

I1 Psychological Trauma in South Carolina Asylum Seekers

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the rates and types of trauma incurred in asylum-seekers and other legal protection-seeking migrants in the American South.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by adding to the empirical literature on non-citizen migrants in the American South. Given the scarcity of resources available to clinicians and other advocates for this population, this presentation will improve clinicians' ability to diagnose and treat trauma in migrant populations. Additionally, this project aims to better understand why the local asylum-seeking population may face such an unusually low asylum grant rate.

The American South is home to a significant but understudied population of non-citizen migrants undergoing court proceedings to be considered for asylum status.¹ In the United States, asylum seekers may apply for legal protection due to a past history or current threat of persecution based on their race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion.² As of 2019, the United States was the largest recipient of new asylum applications in the world. Nearly half of the 301,000 asylum applications that the United States received in 2019 originated from Central America and Venezuela.³ In addition to the asylum process, many migrants already in the United States may alternatively apply for legal protection under the Violence for Women Act (VAWA) or U-visa (i.e., United States non-immigrant visa for crime victimization occurring in the United States).^{4,5}

Although South Carolina (SC) has over 5,000 individuals seeking asylum or legal protection, it possesses one of the most challenging environments in which to seek legal protection. Since the state itself does not have an immigration court, migrants living in SC must travel to the nearest immigration court in Charlotte, NC. However, the Charlotte immigration court possesses one of the lowest asylum grant rates in the country. In 2018, Charlotte approved only 6.1% of asylum cases whereas the national approval rate was at 29.4%.⁶ This population of legal protection-seeking migrants in SC is unique due to the unsupportive political climate in the region and the fact that it has not been the subject of empirical study.

Utilizing data from the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) Asylum Clinic, this project aims to assess the demographics of asylum-seekers, U-visa, and VAWA applicants, the types of trauma they have endured, and their mental health disorder diagnoses. Specifically, this presentation will discuss the rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and other stressor-related disorders present in this population. Data obtained from the clients assessed at the clinic (current $N=29$, though this is an ongoing data collection project) will be compared to other similar migrant populations nationally and worldwide.

Reference(s):

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2. Aliens and Nationality. 8 U.S.C. § 1101 (1952).
3. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (June 2020): 1-84. <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/>.
4. U.S. Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service. *The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA): Historical Overview, Funding, and Reauthorization*, by Lisa N. Sacco. R45410. 2019.
5. U.S. Library of Congress. Congressional Research Service. *Trafficking in Persons: U.S. Policy and Issues for Congress*, by Alison Siskin and Liana Sun Wyler. RL34317. 2013.
6. TRAC Immigration. *Asylum Decisions by Custody, Representation, Nationality, Location, Month and Year, Outcome and more*. (2020). Last modified August 2020. <https://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/asylum/>.

Asylum, Trauma, Immigration Court