

From Displacement to Empowerment: Challenges and Support System for Afghan Refugees Post 2021 in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the multifaceted challenges faced by Afghan refugees resettled in the United States following the 2021 U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan. Drawing on recent studies, it examines the barriers to integration across key domains, including language, housing, employment, education, and cultural adaptation. Despite a relatively young and working-age population, Afghan refugees often encounter limited access to English instruction, inadequate translation services, and high rates of underemployment. Structural barriers such as unaffordable housing, poor transportation, and limited childcare options further hinder adjustment, particularly for women. Cultural misunderstandings, lack of ethnic enclaves, religious discrimination, employment barriers, anti-Muslim sentiment, restricted access to halal food, housing, and healthcare exacerbate social isolation. The paper highlights the compounding effects of trauma, legal uncertainty, and geographic placement on resettlement outcomes. While U.S. policy emphasizes rapid self-sufficiency, this approach often overlooks the lived realities of refugees. The findings highlight the need for long-term, culturally competent policies and support systems that address both structural and cultural dimensions of refugee integration.

Keywords: Afghan refugees, integration, language barriers, housing insecurity, U.S. refugee policy, cultural adaptation

Introduction

The U.S. military's withdrawal from Afghanistan on August 31, 2021, was poorly planned, resulting in a chaotic evacuation despite warnings of a rapid Taliban takeover. Although it was the largest evacuation in U.S. history, disorder was widespread. Still, junior and mid-level personnel helped prevent further chaos (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Minority Report, 2022). In response, the U.S. launched Operation Allies Refuge to evacuate over 80,000 Afghans, followed by Operation Allies Welcome to support resettlement. Yet over 70,000 evacuees remain in legal limbo despite receiving two-year humanitarian parole (Guelespe and Terrones, 2024). More than 76,000 were housed at nine "safe havens," many facing psychological stress and difficulties adapting to unfamiliar customs (International Rescue Committee). Afghans have the second-highest global resettlement needs (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024), but humanitarian parole offers fewer protections than refugee status, limiting paths to permanence (Gelatt & Meissner, 2022). Barriers in healthcare, housing, employment, and transportation remain widespread, though Afghan refugees demonstrate strong resilience (Reihani et al., 2021). Operation Allies Welcome launched on August 29, 2021, and processed evacuees under varying legal statuses at eight U.S. military bases (Ulintz et al., 2023). Even before the fall of Kabul, many Afghans who had allied with U.S. forces were already facing threats and displacement conditions that contributed to what later became known as the "Afghan refugee crisis" (Samber, 2021; Coen, 2022, p. 202). After resettlement, these individuals continued to encounter systemic barriers.

This article explores the multifaceted challenges faced by refugees, with particular attention to the realms of education, employment, housing, and access to support systems. While the study broadly examines the refugee experience, this study focuses primarily on Afghan refugees resettled in Indiana, while also considering the experiences, challenges, and population

numbers of Afghan refugees in other states. It explores the support they receive from local communities in these different contexts. My positionality as an Afghan refugee, having arrived in the United States in September 2021 and been resettled in Indiana since 2022, means that I approach this article not only as an academic but also as someone with lived experience in the subject matter.

Having previously worked as an English lecturer and advocated for Afghan women students in Afghanistan, I bring a nuanced understanding of the educational and social challenges that refugees, particularly Afghan refugees, encounter. This background informs my interpretation of the struggles faced by displaced individuals, especially when navigating new environments where systems of support may be unfamiliar, fragmented, or inaccessible.

In conducting this article, I draw upon both personal insight and academic inquiry to offer a more holistic perspective on refugee resettlement. By integrating these two lenses, I aim to provide a deeper understanding of the barriers Afghan refugees face and, ultimately, to advocate for more effective support structures for displaced communities. My positionality allows me to critically engage with the existing literature while simultaneously offering a grounded perspective that is informed by my personal experiences as a refugee.

Research Questions

This paper explores the post-2021 challenges and opportunities Afghan evacuees face in the U.S., focusing on legal entry categories and addressing two main research questions:

- 1) *What social integration challenges, such as education and language barriers, employment, housing, and healthcare access, do Afghan refugees face in the United States, post-2021?*
- 2) *How effective are local community support systems, and how do they empower Afghan refugees in the U.S.?*

Literature Review

Cultural Foundations and Strategic Failures: Understanding the Afghan Refugee Crisis

Afghan refugees' experiences are shaped by the country's ethnic diversity, Islamic traditions, and prolonged conflict. Specifically, the population consists of Pashtuns (38%), Tajiks (25%), Hazaras (19%), and Uzbeks (6%), with female literacy rates particularly low (Giger & Davidhizar, 2002). Afghan families tend to be patriarchal and conservative, with women supporting household income through handicrafts (Firling, 1988). Indeed, Afghans possess a deeply rooted cultural system that nurtures resilience, mutual support, and emotional strength, qualities that continue to empower Afghan refugees as they rebuild their lives abroad. Their traditions of family unity, social responsibility, and faith-based community networks provide a foundation for recovery and adaptation in new environments. Although Afghan American refugees faced the trauma of displacement and the loss of social predictability, these same cultural mechanisms, collective solidarity, perseverance, and purpose serve as powerful tools for empowerment and healing in resettlement contexts. As Firling (1988) observed, Afghan families maintain strong emotional bonds and adaptive coping strategies even amid the immense stress of forced migration, reflecting a culture of endurance and dignity that enables them to thrive despite adversity.

Moreover, decades of war have disrupted traditional structures and heightened ethnic tensions, leading to emotional instability among refugees (Coleridge, 1999). Notably, Taliban ideology is not uniformly accepted, even within Pashtun communities. In addition, language and religion play key roles in identity. Pashto (32%), Farsi (27%), and Dari (26%) are the most common home languages, with Pashto most dominant among 2012 U.S. arrivals (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024). Islam shapes social values and decision-making through male-led jirgas and shuras. While gender segregation remains widespread, some women see veiling as a source of cultural identity rather than oppression (Coleridge, 1999). Therefore, understanding this cultural

complexity is vital to supporting successful refugee resettlement. Meanwhile, U.S. strategic failures during the withdrawal compounded these challenges.

Although the U.S. maintained military dominance in 2010, the Taliban's resilience weakened American leverage. Consequently, the Trump administration's urgency to exit further emboldened the Taliban (Khan, 2020). While the U.S. sought to promote peace and democracy (Anuka & Raymond, 2024), the Taliban viewed talks mainly as a means to secure U.S. departure (Malkasian, 2021). Critically, the Doha Agreement lacked enforceable ceasefire terms, undermining its effectiveness (Khan, 2020).

As a result, Taliban violations intensified the crisis. By November 2022, 90% of Afghans were food insecure, and 1.1 million children were severely malnourished (Anuka & Raymond, 2024). Additionally, President Ghani admitted that Afghan forces could not survive without U.S. support. Ultimately, on August 15, 2021, the Taliban retook control following the rushed U.S. withdrawal (Khan, 2020). In hindsight, Retired General Frank McKenzie spoke with VOA's Pentagon correspondent Carla Babb on June 10, 2024, stating that President Joe Biden picked the "worst of all possible worlds" when deciding how to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan (Bobb, 2024). Furthermore, the Taliban's return quickly reversed years of U.S.-backed human rights progress, especially for women, while relocation efforts for Afghan allies remain slow (Anuka & Raymond, 2024). Although President Biden set a September 11 withdrawal deadline, and 90% of troops had exited by July 6, interagency planning remained inadequate. The State Department could not track U.S. citizens or the 17,000 principal SIV applicants still in Afghanistan, and evacuation resources fell short. Consequently, after Kabul fell, thousands rushed to the airport. Thus, amid violence and confusion, U.S. forces prioritized evacuees based on proximity and status. However, gate closures and unclear protocols left many in danger. SIV holders struggled to gain entry, while some undocumented Afghans were mistakenly evacuated

alongside them. Ultimately, the disorganized withdrawal resulted in enduring humanitarian and strategic consequences for the United States (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2022).

U.S. Immigration Policy and Afghan Refugee Resettlement: Legal Context and Challenges

Following the September 11, 2001, attacks, U.S. immigration policy shifted heavily toward national security. Galus (2022) explains the increased focus on border protection and deportation of criminal noncitizens to prevent terrorism. The 2002 Homeland Security Act replaced the INS with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), overseeing Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Under Obama, policies shifted partially toward humanitarian relief with the implementation of DACA (2012) and DAPA (2014), which deferred deportation for long-time U.S. residents. However, Trump intensified enforcement, imposing travel bans on Muslim-majority countries and enforcing family separations. Biden has since reversed many policies, focusing on family reunification and easing restrictions, but immigration remains grounded in the 1952 INA, amended by the 2001 USA Patriot Act for counterterrorism. Permanent Resident Cards confer lawful permanent resident status, allowing indefinite residence and work, though serious crimes can lead to deportation; citizenship is possible later (Galus, 2022).

Legally, the Refugee Convention and UNHCR define refugees as individuals fleeing persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion (Coen, 2022). Felter et al. (2022) clarify that “migrant” is a broader, non-legal term for people crossing borders seeking safety or opportunity. This distinction became crucial during the Afghan crisis. Even before the Taliban’s August 15, 2021, takeover, Afghan allies of the U.S., such as interpreters and activists, faced mortal threats. Coen (2022) characterizes the chaos at Kabul airport as a symbol of

the broader humanitarian crisis, sparking renewed discussions about the U.S.'s responsibility to its Afghan allies, particularly those applying for Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs). This overview situates Afghan refugees within evolving U.S. immigration policy, legal definitions, and humanitarian concerns. Regarding resettlement, Catholic Charities Community Services Arizona (n.d.) highlights that the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021 led to the displacement of thousands of Afghans. While many now arrive in the U.S. through refugee resettlement as SIV holders, others, evacuated under urgent circumstances, bypassed typical refugee procedures, making their resettlement more complex. Indeed, in different States, some agencies help Afghan refugees with resettlement. Catholic, they are currently being processed abroad and will be paroled (admitted) into the United States for immediate humanitarian protection. Table 1 shows the number of Indiana immigrants based on the different categories (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024).

Indiana - Immigration Totals: Fiscal Years 2013 to 2022															
Year	Population	Lawful Permanent Residents						Nonimmigrant		Naturalizatio		Refugees		Asylees	
		Total	Rank	New	Rank	Adjus	Rank	Total	Rank	Total	Rank	Total	Rank	Total	Rank
2013	6,568,713	7,668	22	3,113	24	4,555	22	192,018	27	4,369	26	1,541	18	138	16
2014	6,593,644	8,008	22	3,230	24	4,778	21	193,849	28	4,274	25	1,614	17	52	25
2015	6,608,422	8,554	23	3,377	24	5,177	21	213,455	28	4,686	24	1,793	15	83	25
2016	6,634,304	9,946	23	4,302	24	5,644	20	229,334	28	5,113	23	1,893	17	67	27
2017	6,658,078	10,052	21	3,851	24	6,201	20	257,726	28	6,420	20	1,042	22	153	23
2018	6,695,497	9,741	21	3,755	23	5,986	21	273,334	28	6,578	22	493	16	347	16
2019	6,732,219	8,527	22	3,132	23	5,395	21	304,030	27	7,386	21	865	13	721	11
2020	6,788,799	6,551	22	2,088	22	4,463	20	142,063	26	5,107	23	323	14	557	12
2021	6,813,532	7,223	22	1,984	22	5,239	20	77,584	20	6,112	22	202	24	379	12
2022	6,833,037	8,681	21	3,594	22	5,087	20	179,552	27	8,330	22	538	19	430	15

Table 1. Source: Office of Homeland Security Statistics analysis of Department of Homeland Security, Department of State, Department of Justice data, and U.S. Census Bureau data (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024).

Resettlement of Afghan Allies and the Growing Afghan Diaspora in the U.S.

The U.S. differentiates Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders, Afghans who worked with U.S. forces and receive refugee benefits, from parolees, evacuees without formal refugee status who undergo background checks before work authorization (Catholic Charities Community

Services Arizona, n.d.). Established under the Afghan Allies Protection Act of 2009, the SIV program aimed to protect Afghan allies, though eligibility verification was challenging due to inadequate tracking. Table 2 shows a Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program, June 2020 (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2022).

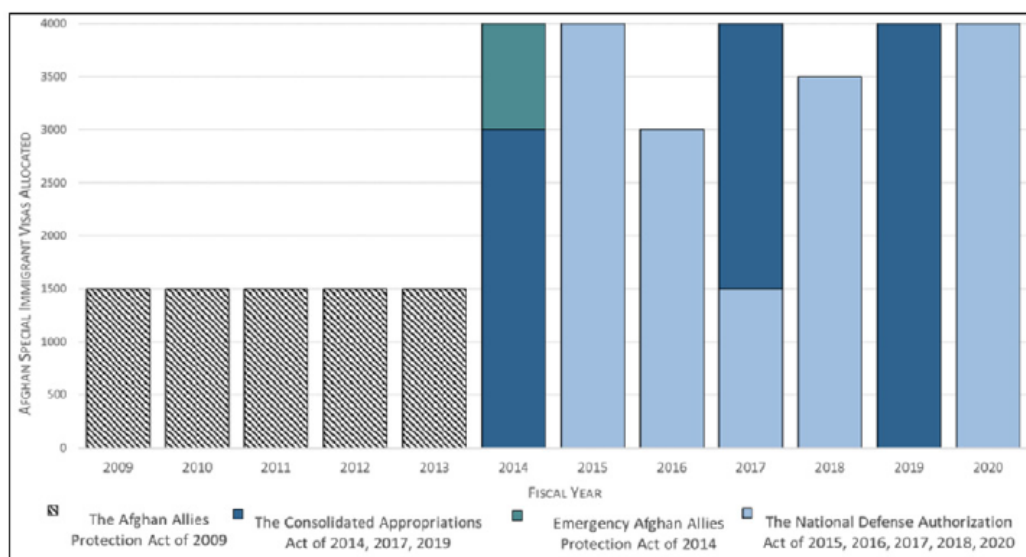


Table 2. Source: Department of State’s Office of Inspector General’s Report Review of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program, June 2020. (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2022).

Operation Allies Refuge began evacuating eligible SIV applicants in July 2021, but by August 15, only about 2,000 had reached safety, despite over 17,000 still waiting for processing. The fall of Kabul exacerbated the situation, causing the backlog to surge to more than 35,000 cases by the end of the year (Roy et al., 2024). In response, the White House requested \$6.4 billion to assist parolees with welfare and identification, yet by December 2021, only 40% of the 74,000 evacuees were eligible for SIVs, and the processing stages remained uncertain (Patteson, 2021).

Following this, Operation Allies Welcome helped resettle 76,000 Afghan evacuees, many of whom were U.S. allies, emphasizing the nation’s moral obligation (Coen, 2022). A significant portion of Afghan immigrants have settled in California (39%), Virginia (14%), Texas (10%), and New York (6%), with notable concentrations in counties such as Sacramento and Fairfax

(Montalvo & Batalova, 2024). Figure 3 from the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) provides data on the U.S. immigrant population by state and county from 2018 to 2022.

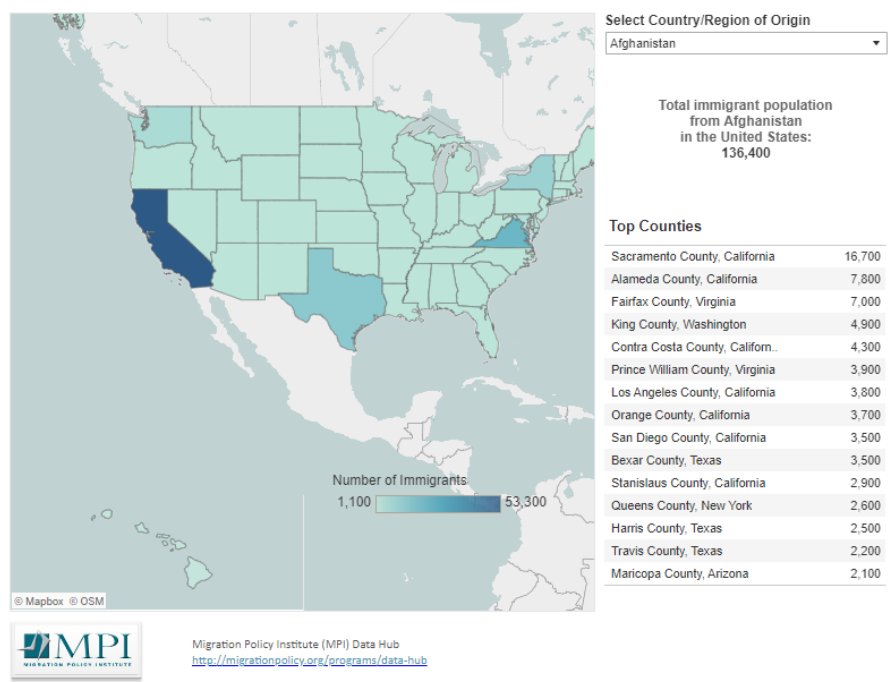


Figure 3. Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) U.S. Immigrant Population by State and County, 2018-2022 (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024).

The Afghan diaspora in the U.S. expanded significantly from the 1980s Soviet invasion and accelerated after the 2001 U.S. intervention, influenced by immigration policies shaping legal status and integration. The 2021 U.S. withdrawal displaced over 600,000 Afghans, adding to nearly six million globally displaced, consistent with the 1951 Refugee Convention's definition of refugees (Mohamed, 2023). Recent estimates place the U.S. Afghan diaspora at approximately 250,000, comprising Afghan-born individuals and those of Afghan ancestry (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024).

Afghan Refugees in the U.S.: Barriers to Integration, Economic Stability, and Well-being

After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Afghan refugees have faced numerous challenges in adapting to life in the United States. One of the most pressing issues is

language barriers. Arun et al. (2022) highlight that work and family responsibilities often prevent refugees from attending English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, while inadequate interpretation services and a lack of awareness about available resources further impede their access to essential support. Housing is another critical concern, particularly in states like Indiana, where refugees are placed in large homes that are often unaffordable. Arun et al. (2022) call for more culturally appropriate housing placements and increased funding to improve these conditions (p. 6). Women face even more complex challenges, including issues such as childcare, lack of transportation, digital illiteracy, and trauma (Mohamed, 2023).

Geographic location plays a crucial role in shaping the resettlement experiences of Afghan refugees. Mohamed (2023) notes that those resettled in areas like Mississippi and Alabama, where ethnic communities are limited, often experience greater isolation and struggle to access support networks. In contrast, states like California, which is home to over 54,000 Afghans, offer more robust networks and services, facilitating smoother integration. However, Arun et al. (2022) asserted that refugees in less diverse regions frequently face challenges such as isolation, racism, and financial insecurity.

Language proficiency remains an ongoing challenge, with Montalvo and Batalova (2024) reporting that 56% of Afghan immigrants speak English less than “very well,” a figure that rises to 68% among women and more recent arrivals. This language gap also affects their ability to access counseling and mental health services. Firling (1988) observes that men tend to dominate these spaces, partly due to gender roles and the language barrier, which often results in the marginalization of women’s voices. In light of these challenges, Arun et al. (2022) emphasize the need for enhanced translation infrastructure to improve refugees’ access to services.

In addition to language and location, structural limitations around housing laws and transportation worsen integration difficulties. For example, Arun et al (2022) highlight how room

occupancy laws disproportionately affect large families. Without access to personal vehicles, many refugees rely on expensive markets or unreliable transit. These issues extend into food access. Goliaei et al. (2023) report that limited SNAP benefits and a lack of culturally appropriate food led to food insecurity and unhealthy eating. These material barriers are further complicated by cultural misunderstandings. As Coleridge (1999) argues, successful integration depends on refugees' ability to adapt to local norms; when these norms are misinterpreted, exclusion often follows, especially for women. In support of this, Saksena and McMorrow (2020) emphasize that resettlement programs should also nurture spiritual and social networks, which are critical for Afghan women's adjustment. To move beyond surface-level support, culturally competent care is essential. Giger and Davidhizar (2002) argue that service providers must understand refugees' unique beliefs, practices, and histories. For example, food restrictions present a significant challenge; Goliaei et al. (2023) note that shortages of Halal food strain both household budgets and religious observance.

At a broader societal level, anti-Muslim sentiment remains a serious concern. Alfonseca (2021), cited in Rai et al. (2023), documents how discriminatory policies and social attitudes threaten the safety and inclusion of Muslim refugees. This is especially urgent considering how rapidly the Afghan military collapsed post-withdrawal, within just 11 days (Lawrence and Sutter, 2021; Anuka and Raymond, 2024, p. 44). While many Afghans qualified for refugee status under the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980 (American Immigration Council, 2020), integration remains an uphill battle. Turning to education and employment, Afghan refugees continue to face serious disadvantages. Capps et al. (2015) explain that while education typically leads to better economic outcomes in the U.S., many refugees, despite having degrees, remain underemployed, especially in credential-driven sectors, and still, employment remains a major obstacle.

Although U.S. policy prioritizes rapid workforce entry, Stempel and Alemi (2021) argue that Afghan refugees, due to trauma, limited English, and lack of social networks, often struggle to secure stable jobs. Furthermore, those with higher education face difficulties transferring credentials into the U.S. job market. Notably, Afghan women experience particularly low workforce participation, as traditional gender roles shape family income strategies, especially in suburban areas like New Jersey, with employment rates as low as 46% and family incomes at just 68% of the local median.

According to Mohamed (2023), limited support and a one-time \$1,225 resettlement grant leave many vulnerable to homelessness. Legal status also plays a critical role. While SIV holders have a pathway to permanent residency, parolees face a complicated asylum system (Patteson, 2021). As Mohamed (2023) explains, Afghan refugee classifications include P-1 (referred to by the UN, US embassy, or NGOs), P-2 (U.S.-affiliated), and P-3 (family reunification) entries, each offering varying degrees of support. Furthermore, access to essential services shapes refugee adjustment. Reihani et al. (2021) identify public benefits, healthcare access, education, and care coordination as key facilitators of successful integration.

Services like SNAP, Medicaid, and culturally competent interpretation foster trust. Additionally, Afghan youth experience cultural tension in schools, where counselors are crucial in helping them navigate identity and family expectations (Rai et al, 2023). Stempel and Alemi (2021) observe that Afghan refugees struggle to re-enter professional fields due to limited networks and re-credentialing opportunities. Alemi et al. (2014) further highlight wide demographic variation among refugees, noting education levels ranging from no formal schooling to college degrees, with men generally more educated than women. Figure 4 explains the educational attainment of the U.S. population ages 25 and older by origin in 2022 (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024).

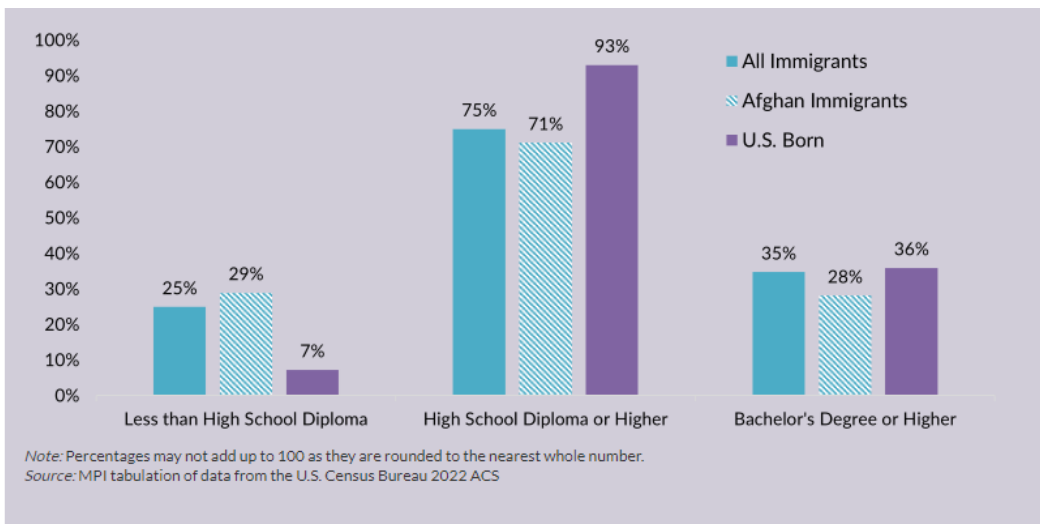


Figure 4. Educational Attainment of the U.S. Population (ages 25 and older) by origin, 2022. (Montalvo & Batalova. 2024).

This educational gap reflects broader demographic trends. Montalvo and Batalova (2024) find that Afghan immigrants are significantly younger than both U.S.-born and other foreign-born populations, with a median age of 31 and 30% under 18. However, education levels lag: 23% of Afghan men and 36% of Afghan women lack a high school diploma, while just 32% of men and 24% of women hold college degrees. Consequently, labor force participation remains low, 61% overall and only 37% for women, compared to 67% among all immigrants and 57% for foreign-born women.

Median household income stands at \$48,000, far below the \$75,000 average for U.S.-born and other immigrant households. Poverty rates remain high, affecting 39% of Afghan immigrants (p. 5). Figure 5. explained age distribution on the U.S population by origin, 2022 (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024).

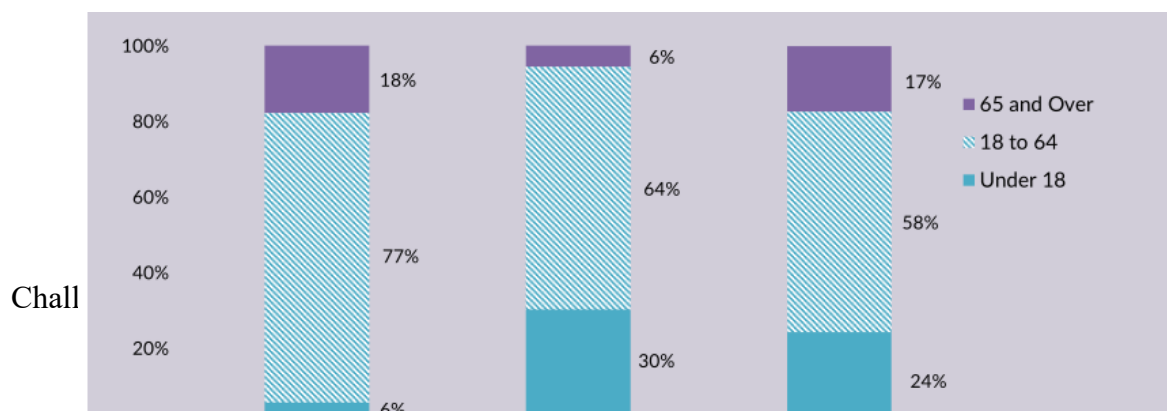


Figure 5. Age Distribution on the U.S Population by Origin 2022, Migration Policy Institute (MPI) (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024).

These demographic shifts coincide with a sharp rise in Afghan migration. Montalvo and Batalova (2024) note that 72% of Afghan immigrants have arrived since 2010, yet only 37% have naturalized, compared to 53% of all immigrants. In 2022 alone, 14,200 Afghans gained lawful permanent residency, 81% through Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs). Between October and December 2023, another 6,200 entered under SIV status, mostly resettling in California, Texas, Virginia, Washington, and Maryland. Yet alongside logistical and economic barriers, psychological challenges loom large. Firling (1988) reports that Afghan men often experience PTSD, insomnia, and withdrawal due to trauma and the pressure of supporting their families. Yako and Biswas (2014) add that acculturative stress and homesickness often lead to depression, confirming that transitions between cultures intensify emotional distress. Social and religious support networks, however, play a stabilizing role.

Despite this, mental healthcare remains difficult to access. Reihani et al. (2021) describe how stigma, fear of losing benefits, and language barriers discourage many from seeking help. An interpreter noted, “Most people don’t want to accept or share their mental health problems...” (p. 62). Miscommunication due to dialect differences, such as confusing “high stress” with “high blood pressure,” along with interpreter shortages, hampers care. Jongen et al. (2018) emphasize

that culturally competent providers significantly improve trust and outcomes. These challenges are compounded by daily realities. Reihani et al. (2021) share that even ambulance sirens can trigger traumatic flashbacks, while access to care is complicated by confusing systems, limited transportation, and the tension between Medicaid eligibility and employment.

According to Arun et al. (2022), such transit and safety issues are especially hard on women (p. n/a). Indeed, education systems also struggle to support Afghan children. While legally entitled to PK-12 education, many face trauma, language barriers, and disrupted schooling. Legal and policy guidance highlights the need for inclusive, culturally responsive classrooms (Crawford et al., 2024). Still, there are positive signs. Montalvo and Batalova (2024) report that 65% of Afghan refugees had public insurance in 2022, and only 8% were uninsured, surpassing rates among the broader immigrant population. Figure 6 explains the health coverage for Afghan immigrants.

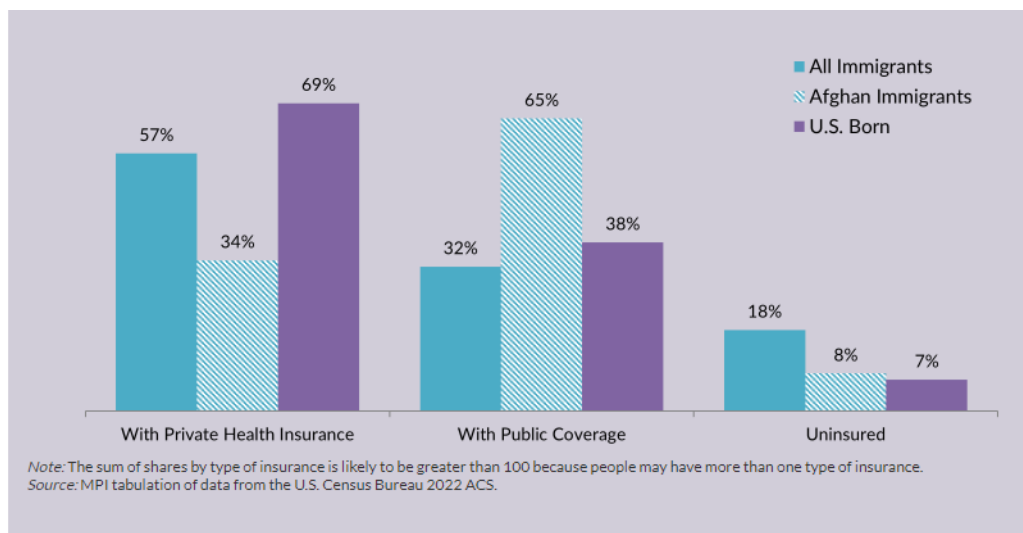


Figure 6. Health Coverage for Afghan Immigrants, All Immigrants, and U.S.-Born, in 2022 (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024).

Empowering Afghan Refugees through Social Support Systems and Resettlement Agencies in the U.S.

Despite complex challenges, Afghan refugees in the U.S. have received vital assistance from resettlement agencies since 2021. Rai et al. (2023) emphasized that these agencies play a

crucial role in empowering Afghan refugees through culturally responsive and trauma-informed care. Providers are encouraged to recognize the stress and anxiety refugees experience during intake and to use culturally appropriate tools such as the Refugee Health Screener to assess mental health, domestic violence, and family conflict (Hollifield et al., 2013; Rai et al., 2023, p. 394). By aligning services with Afghan cultural values and community structures, resettlement agencies foster trust, resilience, and self-reliance, enabling refugees to take an active role in rebuilding their lives and achieving emotional well-being (Huslage et al., 2021; Rai et al., 2023, p. 394).

Building on this, Arun et al. (2022) highlighted that social support networks further empower refugees by strengthening their integration and promoting independence. Community connections, particularly for women balancing domestic responsibilities, provide emotional relief and access to new opportunities. Despite barriers such as isolation and limited childcare, refugees demonstrate adaptability and determination, using these challenges as pathways to empowerment. Moreover, established organizations have expanded services to meet growing needs. For example, Catholic Charities Community Services Arizona (n.d.) has supported refugees since 1975 through housing, education, and job readiness programs, ensuring that Afghan families can access critical resources to achieve stability and long-term success.

In the same spirit, Exodus Refugee Immigration (n.d.), in Indiana, has become a model of comprehensive empowerment. In 2022, its Bloomington office resettled 44 clients while continuing to welcome Afghan evacuees through a wide range of services, including legal assistance, mental wellness support, extended case management, training and culture, the Match Grant program, women's and youth programs, asylum seeker services, legal aid, and translation of the BMV Manual. These initiatives collectively strengthen the foundation for Afghan refugees' social and economic advancement. Exodus's Employment Program enhances economic empowerment by offering personalized job training, career guidance, and workplace orientation,

equipping refugees with the skills needed for long-term self-sufficiency. Through the Language, Cultural Orientation, and Readiness for Employment (LCORE) initiative, refugees develop English proficiency and cultural understanding, fostering communication, self-advocacy, and confidence in navigating daily life (Exodus Refugee Immigration, n.d.).

Furthermore, Exodus's Women's Program promotes self-sufficiency and leadership by providing Afghan women with education, counseling, and vocational resources, empowering them to build independence and strengthen their roles within families and communities. Likewise, the Youth Program fosters empowerment among young Afghan refugees by providing mentorship, cultural guidance, and life-skills training that help them navigate dual cultural identities and prepare for successful futures. Additionally, Exodus's Mental Wellness Program focuses on culturally sensitive counseling that enhances emotional resilience, self-awareness, and coping skills, empowering refugees to heal from trauma and sustain long-term mental health stability. Together, these social support systems and resettlement agencies not only provide essential services but also cultivate empowerment, self-sufficiency, and resilience among Afghan refugees, enabling them to rebuild their lives with dignity and purpose in the United States (Exodus Refugee Immigration, n.d.).

Extending beyond community and agency-level support, educational institutions also play a key role in empowerment. Crawford et al. (2024) emphasized that empowering refugee students begins with recognizing their resilience, cultural wealth, and capacity to thrive when given equitable educational opportunities. Although many encounter academic, cultural, and socio-emotional challenges such as trauma and interrupted schooling, these experiences also cultivate adaptability and determination. Educators and school leaders can transform these challenges into strengths by creating safe and inclusive environments that celebrate students' linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. By engaging refugee families and providing teachers with professional

development in culturally responsive practices, schools can shift from a model of support to one of empowerment, where refugee students are not merely integrated but are positioned as contributors to the learning community (Crawford et al., 2024).

Through the combined efforts of resettlement agencies, social support networks, and educational institutions, Afghan refugees in the U.S. are gradually transforming displacement into empowerment. These interconnected systems provide not only immediate assistance but also the long-term tools needed for independence, resilience, and meaningful participation in American society.

Refugee Task Force at Indiana University (IU)

According to Petranoff (2023), as Indiana prepares to welcome Afghan refugees, Indiana University (IU) has strengthened its commitment to supporting displaced students through the establishment of the Refugee Task Force. Historically, IU has provided a welcoming environment for refugees, asylees, and displaced persons, yet many newcomers continue to face barriers such as disrupted education, missing credentials, cultural adjustment challenges, and limited access to funding. Recognizing these obstacles, IU formed the Refugee Task Force in October 2021 to enhance access to higher education and create a coordinated support network guided by a steering committee composed of university and community representatives, including members from the Office of International Services (OIS), Office of Enrollment Management, Exodus Refugee Immigration, Inc., and the Dean of Students Care Committee.

Petranoff (2023) noted that the Task Force focuses on outreach, ethical protection, and educational advocacy for refugees, ensuring that their unique academic and personal needs are met through collaborative partnerships. Drawing on best practices from universities, NGOs, and refugee organizations, it develops strategies to expand enrollment opportunities and improve communication about available resources. Regular reports are submitted to the Office of the Vice

President for International Affairs, with the Interim Associate Vice President for International Services serving as the primary liaison. Led by Rendy Schrader, Senior Director of Student and Scholar Programs, the Task Force was created in response to the growing number of displaced students from conflict zones such as Afghanistan and Ukraine, where more than 103 million people have been forcibly displaced globally. As of 2025, IU supports approximately 40 displaced students, offering full tuition and fee coverage for their first degree, along with housing and living expenses during the first year. Through an informal and indirect exchange, Schrader, who is knowledgeable about the Refugee Task Force and has been involved in its efforts, commented on the project from which I have received support: “We are in Year 3 of our services, to fund 40 displaced students per year, starting with Year 4. We fund 100% of our students’ tuition and fees for the duration of their first degree. We also fund housing and living expenses for year 1, but many students need help beyond that. I don’t have the heart to cut funding for those in need.”

Indeed, despite ongoing financial challenges, IU’s initiative has demonstrated remarkable success. Students such as Sharifi and others who graduated with bachelor’s and master’s degrees in 2023 have thrived academically, exemplifying the transformative potential of sustained institutional support. Some IU faculty members highlight that the lived experiences of displaced students enrich the academic community by bringing resilience, perspective, and cultural depth to campus life. Through ongoing fundraising and collaboration, the IU Refugee Task Force continues to expand its reach, ensuring that displaced students, particularly Afghan refugees, receive the educational empowerment needed to rebuild their futures and contribute meaningfully to society.

Theoretical Framework

To explore the displacement and empowerment of Afghan refugees post-2021, this article draws on Forced Migration Theory and Social Capital Theory. These frameworks offer a deeper understanding of the structural forces driving displacement and the social networks that promote

resilience and integration. Castles' (2003) attention to policy and structure, along with Vella's (2013) continuum of migration experiences, reflect the complex realities faced by Afghan refugees.

Forced Migration Theory

To begin with, Forced Migration Theory broadens the concept of displacement beyond narrow legal terms. UNHCR (2016), as cited in Stankovic et al. (2021), argues that labels like "refugee" or "stateless" oversimplify and exclude certain displaced populations. In addition, Cameron (2014) points out that such terms carry harmful assumptions that marginalize the vulnerable, while Hynes (2021) notes that phrases like "illegal" shape public attitudes and limit protection. Building on this, Vella (2013) presents migration as a continuum rather than a binary, offering a flexible model that better fits Afghan refugees' circumstances. Drawing from Dascal (2007), he advocates for context-sensitive interpretations (Dascal, 2007; Vella, 2013, pp. 10-11). Moreover, Castles (2003) links displacement to global systems of war, persecution, and inequality. He also emphasizes how migrants reshape host societies and calls for a migration policy rooted in human rights. Identity and belonging are central: displaced people construct new identities yet face deep inequality in global mobility. After 9/11, refugees were increasingly seen as security threats, and Global South migrants remain restricted despite their labor being essential (Castles, 2003).

Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory provides a valuable conceptual lens for understanding how Afghan refugees navigate displacement through relationships and social networks. According to Bourdieu (1983), as cited in Hauberer (2011), social capital refers to access to shared resources derived from long-lasting social connections. He further emphasizes the interdependence between social,

economic, and cultural capital, arguing that group belonging and mutual recognition are central to accessing these resources (p. 38).

Moreover, Hauberer (2011) explains that individuals mobilize different forms of capital depending on their social group membership. For instance, the wealthy rely primarily on economic capital, whereas academics draw on cultural capital. In this sense, social ties can yield both symbolic and material benefits. As Bourdieu (1986) notes, maintaining social networks requires continual investment, often transforming economic capital into social ties, which in turn generate further value through solidarity and collective action. These relationships may even be mobilized by a representative figure to strengthen group cohesion (Bourdieu, 1986; Hauberer, 2011, p. 193). In the context of Afghan refugees, particularly after the 2021 crisis, social capital frequently becomes a crucial substitute for limited economic or cultural capital. Through interpersonal networks, many refugees access employment, housing, healthcare, and emotional support. However, it is essential to acknowledge that Afghan women often encounter additional barriers that restrict their participation in these networks.

Expanding on this theoretical foundation, Volker (2020) differentiates between micro-level ties, those that fulfill daily needs, and macro-level trust, which fosters broader social cooperation (pp. 1-3). Drawing from Coleman (1990), he introduces the notion of “credit slips,” a form of future-oriented reciprocity that sustains long-term relationships (Coleman, 1990; Volker, 2020, p. 4). Similarly, Axelrod’s (1984) concept of the “shadow of the future” illustrates how trust encourages continued collaboration within networks (Axelrod, 1984; Volker, 2020, p. 5). Together, these dynamics illuminate how Afghan refugees can rebuild social cohesion and resilience even amid displacement.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider critiques of the concept. Fine (2010) argues that policy applications of social capital often overemphasize community self-help, thereby

overlooking structural inequalities and power relations. Revisiting Bourdieu's framework helps reveal how social capital is embedded within broader systems of power and class. For Afghan refugees, therefore, social networks play a supportive role in adaptation and integration, but they cannot substitute for systemic reforms that ensure equity and protection. To conceptualize this relationship, Figure 7 presents a pyramid of displacement: at the top, Forced Migration represents involuntary movement; the middle layer, Human Rights, highlights access to legal protection and essential services; and at the base, Social Capital highlights the foundational role of social networks in fostering refugee integration, recovery, and long-term resilience.

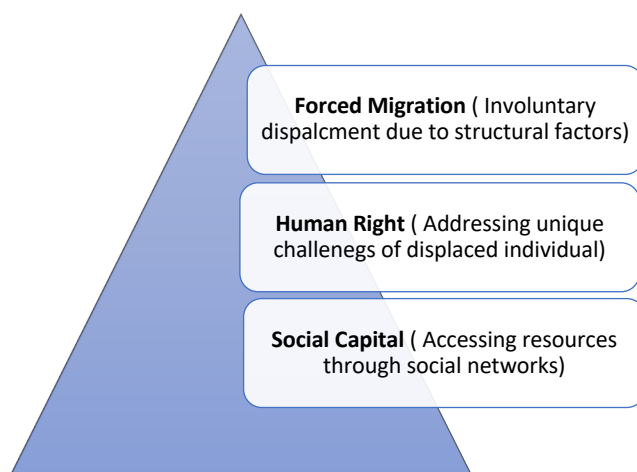


Figure 7. Theoretical Farmwork (Force Migration Theory & Social Capital Theory)

Method

This study employs a comprehensive literature review to examine the experiences of Afghan refugees, especially following the 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Sources were selected from academic databases (e.g., Google Scholar), official reports, and refugee-led publications. Peer-reviewed articles and reputable materials from the last 20 years were prioritized, focusing on socio-economic impacts, integration challenges, and U.S. policy responses. Adopting

a liberation-centered and decolonial framework rooted in critical refugee studies, this article rejects extractive methods that position displaced people as passive subjects. Instead, it views knowledge as a product of lived experience, resistance, and cultural agency. The absence of interviews or direct observation reflects an ethical stance against traumatization and appropriation. Rather than treating refugee narratives as neutral data, this study engages with refugee-led advocacy reports, public testimonies, policy documents, and community-generated accounts as acts of resistance and survival. A critical thematic analysis identifies recurring patterns of systemic exclusion, resilience, and grassroots empowerment within the context of post-2021 U.S. immigration policies.

This methodology is guided by anti-oppressive ethics and researcher reflexivity. Recognizing my positionality, I approach the work as an ally rather than an observer, honoring community knowledge, resisting academic objectification, and fostering liberatory discourse. Empowerment is both a research theme and a methodological principle. While not claiming to represent all Afghan refugee experiences, the study seeks to elevate marginalized perspectives and expose structural power dynamics often omitted in dominant policy and academic narratives. Within this framework, research is reframed as an act of solidarity rather than a tool of surveillance.

Researcher Identity

As the sole author of this paper, the author is a Ph.D. candidate in Literacy, Culture, Language, and Education at the Indiana University. Drawing from her own experiences as a refugee, the author's paper is deeply informed by both academic training and personal lived experience. The dual perspective enables a nuanced understanding of the Afghan refugee experience, bridging scholarly insight with empathetic engagement.

Thematic Literature Review

This section presents findings organized thematically around the research questions (RQs) to reduce repetition and ensure conceptual clarity. The discussion integrates Forced Migration Theory and Social Capital Theory to interpret Afghan refugees lived experiences after the 2021 U.S. withdrawal.

Results

RQ1: Social Integration Challenges Faced by Afghan Refugees in the U.S. post-2021

The resettlement of Afghan refugees in the United States following the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan reveals multilayered structural, legal, and social challenges. The evacuation process, hastily organized under Operation Allies Welcome, was marked by inadequate planning and coordination, leaving many evacuees in prolonged legal and psychological uncertainty (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2022). Although many Afghans were relocated through the program (International Rescue Committee, 2022), nearly half remain without a clear path to permanent residency (Gelatt & Meissner, 2022). This legal limbo directly affects their ability to integrate into U.S. society, particularly in areas such as employment, education, housing, and mental health (Reihani et al., 2021).

Grounded in Forced Migration Theory, which emphasizes the profound and lasting impacts of involuntary displacement, and Social Capital Theory, which highlights the importance of community networks in fostering resilience, this analysis situates Afghan refugees' experiences within broader systemic contexts. In Indiana, as in other U.S. states, refugees confront persistent barriers related to legal status, language acquisition, and cultural adaptation (Ulintz et al., 2023). Nevertheless, both formal resettlement agencies and informal community networks play crucial roles in supporting newcomers and facilitating adaptation. These findings draw upon refugee-led

reports, public testimonies, and scholarly research that center on their lived experiences of displaced Afghans.

Legal and Structural Barriers to Integration

Since the 2021 U.S. withdrawal, legal ambiguity has emerged as a major obstacle to integration. The rapid evacuation left thousands of Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) applicants unprocessed and field staff without clear guidance (United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2022). Although 76,000 Afghans were admitted under humanitarian parole, this temporary status provides no route to permanent residency (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024). Outdated, post-9/11 immigration laws and inconsistent enforcement across Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agencies further delay resolution (Galus, 2022).

Persecuted interpreters, activists, and civil society members depend on refugee status for protection (Coen, 2022), yet inconsistent U.S. policy has left many in a state of legal uncertainty (Catholic Charities Community Services Arizona, n.d.). This instability undermines both psychological well-being and long-term social integration. Despite meeting refugee definitions under international law, thousands remain without durable solutions or permanent residency (American Immigration Council, 2020).

Potential Policy Changes to Improve the Lives of Afghan Refugees

To address the systemic challenges Afghan refugees face in their resettlement, several policy reforms are necessary. First, establishing clear pathways to permanent residency would provide legal stability for refugees, alleviating the uncertainty that hinders their integration into U.S. society. As highlighted by the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (2022), the rapid evacuation left many refugees in legal limbo, unable to secure permanent residency. This could be achieved by expediting the processing of Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) and providing a permanent legal status for those on temporary programs like humanitarian parole (Montalvo &

Batalova, 2024). Additionally, expanding access to language acquisition programs, especially those tailored to refugee needs, is crucial, as Arun et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of providing more ESL programs to facilitate refugee integration. According to Reihani et al. (2021), policies aimed at recognizing foreign qualifications would allow Afghan refugees to contribute their skills and experience in the U.S. workforce, addressing the underemployment problem faced by many refugees. Furthermore, the affordable housing crisis and the lack of culturally sensitive mental health services exacerbate refugee challenges (Goliaei et al., 2023). Policymakers should prioritize the development of affordable housing solutions and the creation of culturally competent mental health programs to better meet the needs of refugees (Rai et al., 2023). Lastly, fostering refugee-led community organizations and initiatives, as seen in successful models such as the Refugee Task Force at Indiana University, would empower Afghan refugees to contribute more actively to their communities and promote a sense of belonging and agency (Petranoff, 2023).

Language, Gender, and Cultural Barriers

Language proficiency and gender inequities further hinder integration. Many Afghan refugees face limited access to English as a Second Language (ESL) programs (Arun et al., 2022), and the lack of strong ethnic networks in rural areas deepens isolation (Mohamed, 2023). Afghan women, in particular, experience lower English proficiency (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024), limiting access to employment, education, and community participation. Gender disparities also restrict engagement in counseling and leadership opportunities (Firling, 1988).

Cultural misalignment, Islamophobia, and insensitive resettlement practices exacerbate exclusion, especially for Afghan Muslim women (Coleridge, 1999). At a practical level, barriers such as unreliable transportation, limited affordable housing, and a lack of culturally appropriate food make everyday life more challenging (Goliaei et al., 2023). These factors illustrate how social and cultural capital deficits intersect with structural inequalities, reinforcing marginalization.

Despite qualifying under refugee law, many remain in legal limbo without permanent solutions (American Immigration Council, 2020).

Economic, Educational, and Health-Related Challenges

Economic integration remains one of the most persistent barriers. Many refugees arrive with professional experience or technical expertise that is not recognized by U.S. employers, resulting in underemployment or unemployment (Reihani et al., 2021). Affordable housing shortages, particularly in cities like Bloomington, Indiana, increase dependency on overcrowded or substandard housing (Exodus Refugee Immigration, n.a).

In education, both adults and children often require extensive ESL support but are placed in under-resourced programs. These integration struggles are compounded by trauma and uncertainty, as Rai et al. (2023) note that long-term psychological stress undermines adjustment. These findings reflect Forced Migration Theory, where forced displacement leads to disrupted social, educational, and economic systems that cannot be easily rebuilt in host countries without systemic reform (Vella, 2013).

Moreover, Reihani et al. (2021) highlight key barriers to healthcare access, trust, miscommunication, and mental health stigma, though public support and coordinated care can help. Many Afghan refugees, for instance, avoid discussing mental health due to fears of job loss or losing benefits. As one interpreter explained, “Most people don’t want to accept or share their mental health problems... They think the information given to the doctor will affect their job or social security benefits” (p. 62). This highlights how structural vulnerability intersects with cultural stigma, limiting healthcare access and overall well-being.

RQ2: Effectiveness of Local Community Support Systems and Empowerment of Afghan Refugees

In contrast to structural exclusion, many Afghan refugees are finding strength and stability through community-based organizations and informal diaspora networks. Local refugee support systems, including volunteer-led initiatives, faith-based groups, and mutual aid circles, are essential in helping refugees access housing, legal aid, language classes, and emotional support. These grassroots efforts not only fill service gaps but also help rebuild a sense of belonging, identity, and autonomy among refugees, many of whom contribute back to the community despite their limited means.

The Refugee Task Force at Indiana University Bloomington exemplifies how academic institutions can support integration by fostering inclusivity and resource-sharing (Petranoff, 2023). As a refugee and student at Indiana University, I have personally experienced how the Task Force's support has helped refugee students cover tuition and living expenses. Without this assistance, life for refugee students would be extremely difficult. Each year, I applied for scholarships available to students with high GPAs and was fortunate to receive funding for two years of my Ph.D. studies. However, after administrative changes in the United States and reductions in scholarship opportunities, I was no longer able to secure funding. The Refugee Task Force helped me overcome this challenge and continue my education successfully.

The lens of Social Capital Theory, such as community networks, builds trust, reciprocity, and resilience. For Afghan refugees, these connections often prove more reliable than governmental aid. According to Bourdieu (1983), as cited in Hauberer (2011), social capital is intertwined with economic and cultural capital within social fields. Bourdieu (1983) defines capital as accumulated labor material or embodied that, though time-consuming to acquire, generates profit when reproduced (Bourdieu, 1983; Hauberer, 2011). These insights explain how Afghan refugees leverage social relationships to rebuild livelihoods and support others in their communities.

Refugees as Agents of Contribution, Not Just Victims

Afghan refugees in the United States actively contribute to their communities, challenging the misconception that they are burdens on society. Many bring professional expertise, entrepreneurial skills, and cultural insight that enrich local economies and civic life. This reality highlights the ethical responsibility of research and policy to recognize refugees as agents of change rather than passive recipients of aid. As an Afghan refugee, I have tried to make my own contributions to the United States. The Refugee Support Center has worked to assist refugees by helping them access food pantries, housing, and employment opportunities. Inspired by their efforts, I also tried to play a similar role by helping newly arrived Afghan refugees who were unfamiliar with their new environment. I welcomed them, took them shopping, showed them around the city of Bloomington, Indiana, and helped them obtain their student ID card. I also guided them through registering for their courses and credits via the student portal One.IU.edu.

Indeed, Social Capital Theory highlights the importance of community networks in enabling refugees to achieve economic and social integration (Volker, 2020). These networks foster resilience and facilitate meaningful participation in host societies. Castles (2003) and Vella (2013) advocate for inclusive policies that acknowledge refugee contributions, while Agadjanian (2013) argues that migration should be seen along a continuum shaped by socio-economic pressures, rather than rigid categories of forced or voluntary movement.

Globalization and Policy Context

Globalization further complicates migration dynamics. While skilled professionals benefit from global mobility, less-skilled migrants, especially those from the Global South, are often restricted despite their essential contributions to labor markets (Castles, 2003). This contradiction highlights the need for equitable migration and resettlement policies that recognize the value, resilience, and agency of all migrants, including refugees.

Afghan refugees, in particular, face a range of shared challenges as they adapt to new social, cultural, and economic environments. These challenges, such as language barriers, limited access to employment, and unfamiliarity with local systems, can hinder their ability to contribute effectively to their host communities. However, when refugees receive adequate support, they not only rebuild their lives but also actively enrich their new societies through their skills, perspectives, and community involvement. By recognizing these common challenges and Afghan refugees, policymakers, researchers, and community organizations can think more broadly and develop solutions that foster inclusion and participation. Supporting refugees in overcoming initial barriers is not merely an act of assistance; it is an investment in their potential to contribute meaningfully to the communities that welcome them. Through informed policy and strong community networks, host societies can help ensure that refugees are seen not as burdens, but as partners in building a more diverse, dynamic, and compassionate future.

Discussion and Implication

The post-2021 integration of Afghan refugees reveals layered legal, economic, social, and educational challenges shaped by both policy failures and the remarkable resilience of displaced communities. Many refugees were evacuated under temporary humanitarian parole, a status that offers safety but no pathway to permanence (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2022). This condition exemplifies Forced Migration Theory's emphasis on disrupted legal and social systems resulting from involuntary displacement (Vella, 2013). Outdated immigration procedures further failed to support U.S. allies and civil society actors (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2022), leaving numerous refugees without legal protection (American Immigration Council, 2020). Indeed, these legal uncertainties extend deeply into economic integration. Barriers such as unrecognized professional credentials, housing shortages, and limited English proficiency inhibit refugees' progress (Reihani et al., 2021). Employment remains restricted not only by legal

insecurity (Mohamed, 2023, p. 50) but also by systemic racism, which weakens refugees' professional networks and limits access to social and economic capital (Stempel & Alemi, 2021). Limited financial aid further contributes to housing instability (Mohamed, 2023), perpetuating socioeconomic vulnerability.

Similarly, access to healthcare is constrained by inadequate interpretation services, insufficient provider training (Reihani et al., 2021), and low cultural competence among medical professionals (Jongen et al., 2018). These barriers leave refugees underserved and mistrustful of the healthcare system. Despite these challenges, however, social and religious networks provide vital mental health support, while school counselors serve as key figures for Afghan youth navigating trauma and cultural adjustment.

Education emerges as a persistent and global barrier to integration. Only 61% of refugee children worldwide are enrolled in school, and merely 7% access tertiary education (UNESCO, 2023; Crawford et al., 2024, p. 120). Refugee students, especially Afghans following the Taliban's 2021 return, face both academic and emotional obstacles, even in systems where education is formally accessible (Crawford et al., 2024). Although scholarship programs exist, wage discrimination and employment barriers persist after graduation (Arar et al., 2021). Sherab and Kirk (2016), as cited in Avery and Said (2017), emphasize the need for flexible, multi-level funding models with diverse entry points. Yet, vocational and hybrid learning pathways remain underdeveloped (Arar et al., 2021), while gaps in cost-of-living support discourage participation and distort educational demand. Even with available aid, many refugee students struggle to access or sustain higher education opportunities.

Amid these barriers, Afghan refugees demonstrate agency and resilience. Rooted in Social Capital Theory, Bourdieu (1983), as cited in Hauberer (2011). Grassroots initiatives such as

Indiana University's Refugee Task Force illustrate how community-based organizations can bridge institutional gaps. These efforts reinforce the understanding of refugees as active contributors rather than passive beneficiaries. Consequently, meaningful and sustainable integration requires legal reform, long-term investment, and direct collaboration with refugee-led organizations to create inclusive, equitable, and ethically grounded migration systems.

Limitations

A key limitation of this study was the inability to conduct direct interviews or field observations with newly arrived Afghan refugees in the United States. Many individuals were hesitant to share their experiences due to trauma, emotional distress, and fear that participation could jeopardize their legal status amid uncertain immigration policies. These ethical and logistical challenges restricted data collection and led to the adoption of a non-extractive, literature-based methodology. While this approach ensured ethical rigor, it also limited firsthand narrative depth and the diversity of perspectives captured. Future research should therefore incorporate participatory and trauma-informed methodologies that prioritize safety, trust, and agency among refugee participants.

Conclusion and Direction for Future Research

This research has explored the complex journey of Afghan refugees following the 2021 U.S. withdrawal, using Forced Migration Theory and Social Capital Theory to analyze their experiences. As Vella (2013) suggests, forced migration is shaped by structural violence, legal uncertainty, and global inequality, all of which are evident in the Afghan case. The rapid evacuation, combined with outdated immigration policies, left many refugees in a precarious legal state, exacerbating their exclusion from societal opportunities (U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2022, p. 5). This research also highlights Bauman's (1998), as cited in Castles' (2003)

argument that refugees remain marginalized within global systems, even when they meet the criteria for protection. However, legal ambiguity continues to impede Afghan refugees' access to employment, while challenges such as racism, housing instability, and inadequate healthcare further hinder their ability to integrate (Reihani et al., 2021). Despite these obstacles, refugees display remarkable resilience, forming community-based networks that align with Social Capital Theory's focus on the power of social ties to foster empowerment and support (Bourdieu, 1983; Hauberer, 2011). The barriers to education are another significant challenge, as limited access to schooling and underfunded, inflexible systems leave many refugees without opportunities for long-term social mobility (UNESCO, 2023; Crawford et al., 2024). To address these disparities, a strengths-based approach that recognizes refugees' skills and challenges the structural inequities they face is critical (Fine, 2010).

For Afghan refugees to successfully integrate, systemic policy reforms are essential. Establishing clear pathways to permanent residency, expanding language acquisition programs tailored to refugees, and addressing employment underutilization through the recognition of foreign qualifications are all pivotal steps in enabling refugees to thrive (Montalvo & Batalova, 2024). Furthermore, policymakers must prioritize affordable housing solutions and the development of culturally competent mental health services, which are key to overcoming the current integration barriers (Goliaei et al., 2023). Additionally, empowering refugee-led community organizations, as demonstrated by initiatives like the Refugee Task Force at Indiana University, would further enhance Afghan refugees' sense of agency and belonging.

While these policy changes hold significant promise, they must be approached with caution, as the diversity of refugee experiences requires nuanced, adaptable strategies. Future research should continue to examine the impact of community networks and explore gender-specific barriers that affect integration outcomes. By focusing on these areas, we can ensure that

Afghan refugees and displaced populations globally are not only protected but also allowed to contribute meaningfully to their new communities, fostering a genuine sense of belonging and social cohesion.

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