Building a New Life in Australia

RESEARCH SUMMARY 2017

Risk of psychological distress among recently arrived humanitarian migrants

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Many humanitarian migrants have experienced torture and trauma prior to arrival in Australia and these experiences can have serious long-term mental health impacts (Settlement Council of Australia, 2014).

This Research Summary explores Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) participants’ risk of psychological distress—shortly after arrival in Australia (3–6 months, Wave 1 of the study), and at annual interviews after that (at Wave 2 and Wave 3). Differences in risk of psychological distress between men and women and by age group are also explored.

Psychological distress was assessed in the study using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, which screens for general mental health in an adult population. This measure provides information on the likely presence of mental health problems. How these results changed over the first three years of settlement (over three waves of data collection) for the whole cohort are also reported.

Key messages

- Recently arrived humanitarian migrants had a risk of psychological distress at much higher rates than the general Australian population. Between 31 and 46% were classified as having moderate or high risk of psychological distress in the first three waves of the study. For the Australian population, 7% of men and 11% of women had these levels of difficulties.

- For some study participants, risk of psychological distress persisted over time, with 16% of the sample being classified at moderate or high risk of psychological distress at each of the first three waves of data collection.

- Differences were found by gender and age, with women having greater levels of psychological distress (between 39 and 46% classified as moderate or high risk across waves) compared to men (31–39%). Older participants were also more often at moderate or high risk of psychological distress compared to younger migrants.

- A higher proportion of those reporting to have experienced discrimination was classified as having moderate or high psychological distress compared to those that did not experience discrimination.
What is the Building a New Life in Australia study?

The Building a New Life in Australia (BNLA) study is tracing the settlement journey of almost 2,400 humanitarian migrants from their arrival in Australia. It will provide a better understanding of the factors that influence their settlement journey. The project will result in a broad evidence base to assist policy development and program improvement for humanitarian migrants in this country.

Study participants come from a wide range of national and cultural backgrounds and comprise humanitarian entrants who arrived in Australia via a number of different migration pathways. This includes those who were granted a humanitarian or refugee visa before their arrival in Australia (85%), hereafter referred to as the offshore group, as well as asylum seekers who sought and were granted a Permanent Protection visa after they had arrived, termed the onshore group (15%). Study members are living in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, in all states and territories except the ACT. They are being interviewed once per year.

Key dates for the first three waves of data were:
- **Wave 1:** Interviews conducted between October 2013 and March 2014 (3–6 months after arrival in Australia for the offshore group or 3–6 months of being granted a Permanent Protection visa for the onshore group);
- **Wave 2:** Interviews conducted between October 2014 and February 2015;
- **Wave 3:** Interviews conducted between October 2015 and February 2016.

Many aspects of life are being assessed, including migration pathways and experiences; family demographics; housing and neighbourhood characteristics; English language proficiency and training; engagement in other educational study or training; employment; income; financial hardship; physical and mental health; self-sufficiency; community engagement and support; and perceptions of life in Australia. (For more information, see De Maio, Silbert, Jenkinson, & Smart, 2014 or the study’s first Research Summary by Jenkinson, Silbert, De Maio, & Edwards, 2016).

Risk of psychological distress

Humanitarian migrants fare poorly on a range of health outcomes when compared to the general population in their resettlement country, including having poorer physical health and heightened levels of psychological distress (Davidson & Carr, 2010). This section investigates levels of psychological distress among BNLA participants, whether these change over time (across waves), and differences between men and women.

Measuring psychological distress

Levels of psychological distress at each wave were measured using the Kessler 6 Psychological Distress Scale. This scale includes six questions about anxiety and depressive symptoms experienced during the previous four weeks and screens for general mental health in an adult population (Kessler et al., 2003). Based on participants’ responses to each item, they were classified into one of the following three groups: low, moderate or high risk of psychological distress. This information was collected from all participants aged 15 years and older.

Risk of psychological distress outcomes for recently arrived humanitarian migrants

Overall, 42% of humanitarian migrants were classified as being at moderate or high risk of psychological distress at Wave 1. The corresponding rate at Wave 2 was 35% (significantly lower than at Wave 1) and 40% at Wave 3. At Wave 2, data were collected by telephone interview, with Wave 1 and Wave 3 data collected via a home interview. This different survey methodology may have influenced participants’ willingness to disclose mental health problems, resulting in the lower percentage classified as moderate or high risk of psychological distress at Wave 2. This will be explored with further waves of data.

To further explore the timing of risk of psychological distress since settlement in Australia, analysis was also undertaken to describe at which time-points over the first three waves participants were classified as being at moderate or high risk of psychological distress. These results are described in Table 1 and show that overall one-third (34%) of participants were not classified as moderate or high risk of psychological distress in any of the first three waves of BNLA. Conversely, 16% of participants had elevated risk of psychological distress (moderate or high) at all waves. For some participants (18% of the sample) risk of psychological distress was present earlier on in their settlement journey (either Wave 1 only, or Wave 1 and 2) and low risk was evident at Wave 3. A similar proportion (16%) of participants were at risk of psychological distress after some time in Australia (low risk at Wave 1, moderate or high risk at Wave 2 and 3, or Wave 3 only).

The analyses reported here are based on the BNLA Release 3.0 data. Unless otherwise stated, reported differences are statistically significant at a 5% level of significance. Analysis is restricted to participants who completed an interview in all three waves. Analysis in this report uses survey weights which can sometimes produce slightly different results from those using unweighted data.
There were no differences in the pattern of timing of risk of psychological distress by gender, with the exception of a higher proportion of females reporting moderate or high risk of psychological distress at all waves compared to males (19% of women compared to 13% of males).

Differences by age and gender

As can be seen in Figure 1, women reported higher rates of psychological distress compared to men. Differences by gender were significant in each of the first three waves. Between 39 and 46% of women were classified as being at moderate or high risk of psychological distress in the first three waves. The corresponding rates for men at each wave were significantly lower: between 31 and 39%. Rates of psychological distress were also significantly higher when compared to the general Australian population (7% of men and 11% of women had these levels of difficulties).

Age differences were also evident with older humanitarian migrants more frequently at moderate or high levels of psychological distress than younger respondents at all three waves. Psychological distress peaked among 55–64 year olds with 58% of respondents in this age group classified as moderate or high psychological distress in Wave 1, significantly higher than the 33% of respondents aged 15–24 years old who were classified as being at moderate or high risk of psychological distress (see Table 2). The relationship found between age and psychological distress for recently arrived humanitarian migrants is in contrast to the general population where other studies have found psychological distress peaks in younger ages and then declines (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2008).

Psychological distress and experience of traumatic events

Previous research suggests a link between prior experience of trauma and humanitarian migrants’ mental health (Davidson & Carr, 2010). The relationship between experiences of trauma prior to arrival in Australia and risk of psychological distress is investigated next. Jenkinson and colleagues (2016) reported that almost all BNLA respondents reported that they, or their families, had experienced one or more traumatic events prior to migrating to Australia. The relationship between number of traumatic events experienced before arrival and risk of psychological distress at each wave is described in Figure 2 (page 4).

Those who reported they or their families had experienced four or more traumatic events before arrival were significantly more likely to be at risk of psychological distress than those who had experienced fewer events. These differences were statistically significant at Waves 2 and 3 but not Wave 1. For example, at Wave 2, 47% of those who had reported four or more traumatic events were classified at moderate or high risk of psychological distress compared to 28% who reported one traumatic event. There was also a difference in the proportion at risk of psychological distress at Wave 3 between those who reported four or more traumatic events (45%) and no traumatic events (27%).
Psychological distress and experiences of discrimination

The relationship between experiences of discrimination and mental health was also explored. Overall, a small proportion of adult study participants reported an experience of discrimination at Wave 1 (4%). At Waves 2 and 3, 10% and 8% respectively had experienced discrimination since the previous wave. A higher proportion of those reporting discrimination was classified in the moderate or high psychological distress category in each wave compared to those who reported no discrimination. Around six-in-ten (61%) of the respondents who reported an experience of discrimination in Wave 1 were in the moderate or high psychological distress category compared with 41% of those who did not report discrimination.1

It is not possible to determine the direction of effects from this analysis (whether discrimination causes psychological distress or psychological distress leads to the experience of, or perception of, discrimination, or whether they are directly related at all). These results show only an association between psychological distress and experiences of discrimination. However, other research (e.g. Gee, 2002) has shown that discrimination influences the health of minority group members.

Summary

This Research Summary provides an overview of the risk of psychological distress of BNLA participants based on analysis of participants’ responses to the Kessler 6 Psychological Distress Scale—a six question scale that screens for general mental health in an adult population. The analyses reported here use the first three waves of the BNLA data.

Overall, four in 10 humanitarian migrants were classified as being at moderate or high risk of psychological distress at Wave 1. These rates were significantly higher than the corresponding rates in the general Australian population (around one in 10 reported this level of psychological distress). For some, risk of psychological distress persisted over time with 16% of BNLA participants being classified at moderate or high risk of psychological distress at each of the first three waves of the study.

Differences in the risk of psychological distress were also found by gender, with women in the BNLA sample having higher rates of psychological distress compared to men. Between 39 and 46% of women were classified at moderate/high risk of psychological distress over the first three waves, significantly higher than the corresponding proportion of men (31–39%). Differences by age were also evident with older respondents more frequently classified at risk of psychological distress than younger respondents at all three waves (between 53 and 61% of those aged 55–64 years compared to 22–33% of those 15–24 years). This pattern of findings is in contrast to the general population where other studies have found psychological distress peaks in younger ages and then declines. An association was also found between experiences of discrimination and higher levels of psychological distress in all three waves.

Access to the BNLA data

The analyses reported here are based on Waves 1–3. The first three waves of BNLA data are now available to approved researchers from government, academic institutions and non-profit organisations. Details on how to apply for the BNLA data are available on the Department of Social Services website (<www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programmes-services/access-to-dss-longitudinal-datasets>.)

Endnotes

1 Weighted data are used in analyses. Analysis was based on 1,704 respondents who completed a Wave 1, Wave 2 and Wave 3 interview.

2 See Kessler et al., 2003, for further details.

3 See Hilton et al. (2008) for further detail on scoring of the Kessler 6 Psychological Distress Scale.

4 Correspondingly, there was also a significant difference in the proportion of men reporting psychological distress in “None of the first three waves” (38%) compared to women (30%).

5 See Jenkinson et al. (2016) for further analysis of rates of psychological distress in the humanitarian migrant population and comparison with the wider Australian population. This paper reports analysis of data for the general Australian population from the ABS National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing.

6 Respondents reported if they had experienced traumatic events such as persecution, violence, kidnapping or imprisonment, or extreme living conditions. The number of traumatic events were grouped into the following categories: 0 traumatic events, 1 traumatic event, 2 or 3 traumatic events, and 4 or more traumatic events.

7 Sixty-two respondents reported an experience of discrimination in Wave 1, 1,569 respondents did not report an experience of discrimination in Wave 1.
References


Background and acknowledgements

In 2012, the former Department of Immigration and Citizenship, now the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP), commissioned the BNLA project. From the end of Wave 1 fieldwork in April 2014, responsibility for the project moved from DIBP to the Department of Social Services. This research summary was commissioned by Settlement Policy Section, DSS. We thank DSS staff for their input into this research.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) was commissioned to manage the design, administration and fieldwork of the BNLA project. AIFS contracted Colmar Brunton Social Research, in conjunction with Multicultural Marketing and Management, to undertake the fieldwork for the project.

We extend special thanks to the humanitarian migrants who participated in this study, especially for their wonderful support and generosity of time. We look forward to continuing to talk with them about their settlement journey in Australia.