

The health impacts of detaining asylum seekers: An Australian perspective

PROFESSOR SURESH SUNDRAM

Chair and Head, Department of Psychiatry, School of Clinical Sciences, Monash University

Director of Research, Mental Health Program, Monash Health

Director of Research, Cabrini Asylum Seeker and Refugee Health Hub, Cabrini Outreach

Disclosures

Prof. Sundram has received consulting fees, advisory board fees, research support, speakers honoraria or travel support from:

Government / Philanthropy: the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council, **Cabrini Health, Collier Charitable Fund, Flack Trust, One-in-Five Association, Phyllis Connor Memorial Trust, Psyche Foundation;**

Government / NGO: the **Australian Department of Home Affairs, the Australian Human Rights Commission, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.**

Pharma: AstraZeneca, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Eli Lilly, GlaxoSmithKline, Lundbeck, Otsuka, Pfizer, Roche, Sequirus, Servier.

Outline

Overview of the refugee and asylum seeker context in Australia

- ▶ Current numbers
- ▶ Policy context
- ▶ Offshore regional processing

Health impacts

- ▶ Physical and mental

Policy implications

- ▶ National and global

Impacts on society

The Australian context

- ▶ Australia offered **18,750** places in 2019-20 and filled **13,171**
- ▶ There are **~31,000** unauthorised (“illegal”) maritime arrivals + **~23,000** non-IMA
- ▶ There are **~4100** “transitory” persons processed in off-shore regional processing centres (Papua New Guinea and Nauru)
 - ▶ Currently **~230** are still off-shore
- ▶ Unauthorised maritime arrivals may only receive temporary protection
- ▶ “Transitory” persons will never be allowed to reside in Australia



Immigration detention

- ▶ Indefinite and mandatory – upheld by the High Court
- ▶ 1992 – onshore, remote, inhospitable
- ▶ 1999-2001 – overcrowded
- ▶ 2001-2007 – “Pacific solution I”
 - ▶ Opening of off-shore regional processing centres
- ▶ 2012-current – “Pacific solution II”





The Senate

Legal and Constitutional Affairs
References Committee

Serious allegations of abuse, self-harm and neglect of asylum seekers in relation to the Nauru Regional Processing Centre, and any like allegations in relation to the Manus Regional Processing Centre

April 2017

Serious allegations of abuse, self-harm and neglect of asylum seekers in relation to the Nauru Regional Processing Centre, and any like allegations in relation to the Manus Regional Processing Centre
Submission 49



SUBMISSION
BY THE
OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES
ON THE
INQUIRY INTO THE SERIOUS ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE, SELF-HARM AND NEGLECT OF ASYLUM-SEEKERS IN RELATION TO THE NAURU REGIONAL PROCESSING CENTRE, AND ANY LIKE ALLEGATIONS IN RELATION TO THE MANUS REGIONAL PROCESSING CENTRE
REFERRED TO
THE SENATE LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

THE LANCET

Volume 390 · Number 10112 · Pages 2532-2604 · December 9-15, 2017

www.thelancet.com

The mental health of refugees and asylum seekers on Manus Island



On Oct 31, 2017, the Governments of Australia and Papua New Guinea ended support for the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre, an Australian immigration detention facility on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. Instead, currently incomplete and substandard facilities without adequate service provision have been hastily constructed to accommodate people.¹ 379 refugees and asylum seekers refused to leave the centre stating fears for their security.² They managed to survive for several weeks with no provision of food and water or electricity and in poor hygienic circumstances. However, on Nov 23-24, 2017, the Papua New Guinea police went into the centre moving people out on buses to these incomplete facilities.³ The physical and mental health of these people is precarious.⁴

Since 2013, an estimated 3000 refugees and asylum seekers have been forcibly transferred by Australia to so-called offshore facilities in Papua New Guinea and Nauru where asylum claims of people who entered Australian territories by boat are processed.⁵ Around 1200 refugees and asylum seekers remain in Nauru and 900 in Papua New Guinea.⁶ The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has repeatedly spoken out against this practice that does not provide international protection to those who need it but is driven by the desire to deter future asylum seekers and deny any possibility of settlement in Australia.⁷

At the former detention facilities people had been placed for indefinite periods without external freedom of movement and no prospects for resettlement in Australia or family reunification.⁸ Such an environment is wholly inappropriate for the housing of refugees and asylum seekers, and their basic rights and

post-traumatic stress disorder.⁹ Diagnoses could not be confirmed against Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th Edition (DSM-IV) or International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) criteria and therefore cannot be seen as evidence of the presence of a true mental disorder but indicate high rates of psychological distress. Most interviewees (71%) had experienced torture or traumatic events before seeking asylum and most reported not having symptoms of mental disorders before detention.¹⁰ The UNHCR team concluded that the lengthy, arbitrary, and indefinite nature of immigration detention on Manus Island, together with hopelessness in the absence of durable settlement options, had eroded the resilience of the detainees, and made them vulnerable to mental illness.¹¹

In April, 2016, the Supreme Court of Papua New Guinea ruled that the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre was unconstitutional.¹² UNHCR has unequivocally advised the Governments of Australia and Papua New Guinea that comprehensive support services for refugees and asylum seekers are a fundamental precondition to the proper closure of the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre.¹³ The authorities of Papua New Guinea, one of the poorest countries in the region with a Human Development Index ranking of 154 out of 188,¹⁴ do not have the means and infrastructure to implement such guidance without support. In these circumstances, Australia's abrupt withdrawal from Manus Island Regional Processing Centre leaves a vulnerable population abandoned.¹⁵ Most refugees and asylum seekers in the centre did not want to go to the offered alternative accommodation on the island due to well founded fears that they would not be welcomed by the local population.¹⁶ Papua New Guinea



Published Online
November 23, 2017
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(17\)32532-8](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(17)32532-8)

Mental disorder in Manus Island RPC

	Total	Refugee Determination Status		PNG RPC Site				
		Refugee	Asylum seeker	Delta	Foxtrot	Mike	Oscar	Transit Centre
	%* (n)**							
PTSD	79.1 (140)	76.5 (104)	87.8 (36)	80.0 (48)	90.0 (27)	81.8 (9)	70.9 (39)	81.0 (17)
<i>Statistic</i>		$\chi^2(1)=1.81, p=0.18, n=177$		$\chi^2(4)=4.48, p=0.34, n=177$				
Depressive/Anxiety Disorder	88.4 (160)	87.1 (121)	92.9 (39)	93.4 (57)	90.3 (28)	90.9 (10)	87.5 (49)	72.7 (16)
<i>Statistic</i>		<i>Fisher's Exact</i> $p=0.41, n=181$		$\chi^2(4)=6.97, p=0.14, n=181$				
PTSD &/or Depressive/Anxiety Disorder	93.4 (169)	92.8 (129)	95.2 (40)	96.7 (59)	96.8 (30)	90.9 (10)	87.5 (49)	95.5 (21)
<i>Statistic</i>		<i>Fisher's Exact</i> $p=0.74, n=181$		$\chi^2(4)=5.04, p=0.28, n=181$				
<i>Symptom severity</i>	<i>Md (IQR)</i>							
Posttraumatic stress	26 (22-29)	26 (22-28)	28 (24-31.5)	25 (23-28)	28.5 (23.8-31.3)	26 (24-32)	26.5 (20-29)	24 (20-27)
<i>Statistic</i>		$U=2140, p=0.03, n=176$		$\chi^2(4)=7.54, p=0.11, n=176$				
Depression/Anxiety	41 (35.0-45.5)	40 (33-45)	44 (39.8-46)	41 (37.5-45)	44 (39-46)	45 (39-47)	37.5 (32.3-44.8)	39 (27.8-47)

UNHCR Submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee 12/11/16
Sundram and Ventevogel. Lancet (2017)

Self-harm and suicide in detention

- ▶ Self-harm rate 200 times mainstream population
- ▶ 260/1000 asylum seekers on Nauru
- ▶ Suicides n=9; including self-immolations



Hedrick K, et al. Lancet Public Health. 2019 Dec;4(12):e604.
Hedrick K, et al. SSM-Pop. Health. 2019 Aug; 100452
Australian Border Deaths Database accessed 21/09/21

Physical health repercussions of offshore regional processing

- ▶ Basic conditions, unfamiliar climate and environment
 - ▶ Limited access to water
- ▶ High rates of skin complaints; renal and bladder calculi; orthopaedic injuries, issues; chronic pain

Mental health repercussions of offshore regional processing

Qualitative survey in Australia of those with experience in OPC

- ▶ N=13 (n=9 female; mean age 37.9years, SD3.5, range 21-60)
- ▶ Iran n=4; Somalia n=2; Nepal n=2; Sri Lanka n=2; other n=3
- ▶ Christian n=3; Muslim n=4; Hindu n=4; other n=2
- ▶ Refugee (n=10 Nauru); AS n=3
- ▶ Time in Nauru mean=14.2 months, SD 11.1 (1-36 months)
- ▶ Time in Australia 55.3 months, SD 12.3 (28-64 months)
- ▶ Psychiatric illness: PTSD n=10; MDD n=9; Panic disorder n=3; OCD n=3
- ▶ No disorder n=2; 1 disorder n=2; 2 disorders n=6; 3 or more disorders n=3

The impacts

- ▶ *“In my country they torture your body but in Australia they kill your mind”*
- ▶ *“If you don’t want to give me a life, okay kill me and shoot me and I will die one time. Why are you killing my brain? Why are you cutting my heart, every single day? When somebody uses a knife and you die, and when somebody kill you every single day, kill your brain and your mind, it’s totally different. It is better you die one time.”*

Three key themes

1. How participants' home country experience and the expectation of protection led them to risk their life and seek safety in Australia,
2. The experience of deprivation, lack of agency, violence and dehumanisation after arrival, with the Australian government seen as the driving force, and
3. How these experiences led to feeling irreparably damaged.

“In my country they torture your body”

Risking one's life to find safety in Australia

- ▶ Participants described that they consciously risked their lives embarking on the dangerous boat journey to Australia because they felt there was no option to stay in their home country.
- ▶ Expectation of safety / refuge / asylum

“In Australia they kill your mind”

Material deprivation, lack of agency, dehumanisation, and violence

- ▶ ***“When we wanted to go to the toilet. Even for the toilet paper, what they do, took some of the papers and saying that ‘This is your paper. Cannot give more.’”***
- ▶ ***“We didn’t have enough time to take a shower. Maximum two minutes and there was not enough water. We might still have some shampoo on our head but they would just turn off the tap.”***
 - ▶ All participants stated that what they experienced after arriving in Australia was the opposite of what they expected; several of them expressed ongoing disbelief and bitterness. Their reports conveyed experiences of deprivation, lack of agency, violence, and dehumanisation.
- ▶ ***“They were treating us like animals, even less than animals.”***
 - ▶ The deprivation appeared to have an intentional component intentional?

“I’m completely destroyed - inside and outside”

The result

- ▶ ***“Now I don’t know, who am I? I lost myself. Because I’m not that person I was, that person who came to Australia. I was healthy. I was active. I had a hard time but I was happy. But now I can’t laugh, I can’t cry, I can’t work. I can’t study. I’m living in very dark place.”***
- ▶ Participants mentioned their loss of trust in other people, an inability to feel close to others, and a negative view of the world and themselves.
- ▶ Participants also reported that after their experience of detention, they felt that “they lost themselves”, had been “damaged” or “destroyed”:
- ▶ Hopeless
- ▶ Fear, depression, emotional numbness, sleeping problems, obsessive compulsive behaviours, irritability – or ongoing sadness related to their experiences in detention.

Current factors

- ▶ Protracted indefinite uncertainty; fear of refoulement
- ▶ Persistent threat of being returned to locked detention
- ▶ Family separation – no prospect of reunification
- ▶ Unemployment/no right to work/inability to use skills/ loss of skills
- ▶ Inability to engage in tertiary education or vocational training
- ▶ No English language classes; no cultural familiarisation
- ▶ Community detention with specified accommodation and schooling, restricting freedom of movement including curfews; minimal living allowance

Adults

- ▶ Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); major depression
- ▶ Suicidality – desperation and despair
- ▶ Decay and crumbling of hope, marriages and relationships
 - ▶ family violence; indifference to health; faith
- ▶ Paranoid persecutory psychosis
- ▶ Irreparable loss of functioning, skills, health
- ▶ Intergenerational transmission of trauma

Children

- ▶ Anxiety; major depressive; and post-traumatic stress disorders:
 - ▶ separation anxiety, school refusal, enuresis, encopresis, disrupted sleep and nightmares, insomnia, night terrors
- ▶ Disrupted attachment with significant parental mental illness
- ▶ Oppositional behaviour; attentional difficulties; screen-based numbing
- ▶ Learning delays especially expressive language delay
- ▶ Suicidal ideation, intent and attempts became increasingly prevalent as did food and fluid refusal. Children then withdrew ultimately requiring transfer to Australia for refeeding.
- ▶ Despair due to no educational or vocational opportunities for youth; impaired socialisation

Policy implications

- ▶ Comparable policy consideration e.g. Hungary, Denmark, UK, others
 - ▶ offshore regional processing; indefinite mandatory detention; and permanent barring of resettlement for all unauthorised entrants
- ▶ Other components of likely greater importance:
 - ▶ boat tow-backs; enhanced point of origin surveillance; and co-operation with transit country authorities to prevent departures
- ▶ Creation of a class that is not accorded the same status; an “other”, an alien.

Social impact

- ▶ Othering of the refugee and asylum seeker by removing them from sight through:
 - ▶ detention; remoteness; numbering them; minimising communication with the world; removing media contact; placing them outside the mainstream legal framework.
- ▶ Through alienation it becomes possible for injustice to be ultimately permissible.
- ▶ By prohibiting social inclusion their humanity can be reduced and they no longer need to be accorded the same moral value as an included member of society.
- ▶ The blurring between nation-state identity and human identity occurs and there is no need to transcend this with any overarching concept of humanity.

Conclusion

- ▶ National policies focussed on deterring asylum seekers based on principles of exclusion through the use of indefinite mandatory detention, offshore processing and prohibition of resettlement have profound impacts on the affected individuals and on the host community.
- ▶ The individual impacts are devastating:
 - ▶ mental disorders; psychological harm and corrosion of personal moral structures.
 - ▶ the impacts on society degrade human rights and consciously allow nation-state identity to replace humanity as the core defining notion of the individual.

Acknowledgments

- ▶ Refugees and asylum seekers and their families
- ▶ Cabrini Sisters, Cabrini Australia
- ▶ Cabrini Asylum Seeker and Refugee Health Hub
- ▶ Dr Deborah Hocking

