

Food Access During Refugee Resettlement: A Modified Photovoice Study in Massachusetts

Nour M. Hammad¹, Paola Bojorquez-Ramirez², Weiwei Lu³, Natalie Slopen⁴, Erica L. Kenney^{1,4}, Walter C. Willett^{1,2}, Sara N. Bleich⁵, Cindy W. Leung¹

¹Department of Nutrition, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (HSPH), ²Department of Epidemiology, HSPH, ³St. Francis House, Boston, ⁴Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, HSPH, ⁵Department of Health Policy and Management, HSPH

Contact information: nourhammad@fas.harvard.edu

Background

- Food insecurity is a major public health problem that disproportionately impacts marginalized populations, including refugees
- Limited research has explored refugees' lived experiences of food access, despite food insecurity being identified as a pervasive issue during resettlement¹
- Objective: To qualitatively explore how newly resettled refugees in Massachusetts (MA) experience and navigate food access

Methods

- We used modified Photovoice, a community-based participatory research methodology
- Participants were recruited through a MA-based refugee resettlement agency
- Eligible participants were asked to submit 5-10 photos reflecting their food access experiences
- In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 refugees between February-May 2025

Results

- Median age was 39.5 years. Most participants identified as women (n=9), had children (n=10), and were unemployed (n=10)
- Ten refugees had been in MA for ≤6 months
- 12 of 14 participants experienced food insecurity over the past year

Theme 1: Food access and related challenges upon resettlement

Perceptions of food situation patterns throughout migration



Eating without worry about expenses prior to resettling in MA and child noticing worsening food situation in MA



Limited cooking equipment in temporary housing in MA

Perceptions of food costs and quality in MA



Noticing high cost of traditional foods in MA



A bunch of spinach in MA costs what 90 bunches cost in country of origin

Transportation-related challenges in accessing American grocery stores

- Transportation: time consuming, unreliable and long wait times
- Finding creative ways (e.g., backpacks) to transport heavy items

Accessing cultural and religious specific foods and stores



"I just arrived... We were staying in a hotel... there's a buffet. I have no idea what are these things... The only thing that I picked up was three of these cupcakes... The cake is like a universal thing... I didn't even try coffee because I wasn't sure how to add milk to it. I didn't know, so I only had a cup of tea with these three muffins."



Language, employment, and childcare challenges

- Difficulty finding jobs
- Waitlisted for English language classes



Taking wrong routes while grocery shopping due to English language barrier



Staying home to care for child with disability while other parent works

Theme 2: Navigating limited food access through assistance in MA

SNAP helpfulness in reducing refugee food insecurity



A full refrigerator made possible by SNAP benefits



SNAP enabled participants to afford nutritious meals for themselves and their children

Local assistance in MA



Only 1 participant reported receiving assistance from a charitable organization but described feelings of guilt and shame
Food pantries are **underutilized**

Current policy actions shaping refugee food access

"The agency's budget was cut. They already told us they can't help us with the rent. We've only had two months and I don't have the money for the rent. I don't know what to do, no. I haven't slept well for three or four days, thinking about how I'm going to find that money? They're going to kick us out. They're going to kick my children out of that house."

Key Takeaways

- Food is essential in maintaining resettling refugees' identities and sense of home
- Photovoice is unique in capturing nuanced food access challenges among refugees
- Unfamiliarity with local food environments limits refugees' food access. This unfamiliarity makes culturally and religiously appropriate foods hard to find
- SNAP is a lifeline; loss of eligibility – with the passage of H.R. 1 – may worsen refugee food insecurity
 - Charitable food systems are likely to experience increased demand and may become overwhelmed without additional resources
- Strengthening partnerships between refugee resettlement agencies, public health departments, food banks, and community organizations, as well as improving transportation and language supports, will be essential to mitigate the impact of SNAP ineligibility on refugees

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References

1. Piwowarczyk L, Keane TM, Lincoln A. Hunger: The Silent Epidemic Among Asylum Seekers and Resettled Refugees. *International Migration*. 2008;46(1):59-77.

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