refugees learn about racial discrimination.

Race and ethnicity definitions are unclear to many.

"I'm always confused... Since Afghanistan is located in the center of Asia... I always write Asian, other people write White."

- Afghan man, Pittsburgh



2. In Migration

Views of the U.S. differ by transit location

Experiences of racism in transit differ by race.

Orientation and other materials do not prepare refugees and migrants for racial reality in U.S..

Participants report being exposed to harmful racial stereotypes while in transit.

"When we were in the... camp... they told us 'In the United States there is Black people, they are very bad. They have guns.' ... We told them we don't have any idea about it because we are refugee... We are not from this country; we have to make our mind..."

- Afghan woman, Pittsburgh



3. Arriving in the U.S.

Many refugees experience first-hand discrimination in the U.S..

Participants report that being bullied at school is one way refugee and migrant children learn about race.

Social media contributed to a deeper learning about race in the U.S., especially for younger people.



81% of survey participants said they learned about race and racism from news and television shows depicting racial discrimination and police brutality.