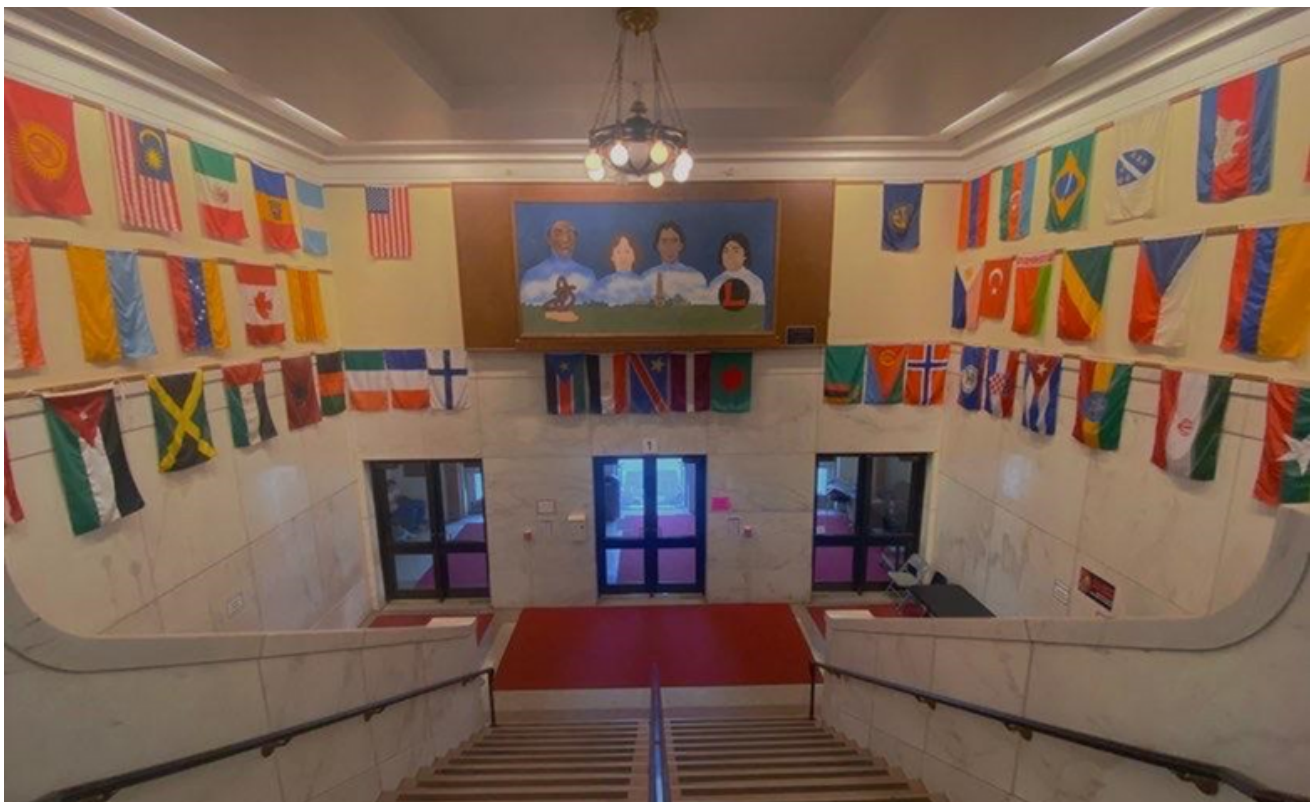


# Photovoice: Refugee & Immigrant Experiences of Mental Health

Brought to you by:  
4-H True Leaders in Equity



# Brought to you by: **4-H True Leaders in Equity**

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**4-H True Leaders in Equity is offered by National 4-H Council. Nebraska Extension's 2022 True Leaders in Equity engaged in health equity work through Well Connected Communities (WCC). Well Connected Communities is a national health and well-being initiative of the Cooperative Extension System—in partnership with National 4-H Council and support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)—that is working to ensure that life-long health and well-being are within everyone's reach.**

**Visit the Lancaster County Well Connected Community's website:  
<https://lancaster.unl.edu/wellconnectedcommunities>**

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# Photovoice: Immigrant & Refugee Experiences of Mental Health

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4-H True Leaders in Equity offered three youth leaders an opportunity to lead a project focused on increasing health equity. These leaders and Nebraska Extension Master Health Volunteers chose to implement a Photovoice project. Photovoice is a community-based, qualitative research method that uses images and captions to influence social change. Photovoice has been powerful in telling stories from youth who may not otherwise be listened to. The artistic creativity involved in Photovoice is allowing open community dialogue about equity.

The three youth project leaders are all refugees. They chose to focus the Photovoice project on young adult refugees, particularly the mental health impacts of 'dual navigation': the immigration of self while also assisting one's own family in the immigration process. Dual navigation can impact mental health. Families acculturate to the United States at different rates depending on the length of time spent in formative years in a particular culture. Varying acculturation rates can strain families and lead to parentification of youth. Parentification is when youth take on parent-type responsibilities in childhood and can be common among immigrant families. Mental health support can be lacking for immigrant and refugee youth and many parents do not understand the mental health strain on their children nor the importance of support for mental health.

To better understand the experiences of these immigrant and refugee young adults, this Photovoice project came to life. The project leaders desired to give the project participants an opportunity to process their experiences through Photovoice so they could gain awareness and verbalize their dual-navigation and the subsequent impacts on their mental health.

The Photovoice project engaged seven immigrant and refugee young adults, ages 17-24 in six sessions and explored the questions outlined in this report. This project and report is supported by National 4-H Council and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through 4-H True Leaders in Equity and Well Connected Communities.

Learn more



# What is Mental Health?

Mental health can be defined in many ways. The World Health Organization defines mental health as, "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community."

Though there is value in this technical definition of mental health, in this Photovoice project it was important to seek the definitions of mental health from the perspective of the immigrant and refugee participants.

The Well Connected Communities work in Lincoln, Nebraska has been seeking and listening to community voices, especially those who have experienced health inequities. These efforts are done to inform work and guide action toward real community needs of health equity - voiced by community members who experience them.

Discover through these young adults' images and captions the meaning of mental health as immigrants and refugees.



Photo by: Ghada



*Cacti are seen as dangerous plants, similar to mental health. Some people deal with their mental state by being mad. Cacti protect themselves with spines. Some people protect themselves with anger. Mental health can be a dangerous thing. Especially because it can lead to bad thoughts and bad things you want to do to yourself. You can't do anything about it because that's just them protecting themselves. Everyone needs their time to figure things out.*



*Mental health grows like a flower. Bad mental health can destroy you and make you feel sad all the time. Flowers start as beautiful, but if you don't take care of them right, they'll die. If you don't take care of your mental health right, you'll be destroyed like the flower.*



Photo by: Ghada

# Nebraska Extension | Well Connected Communities

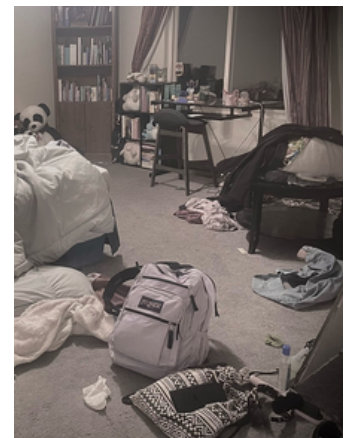
## What is Mental Health?



Like this dandelion, our parents think our mental health and seeing a therapist is useless - that it brings shame to the family. Older generations think that mental health is that you are going crazy and not normal. In reality mental health is something normal and nothing to be afraid of. We are all human and have feelings and we will grow our mental health.

**Photo by: Kassem**

This room can reflect our mental health at some points. There are times when we're physically and mentally exhausted where we can't process what's going on. We just need time to take a break, reflect and clean up our mind - just like the room. We need to have a reset. Sometimes in your mental state, you're closed in and you can't talk to other people about how you're feeling. This room looks like my mental state. Even though it's not the way I want it to be and it's not stable or organized, there are still happy moments and things that I enjoy. Not everything is causing my mental state to be bad.



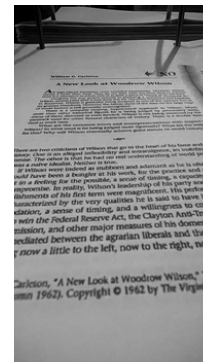
**Photo by: Anonymous**



Some people assume that mental health can be treated...assuming it can be treated by a therapist. But sometimes taking medication can relieve anxiety and stress. Medication can have side effects that are good and bad. If you're taking too much medication, that is bad for you and not taking it is still bad for you. It is best to follow the doctor's prescription.

**Photo by: Wesal**

As an immigrant, taking this [literature] course is hard for me since English is not my first language. I have immigrant parents that say 'we came to America for opportunities'. School is one of the biggest impacts on my mental health. I stress myself to keep acceptable grades to make my parents proud...to not be the disappointment of the family. School can especially be a struggle for immigrants because they feel pressure to do well to make their families proud.



**Photo by: Anonymous**

# How does being an immigrant/refugee impact mental health?



Photo by: Ghada

Immigrants and refugees have unique experiences that impact mental health. An immigrant is broadly defined as a person living in a country that is different than their birth country. According to the Council of Foreign Relations, refugees are "migrants seeking entry from a third country who are able to demonstrate that they have been persecuted, or have reason to fear persecution, on the basis of one of five "protected grounds": race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group." Participants share experiences migrating, being in refugee camps, fleeing persecution, and living in the United States and how it impacts their overall mental health.

“ A lot of [refugees] don't feel safe in [refugee camps]. Being there made me anxious because they didn't have security...There are a lot of fires and if one tent catches on fire, the whole row would be on fire. They would lose money, passports and everything they have, which isn't much, but it's all they have...It's dangerous there too...a bomb could happen at anytime. I am thankful to be here...and to have these opportunities...and speak two languages...I'm happy being in the U.S.



## Nebraska Extension | Well Connected Communities

# How does being an immigrant/refugee impact mental health?



**Photo by: Moo Hsee**

You don't really get to experience different kinds of traditions in your home country, but coming here, so much diversity...impacts social well-being. There are new people, cultures and traditions. As a refugee, you feel that you may not be accepted here and we don't really get to share those feelings with other people...because they don't know what it's like.

We can share this with people of color and people of different cultures and traditions. They know what it's like...they experience the hardship. Even though you're a refugee here, you don't go through the same thing as other refugees. Every immigrant is facing different things.



When you become a citizen and have these [documents], you have opportunity ...privilege... better job, better pay... scholarships and benefits. [Having citizenship] is hope for most immigrants. In this country nothing is impossible...with citizenship.

**Photo by: Kassem**

This image shows that as an immigrant I'm able to experience more. This picture was taken when I got out of a speech session. Being able to do speech is a privilege. Being able to be out at night and being less scared has helped my mental health because I know I'm safer in the U.S. than my birth place.



**Photo by: Anonymous**

## Nebraska Extension | Well Connected Communities

# How does being an immigrant/refugee impact mental health?

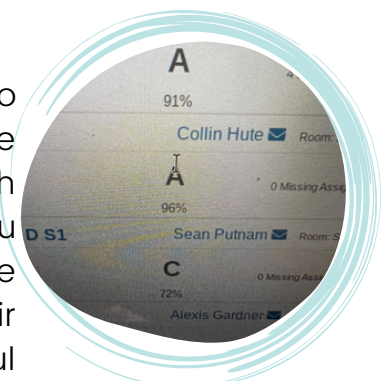


**Photo by: Mu Paw Wah**

I took this photo back in the refugee camp where we didn't have much food to eat. Here we don't have to worry about food being on the table. I hear stories from my mom - they didn't have food when they were growing up. I grew up different here...Medicaid, food stamps...we have a good system. (Participant "M")

It was really hard that first year...we had some family here helping us with money. If we didn't have their help, we would have begged for food. (Participant "S")

Back in refugee camps, some people didn't get to go to school because they couldn't afford it, and here we have the opportunity for education. It relates to mental health because your parents have high expectations for you since they couldn't afford school. If you get a bad grade its stressful. It makes you feel like you didn't reach their expectations and they won't be proud of you. I am grateful for school even though it is hard.



**Photo by: Mu Paw Wah**



**Photo by: Moo Hsee**

I took this photo because of the text, 'native plants'. Being an I/R from a foreign land and coming [here] with these native people that know the language and how to navigate, you just feel like an outcast...The people here think you're trying to steal from them. On the news they say, 'I/R are stealing our jobs'...they want to deport us. Before coming [here], you're hopeful for education, opportunity, freedom; but when when you get here your expectation drops. You become hopeless.

These people are trying to bring you down and you're just confused...you don't know the language or how to navigate because everything is so different.



# When youth help their families navigate a new culture, how does that impact mental health?



“ *It was my first time in an airport too, but I had to translate and explain things to my parents.*

*I think [helping our parents in a new country] just makes us more anxious, it's very bad for our mental health.*



**Photo by: Anonymous**

Based on their own personal experience, the leaders of the Photovoice project wanted to explore the mental health impacts of ‘dual navigation’. Dual navigation includes the process of the youth or young adult migrating and acculturating to a new country while also being the person in their family who helps their parents and other family members navigate that same country. The youth and young adults express the pressures and stress of taking on new roles and responsibilities in their families when they moved to a new country and learned the systems, laws and overall culture.

Photovoice participants express their experiences of dual navigation leading to parentification of youth. Participants express the pressures they felt when translating important documents for their families such as school materials, bills, notices, and the like.

The participants as well as the youth leaders express the need for support and resources for increased translation services for New Americans so that youth are not needed or expected to translate for their parents.

## Nebraska Extension | Well Connected Communities

# When youth help their families navigate a new culture, how does that impact mental health?



**Photo by: Anonymous**

I took this photo because this represents what it's like when you're navigating with your parents. It might lead to new opportunities, and a new door means a new opportunity.



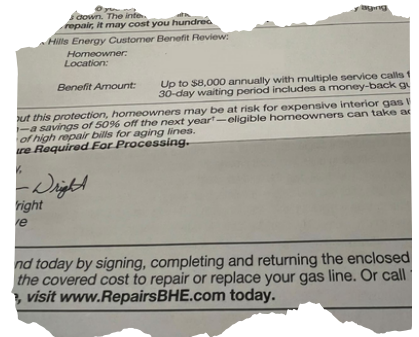
**Photo by: Ghada**

Sometimes I have to translate for my mom or sister, and it gets stressful because I forget certain words or don't know how to translate it...and my parent depends on me. It puts a lot of pressure on me, and it gets hurtful, and then I might feel like I'm not good enough.

A lot of people talk about their dreams of going to this college or that college. But for me, and other low-income families, we have to be more cautious about how big we dream.

[The image at left is of an event featuring Untold Migrant Stories, a project where youth craft and share their migrant stories with honor and celebration.]

Our parents didn't get to have this opportunity and didn't get to speak up about their [projects and ideas]. Now we're doing what they maybe wanted to do, or what they couldn't have done cause of maybe the language barrier, or because they weren't in America.



**Photo by: Mu Paw Wah**



**Photo by: Anonymous**

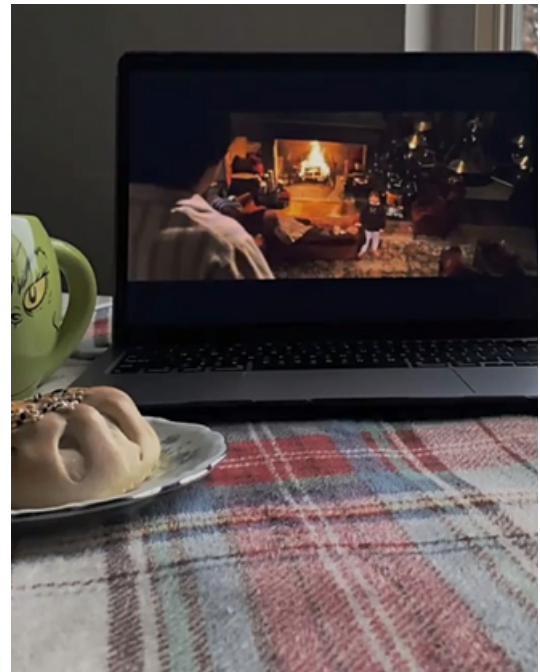
## Nebraska Extension | Well Connected Communities

# When youth help their families navigate a new culture, how does that impact mental health?

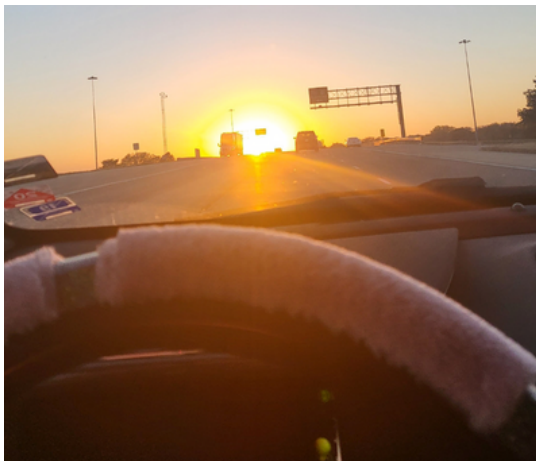
When you're the oldest, you have a lot of pressure. You have to translate for your family, you have to work, you have to pay bills, and do a lot of stuff [for your family]. You have to worry about your meals, getting to school, and getting good grades.

[Youth] can learn and absorb a new culture and understand it way better.

When you come to the United States, you need to be open because there's a lot of diversity. A youth helps a sibling transition to a new country: "I try to make [my younger sister] feel every tradition, like Thai, American, and everything, so we can like fit in with everyone and so she doesn't feel like she's missing anything.



**Photo by: Kassem**



**Photo by: Anonymous**

My dad is Syrian and my mom is Thai. Both of my parent travelled the world by themselves at a young age. My mom use to work as an optician and my dad, he's a traveling expert...But when they came to the USA they don't know anything, so we all had to start from zero.

All of us had to learn and start from zero. The rules, driving, schools, application, doctor appointments, and even food that we've never tried.

Our parents would tell us 'you're not like them you will not be like them'. The religion and culture [our parents] grew up in is different and they aren't accepting of anything different. It really impacted a lot of us. For a lot of immigrant kids, their parents always say, 'Don't be like them.' They always try to compare you to the American kids when you do something bad, because, like they have a certain idea of an American kid.

# What Supports Immigrant & Refugee Mental Health?



**Photo by: Anonymous**

Photovoice participant expressed many supports for their mental health. The most referenced mental health supports were:

- Connection
- Opportunity
- Support systems
- Creativity
- Food
- Music
- Safety
- Nature

“Friends with similar experiences who understand me support my mental health. As immigrants, we tend to find people that we're connected to. I'm more comfortable around my friends who are also immigrants - our connection is stronger because [that friend] will understand me more.”

This summary of the most important supports for immigrant and refugee youth mental health gives communities, organizations and schools opportunities to capitalize on current supports and assets. Funds and structures for these supports can be increased in addition to considering gaps in mental health support services that may need to be filled.

# What Supports Immigrant & Refugee Mental Health?

## CONNECTION



**Photo by: Kassem**

It's important to spend time with family and friend, being with, connected and open with them, and going to the fair and screaming and letting everything out.

My siblings have become a mental health support, because we're all going through this together, so I could relate with the people I love.



**Photo by: Anonymous**

This is my parents' garden. My dad always says that this garden helps him to not think about stuff and it helps his mental health. My mom and I usually help him too.

## OPPORTUNITY



**Photo by: Moo Hsee**

Being in the United States allows me opportunities that I normally wouldn't have experienced when I was in my home country.

We're regarded as foreigners and I feel like we don't really have a clear identity of who we are since we're in a new place. Joining other activities, like marching band, really helps me understand who I am as a person.

Marching band helped me understand that I enjoy music, and that music really supports my mental health. It helps with all my troubles, and it's going to help me be a better person overall.

# What Supports Immigrant & Refugee Mental Health?

## SUPPORT SYSTEMS

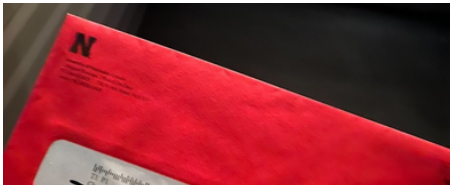


Photo by: Ghada

I'm thankful for Medicaid and my family not having to choose between a surgery and food or for me and my sister to work to pay medical bills.

I also got a scholarship from UNL and from my work. Scholarships are so important for refugees. I'm so grateful for the opportunity to go to college.

## CREATIVITY

Being creative with photography helps me when I'm feeling down. It helps with my mental health. It hard for me to express my thoughts and feelings, so I express them through photos. Photography helps me focus my thoughts and it helps create a balance for me.

I can be creative and relaxed. School is very stressful. It's hard for me to find and keep my identity in school. I feel trapped. I want to quit, give up. I also want to achieve something for myself. I want to make people proud. None of it comes easy.

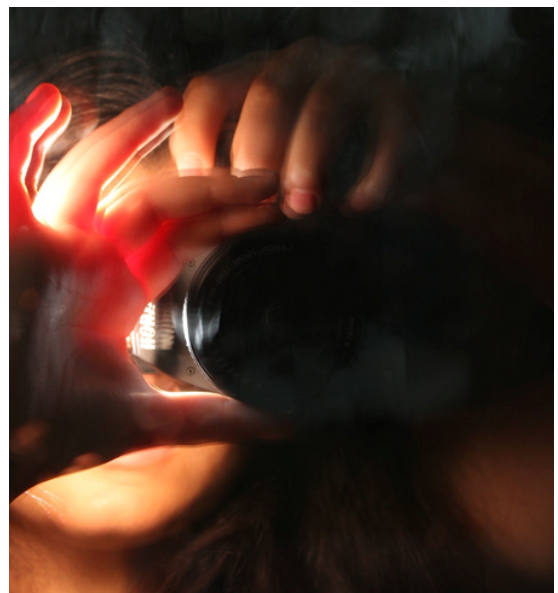


Photo by: Anonymous

## FOOD



Photo by: Wesal

Not having to worry about a meal supports mental health. When I was a kid, there was a very bad time and we all, as a family, shared one plate of food. I don't like to talk about it. It was a bad time.

Food always support my mental health because when I get sad, I eat. When I get mad, I eat. When am happy, I still eat.

Food is a way of connecting and repairing relationships, especially differences between parents and youth. Parent [in my culture] don't say sorry, they just bring you food.

# What Supports Immigrant & Refugee Mental Health?

## MUSIC



Photo by: Kassem

[Participant "K"] Every time I get depressed or overwhelmed, music is the best way...to release stress. Lyrics...have meaning that hits your heart in the spot...help with anxiety. [Music] helps to keep fighting and keep going.

[Participant "S"] There's different lyrics that kind of seem like they talk to us, and they, you know, just help us keep going. they had like supported me through like just when I'm feeling down, and I don't feel like contacting anyone cause like it's harder for me to like, tell people my problems, because I know that they have their problems as well. So music really helps me just kind of think and relax a little, because a lot of their lyrics are just very easy to connect to

## SAFETY

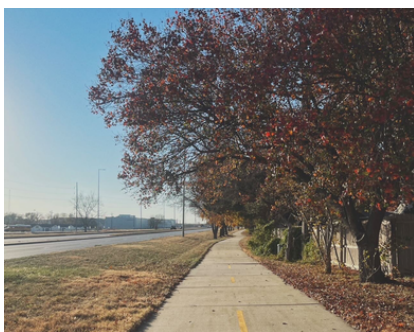
I really appreciate America. They are accepting people from all countries. If it wasn't for that, we wouldn't be here...it would be hard for us because of war. My parents chose to raise [in Lincoln], they could have chosen anywhere, but they chose this place. I think, Lincoln is a pretty safe place especially for culture.

If I didn't feel safe, I would be anxious all the time.



Photo by: Ghada

## NATURE



Nature helps me calm down and not think about anything else. It helps me get rid of all the bad thoughts and feel less stressed. It is important for mental health to take a break from your work and take a nice walk with your friends and family and being in nice scenery and nature.

Photo by: Mu Paw Wah

# What does access to mental health support mean to you?

The World Health Organization's definition of mental health emphasizes that mental health "is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in."

Mental health is a basic human right. Thus, it is critical that communities develop systems and structures that provide access to mental health support. These supports are "crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development", according to the World Health Organization. Based on this definition of mental health, access to mental health support is a topic worthy of consideration, planning and funding by community organizers, policy makers and persons of influence.

The Photovoice participants outline community-based supports that have been integral for their mental health as immigrants and refugees. Numerous community assets are described, including mental health supports embedded within school systems and nature-based supports constructed into the built environment of the community.

The participants also describe the need for social supports and relationships in order to have thriving mental health. These supports were described as the need to have close, trusting friendships as well as open, trust-based relationships with parents and family members. Additionally, communities that support diversity and allow for diverse individuals to connect with each other was described as an important structural support for mental health.



Photo by: Moo Hsee



*You can get mental health help at school without having to worry about your family's thoughts.*





## Nebraska Extension | Well Connected Communities

# What does access to mental health support mean to you?

### SCHOOL

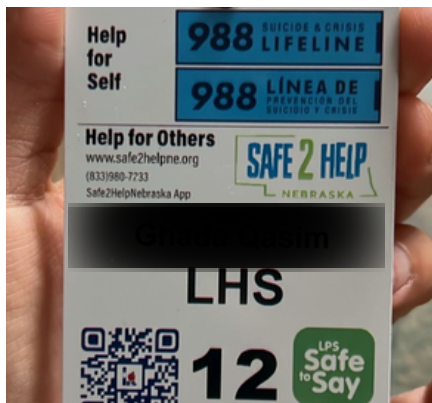


Photo by: Ghada

Lincoln High offers mental health supports - a lot of my friends and teachers are there for me to talk to about hard feeling or my mental health because I trust them. Every school has counselors that you can talk to. There is more awareness for mental health now but mental health used to have a negative stigma. [Participant w]The school counselor has helped me a lot in the past 4 years of high school, I have the best counselor in the whole world. She's the best and I tell her she's like my second mother - that's what we call her. We tell her every single detail in our life, and the past 4 years I went through depression because my friend passed away before finals. I didn't eat, I didn't sleep and was depressed. I couldn't do anything, but thank God I've passed my exam with A and B's. The school counselor helped me through that.

On the back of my student ID, there is a message with access to mental health information. Back in ninth grade, this wasn't on my ID. Now it's cool how they recognized mental health.

### EXTRA ACTIVITIES/4-H

One of the accesses that we have to mental health would definitely be this project.



### SPORTS



Photo by: Anonymous

I was really frustrated and stressed because of an activity at school and that affected my thinking. I think that's a part of mental health - if you're not able to control your thoughts and go through the day then it's really hard for you to focus. Tennis helps me get all my frustration out. I was able to talk to my friend about the problems I was having and I felt calmer. Tennis is an activity that gets you moving which flows more blood to your brain. You feel refreshed so you're able to continue on with your day with a fresh, clean plate.

## Nebraska Extension | Well Connected Communities

# What does access to mental health support mean to you?

### RELATIONSHIPS



Photo by: Ghada

Find someone that you trust the most to talk about your feelings. (Participant "W")

My family is there when I need them. Traveling takes my mind off of things. [In the United States] we have a little more money [than in the refugee camp] and time to travel as a family. (Participant "M")

The people that you are surrounded with, it very important that they ask what's going on - ask you how you are really doing. (Participant "S")

My parents are different than my friends' parents here in America. (Participant "G").

There's diversity [here]. We were born in separate cities, and thanks to all of us coming to America, we are all able to be all together. (Participant "G")

### NATURE

When I'm stressed and depressed, I like to go somewhere calm to relax, like the lake. It helps me focus on what is in front of my eyes. It takes away my problems at the moment. (Participant "L")

Weather affects your mood. (Participant "G")

[Nature] doesn't cost any money. It's just there. You can always appreciate it even if it's not a big moment. (Participant "M")



Photo by: Moo Hsee

# How has your mental health changed being an immigrant or refugee?



Photo by: Anonymous

Immigrants and refugees experience dramatic changes when shifting from one country and culture to another. These experiences of robust change can impact mental health. Migrants experience changes in daily living practices as well as the overarching cultural and social norms within which they now live.

Photovoice participants describe the impacts on their mental health when experiencing a shift in culture and people, including experiencing a lack of acceptance and racism.

Participants describe the mental health impacts of new technologies and daily structures of the United States. They also express gratitude for hope and opportunity.

PP

*It's really hard for you to stay connected to your culture. No matter how many friends you make here in the U.S., it's not like Iraq.*

*American culture is everywhere. It is so easy for someone to get influenced by it, even though some of the decisions that [Americans] make are not really 100% what our culture wants us to do.*

*I miss my family and community. I think that my mental health is a little bit more peaceful knowing that I can go visit and see family [in my birth country] that have been in my memories for a very long time.*

QQ

## Nebraska Extension | Well Connected Communities

# How has your mental health changed being an immigrant or refugee?



Just knowing that Lincoln High exists and that I'm able to get my education really benefits my mental health.

Coming to the U.S., the biggest thing I've been grateful for is education.

**Photo by: Anonymous**

Refugees have to travel across the world and change their whole lives. But they do it for hope.

There is hope and safety and security here. Parents don't have to be afraid of their kids not having a meal and their kids are gonna have a better opportunity for their life and future. Even if you have a 1% hope to achieve a goal, at least you have a percent to achieve it.

[Parents] want you to achieve, even though sometimes it is a lot of pressure on you.



**Photo by: Kassem**



**Photo by: Moo Hsee**

I have a lot of educational opportunities in American that I never expected to have as an immigrant. There is a program called 'Upward Bound' that helps first generation people get prepared for college. In my home country...I wouldn't go to college because my parents didn't go to college. In American, education is so important, it determines your job, career, everything. College fairs are more beneficial for immigrants, because our parents are usually too busy to take us and they don't understand how important having a college visit could be - it eases our mental stress because we are able to access the colleges without as much worry.

## Nebraska Extension | Well Connected Communities

# How has your mental health changed being an immigrant or refugee?

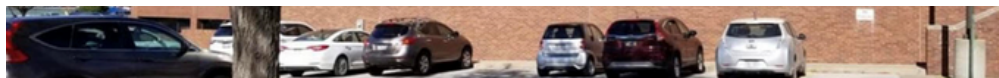
We know so much more about this culture than our parents. We are in between what they think is like right and what we have learned here. It's nice that we have connection as siblings where we're able to share our thoughts.

Being an immigrant, one of the things that we end up doing is finding friends that are in the same situation. These friendships are some of the best decisions that we've made because some of the friends become like sisters. We don't immigrate with our whole family, so you have to create new friendships

and sisterhoods. Our bonds exist because we relate to each others' hardships, we know that we have to stick together to get through and build our mental health together.



**Photo by: Anonymous**



**Photo by: Wesal**

The one thing I hate about the U.S. - I'm just going to say it - is racist people. Everywhere I go, there are racist people. They say, 'If you don't know how to speak English, just give me somebody that will understand what I'm saying.' I have to deal with people like that. He ruined my day. He ruined my everything. I don't tell my parents about this stuff. I couldn't go to my manager at work about it. I have a friend I can trust - talking to her and getting advice from her was the only thing I cared about.



**Photo by: Mu Paw Wah**

Since I came here, technology has changed my life. You can access anything from your phone or computer. Back in Thailand, we wouldn't have that and couldn't afford it. Technology is both good and bad for mental health. Social media can be bad thing - people can bully people online. But it can be good for learning, doing homework and accessing books and learning materials.

# Acknowledgements

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This project is possible thanks to the youth and young adults who were willing to share their experiences and perspectives. Community change, growth and acceptance are not possible without the type of openness and vulnerability displayed by the Photovoice participants.

The Photovoice project idea and instigation would not have been possible without the True Leaders in Equity youth leaders understanding their unique perspectives and volunteering their time to developing this project as a space for other immigrants and refugees to share their voices. Thanks to the dedication of Rose, Zikra and Naw for volunteering their time outside of nursing school and work to bring this project into existence, to see it through, and to continue to bring to light the unique perspectives of immigrants and refugees.

The opportunity for this project was shaped and formed by community leaders, sponsors, and organizations willing to help share the immigrant and refugee stories through Photovoice:

Thank you to Tracy Anderson, Nebraska Extension 4-H Educator and Natalie Wiebelhaus, Programs Manager with the Asian Community and Culture Center for attending the True Leaders in Equity Institute with the youth leaders and helping their project idea become a reality. Thank you to Dr. Lisa Franzen-Castle with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and principle investigator on the Well Connected Communities grant for championing this type of community change work. Thank you to Dr. Paul Springer with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for ensuring the the perspectives of the immigrant and refugee youth, along with community-voice based research processes are shared broadly with the academic community. Thank you Jean Ann Fischer for believing in Well Connected Communities from the beginning.

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# Nebraska Extension | Well Connected Communities

## Next Steps

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Immigrant and refugee young adults have taken steps to share their unique perspectives on mental health. Numerous hours have been spent collecting, processing and disseminating their voices. Now it is up to the community to listen, reflect and partner with immigrants and refugees to take positive action to equitably increase mental health supports.

To aid in reflection on the stories in this report, consider the following questions:

### What did you learn?

- How does being an immigrant or refugee impact mental health?
- How does being a youth in an immigrant or refugee family impact that youth?
- What are the mental health impacts to the youth who have to translate for their families?
- What mental health supports do these young adults rely on?

### What does this mean for the Lincoln community?

- What strengths and assets exist in Lincoln to support refugee youth that can be celebrated, continued and uplifted?
- What might need to change to best support refugee youth?
- What does this mean for you? What action can you take?



