



The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues

Wednesday, February 8, 2017

**Statement of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI)  
on the Recent Executive Order Concerning Refugees, Visitors from Select Countries**

Humanity is experiencing an unprecedented level of large-scale mobility. In 2015, there were 244 million international migrants—people who were either foreign-born or foreign citizens of the place they now resided<sup>1</sup>. This number included over 65 million forcibly displaced people, 25 million of whom were refugees and asylum seekers forced to leave their home nations and seek refuge in other countries<sup>2</sup>. The causes of forced migration are multifold: political conflict and civil war, religious and ethnic persecution, economic crises, natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes, drought and famine, and environmental changes associated with a changing global climate. Whatever the reason, refugees face dire situations, fearing for their own lives and the lives of their families.

Although the vast majority of nations in the world have committed to promoting human rights within their own borders—as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>3</sup>—many migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are subject to serious harms in their home countries, in transit, and in the host countries where they seek residence. While in transit after having been displaced from their homes, they are exposed to a variety of risks, including: death; exploitation by traffickers; indefinite stays in camps where there is limited safety (especially for women and girls); exclusion from transit countries; and threats to the survival and well-being of children and families due to lack of employment, health, education, and other resources. Within host countries, they might experience complex social, religious, economic, and political challenges due to xenophobia, racism, and other forms of intolerance, which put their physical, mental, and social well-being at risk.

In the global context of refugees and migration more broadly, the United States of America has played a distinctive historical role. Even prior to the founding of our republic, the future United States was a destination for religious refugees who sought sanctuary, including Pilgrims and Huguenots. At the time of the American Revolution, the framers of the Declaration of Independence accused the British monarchy of unfairly restricting immigration. **As noted by our first president, George Washington, America was welcoming of people from all countries, “not only the opulent and respectable stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all nations and religions”<sup>4</sup>.**

Over our 241-year history, the United States has become the home of waves of refugees who arrived when famine, conflict, and persecution made staying in their home countries untenable. Although the country’s receptiveness for admitting refugees and migrants of diverse religious, racial/ethnic, and political identities has been uneven and limited in certain periods, the United States is known for

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2016). [International migration report 2015](#) (ST/ESA/SER.A/384).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2016). [Global trends: Forced migration in 2015](#).

<sup>3</sup> UN General Assembly. (1948). [Universal declaration of human rights](#) (217 [III] A). Paris.

<sup>4</sup> Deaux, K. (2006). A nation of immigrants: Living our legacy. *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(3), 633-651.

Chris Crandall, President    Wendy Williams, President-Elect    Susan Clayton, Past-President    Richard Wiener, Secretary-Treasurer  
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Executive Director: Susan Dudley

providing sanctuary for global populations fleeing war and other threats. This history has become an inextricable part of the American social identity, embodied in both the Statue of Liberty and modern-day immigration policy: For example, in 2015, the United States was first among industrialized nations in the number of refugees admitted (66,500), followed by Canada (20,000), and Australia (9,400)<sup>2</sup>.

People who found shelter in the United States have made immeasurable contributions to American society, providing labor and economic energy, spurring innovation, adding to the nation's cultural diversity and culinary flavors, and making great accomplishments in the arts, literature, and science. A number of influential social scientists in the United States were themselves refugees from conflicts in Europe and elsewhere, including Urie Bronfenbrenner, Kurt Koffka, and a former president of our organization, Kurt Lewin.

Given the historical and critical role of the United States as a global sanctuary, recent actions by the president are extremely disheartening. On January 27, 2017, the president signed an executive order ("Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States") that temporarily bans entry to the United States by all refugees, and indefinitely bans entry by all Syrian refugees. The order also temporarily bans entry to the United States by citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries. Putatively, this last ban denies sanctuary on the basis of nationality; implicitly, it denies sanctuary on the basis of religion.

While the purpose and function of this executive order is to bolster national security, its actual ramifications will likely weaken and negatively impact the nation on various levels. Research on risk factors for holding pro-radical views among Muslim Americans suggests that individuals who feel rejected and marginalized experience greater feelings of loss, which—when coupled with the experience of discrimination—is associated with increased support for radical groups<sup>5</sup>. As a result: **Policies that ban refugees, immigrants, and/or visitors from predominantly Muslim countries may actually function to promote pro-radical beliefs and attitudes both abroad and in the United States. When we undermine America's long tradition of "welcoming the stranger," we expose our nation to the very threats against which it is intended to protect.**

In contrast, refugees and immigrants who settle in the United States not only undermine radical terrorist group rhetoric and sentiment; they also make significant economic contributions to the nation. Research findings indicate that in 2011 alone, immigrants contributed approximately \$775 billion to the U.S. gross domestic product and started 28 percent of all new businesses<sup>6</sup>. From Maine to Florida, immigrants are bringing their expertise in agriculture and aquaculture to places where food production had declined and the labor force had shrunken, stimulating once-sluggish local economies<sup>7, 8</sup>.

Resettled refugees also benefit. They are no longer exposed to the trauma of war, gang violence, poverty, famine, and persecution that drove them from their countries of origin, and— while they do face challenges during migration and post-migration—refugees who resettle in the United States enjoy access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the very principles on which America was founded.

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<sup>5</sup> Lyons-Padilla, S., Gelfand, M. J., Mirahmadi, H., Farooq, M., & van Egmond, M. (2015). [Belonging nowhere: Marginalization & radicalization risk among Muslim immigrants](#). *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 1(2), 1-12.

<sup>6</sup> Fairlie, R. W. (2012). [Open for business: How immigrants are driving small business creation in the United States](#). The Partnership for a New American Economy.

<sup>7</sup> Silka, L. (2016, January 1). [What Maine can learn from how Lowell, Mass., welcomed immigrants, rebuilt its city](#). *Bangor Daily News*.

<sup>8</sup> Card, D. (1990). The impact of the Mariel Boatlift on the Miami labor market. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 43(2), 245-257.

The United States and its citizens gain additional benefits. The very act of opening our borders to individuals regardless of national origin, race/ethnicity, or religious affiliation sends the message that America values people regardless of background. As social science research has shown, such institutional signals can positively influence how individuals think about people from other groups. Americans from more advantaged backgrounds who receive this message celebrating America's multiculturalism show more positive attitudes toward and beliefs about disadvantaged groups and are more supportive of policies to reduce group-based disparities. Americans from less advantaged backgrounds who see that the United States government values all cultures show higher self-confidence and feel less powerless.<sup>9</sup>

The United Nations Summit in the fall of 2016 focused on addressing large movements of refugees and migrants. Member States of the United Nations, including the United States, made commitments to work together to ensure people-centered, sensitive, humane, and dignified approaches toward refugees and migrants consistent with their human rights and fundamental freedoms<sup>10</sup>. It is in this context—and in the context of social science research findings highlighted in this statement—that the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues strongly recommends that the executive order signed on January 27, 2017 (“Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States”) be rescinded or nullified. **When our nation welcomes refugees (and immigrants, and international visitors more generally) regardless of religion, race, or ethnicity, we reap important social and economic rewards, advance our country’s commitment to human rights, and undermine efforts to radicalize both those outside of our borders and those within our borders.**

Chris Crandall, Ph.D.  
President, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues

Wendy Williams, Ph.D.  
President-Elect, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues

Susan Clayton, Ph.D.  
Immediate Past President, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues

**About SPSSI.** Founded in 1936, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues is an association of 3,000 social scientists who share a common interest in research on the psychological aspects of important social and policy issues. To learn more about SPSSI, visit [www.spssi.org](http://www.spssi.org).

**Acknowledgements.** This statement was drafted by SPSSI UN/NGO Committee Member David Livert, Ph.D., and SPSSI UN/NGO Committee Interns Michelle Herrera, Ph.D. student, and Gina Roussos, Ph.D. student, in collaboration with SPSSI UN/NGO Committee Member Corann Okorodudu, Ph.D., SPSSI Policy Committee Chair Linda Silka, Ph.D., and SPSSI Policy Director Sarah Mancoll, M.S.

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<sup>9</sup> Sasaki, S. J., & Vorauer, J. D. (2013). Ignoring versus exploring differences between groups: Effects of salient color-blindness and multiculturalism on intergroup attitudes and behavior. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 7(4), 246-259.

<sup>10</sup> UN General Assembly (2016, October 3) [New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants : resolution/adopted by the General Assembly](#) (A/RES/71/1). New York.