

Afghan Refugees in Buffalo



Please note that this is a rough-and-ready guide, and that these facts will not be applicable to all Afghan refugees that you meet.

Background

Afghanistan is a diverse country with many different ethnicities, often differentiated by language or religious beliefs. Many of the groups can also be found in the nations that border Afghanistan: Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China.¹ The most common ethnic group is the Pashtuns, who speak Pashto. Persian-speaking ethnicities include the Tajiks, Hazaras, and Aymaqs.² Turkic-speaking ethnicities include the Uzbeks and Turkmens.³ People from Afghanistan have been seeking asylum since the communist insurrection of 1978 and the subsequent civil war.

Afghan Refugees in Buffalo

- Since 2003, New York State has resettled 395 Afghan refugees, including 63 in 2013. Many of these have settled in Erie County.
- Many recently resettled individuals from Afghanistan have come with “SIV” status. Similar to refugee status, SIV indicates “Special Immigrant Visa”, made available to individuals who worked with the US Armed Forces in Afghanistan (often as a translator or interpreter).⁴

Cultural Attributes

Religious Traditions and Belief Systems

The majority of Afghans practice Islam. Specifically, 80% practice Sunni Islam and 19% practice Shi’a Islam. The other 1% of the populations practice other religions such as Christianity or Judaism.⁵ Differences between Sunni and Shi’a Islam trace back to arguments over who would take authority after the death of the prophet Muhammad. Nevertheless, both sects of Islam follow the Koran and the five pillars of Islam. Islamic law prohibits the consumption of alcohol and pork.

The Five Pillars of Islam

Shahadah: profession of faith in God

Salah: prayer towards Makkah, Islam's holiest city

Zakat: almsgiving, service to God

Sawm: fasting during the holy month of Ramadan

Hajj: the pilgrimage to Makkah

Social and Familial Values

Patriarchal family systems are common in Afghan culture. Men are traditionally the providers for the family, while women usually stay at home to cook, clean, raise children, and socialize only with female Afghan friends. Non-traditional families allow women to work and fill other roles. Marriage happens at young age and is often arranged. Restrictions on women (veiling of hands, feet, and faces, inability to leave the home or hold a job) were implemented as recently as 1992, with the growth of fundamentalist mujahideen groups and the Taliban. There is a great emphasis on family, especially respect and appreciation for elderly persons. Food is traditionally consumed communally, out of the same bowl; each person eating using his/her right hand.

Language, Literacy and Education

Thirty-one percent of Afghanistan’s population, aged six and above, are considered uneducated (women 36%, men 26%).⁶ About 50% of those considered educated have only primary or secondary school education. Children are often more literate than older generations. About 70% of children between the ages of 6 and 16 go to school, but upwards of 30% are still illiterate.

Dari and Pashto are the official languages of Afghanistan; Dari is commonly used in governmental administration and correspondence. Turkic speaking ethnicities, primarily Uzbek and Turkmen, comprise 11% of Afghans; most of these people are bilingual and also speak Dari. In fact, as 30 additional minor languages are spoken in Afghanistan, there is much bilingualism among Afghans.⁷

Employment Skills and Experience

Jobs in agriculture employ approximately 80% of working men in Afghanistan.⁸ Other working people hold jobs in the production of textiles, soap, furniture, shoes, fertilizer, cement, hand-woven carpets, natural gas, coal, and copper.

Medical Information

In Afghanistan, medical facilities are limited, and people travel long distances to receive medical treatment. Some may also rely on traditional practices that use herbal and animal products, or may employ both modern and traditional practices. Much faith is put into the healing powers of taking a pilgrimage to a shrine. Upon coming to the United States, refugees often experience language, economic, and occupational struggles.⁹ Refugees may also display symptoms of depression, psychosomatic symptoms, and posttraumatic stress disorder.

Resettlement Experiences

In working with refugees, it is important to bear in mind that symptoms of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) are common, due to past experiences such as torture, imprisonment, violence and interrogation. In addition, the loss or separation of families may add to the difficulties in adjusting to the new culture.

Two types of families find refuge in the United States: families headed by males and those headed by “women-at-risk” or “WAR”.¹⁰ Male-headed families that seek asylum often come to the United States because they are victims of state torture due to their political affiliation, race, religious beliefs, or membership in a particular group.

WAR refugees, who represent nearly 2/3 of the Afghan refugee population, are women (often single women or widows with small children) who fled Afghanistan after the Taliban began their regime; these women are at great risk of being oppressed because they do not have the protection of a male figure.¹¹

Upon arriving in the United States, refugees seek to be connected socially and economically. Most Afghan refugees live in Pakistan and other safe countries in the Middle East, and so it can be difficult to find support in the U.S. due to a lack of established communities. In Afghanistan, most people rely on public transport, motorcycles, and taxis, instead of cars. Refugees often

become familiar with the bus system or use bicycles for transportation. For decades there has been little opportunity for Afghans to participate in the global technology boom. But, in general, it is important not to make assumptions about an individual's level of competency with Western amenities, but rather to assess them individually.

Local Resources

Zaiqa Halal Restaurant

3054 Delaware Ave, Kenmore, NY
www.zaiqarestaurants.com (716) 887-7797
Restaurant serving Indian, Asian and Afghan cuisine.

WNY Muslim Association

4011 Bailey Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14226
WNYMuslims serves the Western New York community by creating awareness, encouraging diversity, and providing service. We empower Muslims and non-Muslims with the means to voice, connect, and contribute through creative media.

International Institute of Buffalo (IIB)

864 Delaware Ave, Buffalo, NY 14209
www.iibuff.org (716)883-1900
"The IIB seeks to strengthen Western New York by assisting refugees and immigrants to become independent, informed and contributing members of the community, and by promoting and supporting cultural competence, multiculturalism and global connectedness throughout the region." The IIB offers translation and interpretation services.

Catholic Charities (CC)

20 Herkimer St. Buffalo, NY 14213
www.ccwny.org (716) 842-0270
"Our Resettlement clients arrive in the United States through the auspices of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS). Pre- and post-arrival services such as assistance with housing, food, clothing and employment are provided."

Journey's End Refugee Services, Inc. (JERS)

2495 Main St #317, Buffalo, NY 14214
www.jersbuffalo.org (716) 882-4963
JERS "provides refugees with the resources and support they need to become successful, active and contributing members of the Western New York Community."

Jewish Family Services (JFS)

70 Barker St, Buffalo, NY 14209
www.jfsbuffalo.org (716) 883-1914
Jewish Family Service assists families new to the US during the difficult transition to the American way of life. JFS provides employment services, ESL training, assistance in acquiring health care and social support services as well as public school enrollment and mental health support.

Jericho Road Community Health Center

184 Barton St., Buffalo, NY 14213

www.jrm-buffalo.org (716)-348-3000

Jericho Road offers a variety of health services to low-income and refugee families. The services range from healthcare for new mothers, to general case management, support in filling out forms, ESL education or educational support for a range of ages.

Coordinated Refugee/Asylee Legal Services (The CRLS Project)

237 Main Street, Suite 1015, Buffalo, NY 14203

(716)853-3087

A collaboration of legal service providers to support immigrants and refugees with civil and immigration legal services.

NOTES

¹ "Afghanistan." Countries and Their Cultures. January 1, 2006. Accessed February 20, 2015.
<http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Afghanistan.html>.

² Id.

³ Id.

⁴ "Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans." Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans. January 1, 2015. Accessed February 12, 2015. <http://travel.state.gov/content/visas/english/immigrate/types/afghans-work-for-us.html>.

⁵ "Afghanistan." Countries and Their Cultures. January 1, 2006. Accessed February 20, 2015.
<http://www.everyculture.com/A-Bo/Afghanistan.html>.

⁶ Barbara Robson, Juliene Lipson, Farid Younos, Mariam Mehdi, The Cultural Orientation Resource Center, *The Afghans: Their History and Culture* (Washington D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 2002).

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Omidian, P.A., and J.G. Lipson. "Health Issues of Afghan Refugees in California." *Western Journal of Medicine* 157, no. 3 (1992): 271-75. Accessed December 1, 2014.
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1011275/>.

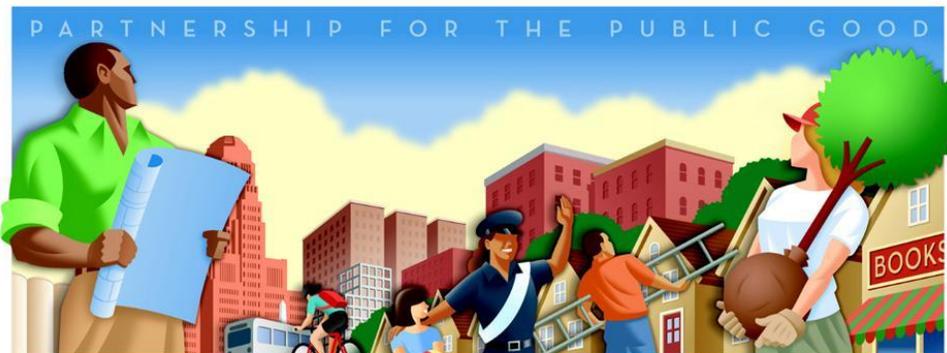
¹⁰ Barbara Robson, Juliene Lipson, Farid Younos, Mariam Mehdi, The Cultural Orientation Resource Center, *The Afghans: Their History and Culture* (Washington D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 2002).

¹¹ Id.

This fact sheet is one in a series of “snap shots” of Buffalo’s immigrant and refugee populations, made possible by a grant from the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. They are free of charge at www.ppgbuffalo.org/publications.

The fact sheets in the series are:

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- **Yemeni Immigrants in Western New York**
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