

# Assessing the mental health and well-being needs among displaced students enrolled in higher education in the U.S.

## Background

**Forcibly displaced individuals face unique obstacles when enrolled in post-secondary education. Challenges can emerge from abrupt separation of place and families of origin—not common among other student populations (Siriwardhana & Stewart, 2013)**

Multiple sources of stressors, such as adapting to new academic life, financial burdens, and living in unstable and uncertain situations, significantly and negatively affected the mental health of asylum-seeking students.

Despite evidence suggesting displaced individuals may experience negative mental health challenges after migrating, there is scant literature concerning the mental health needs among displaced students within higher education in the United States.

## Objectives

- Measure mental health experiences and needs
- Measure mental health help-seeking behaviors
- Describe experiences of flourishing, resilience, and belonging
- Describe how on-campus experiences impact flourishing, resilience, and belonging

## Methodology/Data Analysis

**Two-phase, mixed-methods research of a cohort of scholarship recipients, including former and current students**

- Phase one:** confidential survey of selected demographics, mental health & well-being, sense of belonging, flourishing, and help-seeking behaviors
  - Census sampling to increase statistical power for analysis
  - Quantitative data analysis consisted of descriptive statistics using aggregate data from completed surveys
- Phase two:** semi-structured qualitative interviews to discuss on-campus experiences and connections to mental health and well-being
  - Grounded theory guided the qualitative analysis
  - Line-by-line coding on each transcript
  - Codes were compared and integrated into themes

## Key Phase One Results

Mental Health Condition	% Reporting Experience	Reporting Negative Academic Impact*
Anxiety	89%	88%
Depression	67%	83%
PTSD	78%	86%

\* Of those reporting the experience

Overall, respondents reported positive resilience and higher flourishing throughout their time at their U.S. academic institution

**87% of respondents expressed high sense of belonging**  
100% of respondents reported willingness to seek mental health support

## Key Phase Two Results

Four predominant themes:

### 1 Mental health:

While very few participants discussed their mental health, those that did were more open about the traumatic and unsafe situations they experienced back home.

- These participants were actively receiving mental health support
- Participants not receiving services were aware and willing to seek help



"...you know, like I still worry about everyone else, but at least...it's good that I'm not worrying about myself."

"I don't like to be greedy, right? But still, you know, you always think 'ah, like if a little bit more it will be helpful,' and that was always the challenge for me, not to go back to academia. I was never able to find anyone to fund me"

### 2 Finances & stipend disbursement:

The subject of finances such as tuition, cost of living, and stipend disbursement was discussed by all participants.

"Of course, I cannot be so fast like them because I haven't been interacting with computers for their lifetime and I completely understand that I am someone that needs to learn some other things. So, I also didn't know how to use Canvas."

### 3 Academics & resource connection:

Overall, participants enjoyed and were appreciative of the opportunity to pursue an education, relishing access to many on-campus resources.

- However, some participants noted some gaps in assistance, such as navigating student health insurance or the learning management system

"And I also had the same conversation with the people that had the scholarship and they also had the same issues because they're thinking, 'OK, we're finishing school. We don't find jobs within the next, within our OPT period, what happens then?' ... I never got to find out because I got a job before my OPT ended. But what would have happened? You know? So those are the main issues and the main stress points..."

### 4 Post-graduation transition:

Nearly all participants acknowledged the stress and uncertainty displaced students encounter during graduation.



## Discussion

- Displaced students reported experiencing mental health conditions at higher rates compared to college students nationally.**
  - High awareness and utilization of campus resources
  - Positive experiences among those using campus mental health resources
- Displaced students requesting more basic needs support is consistent with the literature and may be contributing to the mental health experiences:**
  - Stressors such as economic insecurity have been found to negatively impact the mental health of asylum-seeking students (Hartley et al., 2018; Bunn & Betancourt, 2022)
  - Requests for financial literacy are also aligned with the current literature as minoritized and first-generation students have been found to have lower financial literacy (Artavanis & Karra, 2020)
- Displaced students expressed lacking supplementary and tailored support in preparing for and finding employment post-graduation**
- Consistent with past findings, international and first-generation students were more likely to not have their needs met by career services (Chin, Blackburn Cohen, & Hora, 2018)**

## Conclusion

- Despite the higher prevalence of mental health conditions and negative impact among the displaced student population, the results from phase two do not support the need for a specific mental health intervention.**
- Participants expressed a need for more basic needs support, including financial literacy and resource connection**
- Replicate with a larger sample size in other academic and geographic locales.**

## Contact Us

**Corresponding Author:** Dr. Michael McNeil • mpmcneil@columbia.edu

### Authors:

McNeil, M. P., Mares, J., Zhao, M., Koss, K., Bourns, A., Gomez Carrasco, R. Y., Greene, C., Bernitz, M., & El-Sadr, W.