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**The Perceptions of Afghan Male Special Immigrant Visa Recipients and Their Wives  
Regarding their Integration into the United States Society**

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*To my father and my brother, an SIV recipient, and to my family now spread across three continents... and to all Afghan refugees who have lived through the ups and downs of life and bravely carried on.*

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## **Abstract**

This thesis presents a look at the perceptions of male Afghan Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) recipients and their wives who resettled in Sacramento, California between 2014 and 2019 regarding their integration into U.S. society. These Special Immigrants worked as translators or in other roles with the U.S. military and U.S. organizations in Afghanistan. They had sufficient education and English language skills to enable them to do this get these roles, and they came to the U.S. with English language skills and familiarity with American culture. In contrast, the SIV recipients' wives come to the U.S. from a highly patriarchal society, typically with less education and no or very basic English language skills, and without the benefit of having worked with individuals from the U.S. The key argument in this thesis is that the challenges that the Afghan SIV recipients and their wives face after they arrive in the United States are the reason for their slow integration into American society. In addition, I argue that the challenges experienced have a greater impact on the wives, slowing their integration into U.S. society even more than their husbands. Recognizing the differential impact of the challenges faced is important in designing appropriate resettlement and integration programs and services for the men and for the women.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Decades of war and uncertainty forced millions of Afghans to leave their country in search of a more peaceful life for themselves and their families.<sup>1</sup> The majority of these refugees went to Iran and Pakistan, but some came to the United States. According to the American Community Survey, there were 94,726 foreign-born Afghans residing in the U.S. in 2016, which represents a thirty percent increase over the previous decade.<sup>2</sup> Many of these more recent refugees came to the U.S. under the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program.<sup>3</sup> This visa is provided to Afghan nationals (and their immediate families) who have put their lives at risk by working with the U.S. military or government in furthering war efforts in Afghanistan. These individuals have served either as translators or interpreters for the U.S. military forces or were employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government in the region.<sup>4</sup> This work is both timely and important, due to the number of Afghan SIV recipient and their spouses expected to arrive in the United States with the conclusion of the U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan.

Afghan SIV recipients are considered a special group of refugees as a result of having familiarity with the language and culture of the United States. It is believed that this group of refugees will be integrated into American society faster than other refugees who settle in the United States without these advantages. In this thesis, I argue that the Afghan SIV recipients face struggles that are similar to those faced by all refugees when it comes to integrating into

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Willner-Reid, "Afghanistan: Displacement Challenges in a Country on the Move," *Migration Policy Institute*, (2017): (n.p), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/afghanistan-displacement-challenges-country-move>

<sup>2</sup> Burki, Shahid Javed. "Expanding Afghan Diaspora in America," *The Express Tribune*, (2021): (n.p), <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2308938/expanding-afghan-diaspora-in-america>

<sup>3</sup> "The Afghan and Iraqi Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Program," *Justice for Immigrants*, (n.d): 2. <https://justiceforimmigrants.org/what-we-are-working-on/refugees/afghan-iraqi-special-immigrant-visa-siv-program/>.

<sup>4</sup> Bruno Andorra, "Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Programs," *Congressional Research Service*, (2020): 1, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/homesec/R43725.pdf>

American society. This thesis will examine the challenges that male Afghan SIV recipients and their wives who have chosen to live in Sacramento, California face. These challenges, which include lack of English language skills especially for women, the inculcated Afghan cultural values and expectations that differ greatly from American societal gender norms, were identified after I conducted interviews with Afghan SIV recipients and their wives. To help Afghan SIV recipients and their spouses to integrate faster and achieve better outcomes, the U.S. government, as well as the nonprofit governmental organizations that resettle this group of refugees, should reconsider some of their policies and programs and consider developing targeted programs to assist this particular group of refugees.

### *a. Overview of Thesis*

This thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter Two is divided into three sections. The first section provides empirical information on the origins of Special Immigrant Visa program. The second section focuses on the background and history of the Special Immigrant Visa program in the United States. And the third section summarizes the characteristics gleaned from the literature and census reports about Afghan immigrants and their resettlement in the U.S.

Chapter Three presents a review of the literature on integration. This review looks first at how integration has been defined for refugees and immigrants who came to the U.S. since 1975, which is when the concept of special was first used for immigrants, and then looks at what has been written about perceptions of immigrants and refugees about integration. Particular attention is paid to whether any previous work has addressed the needs of Afghan male and female immigrants to the U.S. separately. The fourth section focuses on the methodology used in the study, the selection of Sacramento, California for fieldwork, and the demographics of those interviewed.



Chapter Four reports the findings of this study. This chapter delves into the challenges faced by the SIV recipients, their wives, and their families. These include: the inadequate length of support that they receive from the government and nonprofit organizations; the sub-standard housing often in dangerous neighborhoods that is assigned upon arrival, which leads to isolation and selection of subsequent housing in Afghan neighborhoods; the level of English skills of the men, which hinders the men finding jobs that reflect their level of education and work experience prolonging their dependency on public assistance and length of time spent in sub-standard housing; the rudimentary or no English skills possessed by the women, who also lack university degrees, both of which hinder their ability to function in U.S. society; and the lack of efficient public transportation.

Chapter five discusses the implications and interrelatedness of my findings associated to integration and mental health of the male Afghan SIV recipient and their wives, considering issues/challenges common to both or specific to either the men or women, and presents key recommendations for how resettlement agencies and local governments can facilitate the integration of the Afghan male SIV recipient and their wives into U.S. society. Lastly, recommendations for further studies are given, including the need to track economic and social indicators for both the Afghan SIV recipients and their wives.

## Chapter Two: The Special Immigrant Visa

### *a. Origins of Special Immigrant Visas*

Before delving into details, it is important to understand the origin of the special immigrant visa category in U.S. immigration policy, and how this notion of special immigrants has evolved over time. The special immigrant classification was first evident during the Indochinese refugee crisis, which occurred after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.<sup>5</sup> The adjective ‘special’ was used at the end of this war for the first time, indicating that this visa was different from all other visas.<sup>6</sup> It was thought that because certain individuals had put themselves at risk as a result of assisting the U.S. military effort during the war, “they are entitled to ‘special’ benefits under the SIV program.”<sup>7</sup> This concept has been the underpinning for subsequent SIV programs for Afghanistan and Iraq.

Afghans SIV recipients are an specific group of immigrants. The reality in Afghanistan is that in most of the cases, individuals eligible for these visas are men because more men held roles that qualified them and their immediate family for these Special Immigrant Visas. The men who served as translators or interpreters speak English, and those who served in other roles have sufficient English language skills to enable them to work with Americans. However, the wives of these male SIV recipients typically come to the U.S. with no or rudimentary English language skills and without the benefit of having worked with Americans, meaning they lack familiarity with U.S. culture and customs. They have grown up in a patriarchal culture, and many of these

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Fix, et.al, “How are Refugees Faring? Integration at US and State Level,” *Migration Policy Institute*, (2017): 12.

[migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/TCM-Asylum-USRefugeeIntegration-FINAL.pdf](https://migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/TCM-Asylum-USRefugeeIntegration-FINAL.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Samir Ahmad Noory, “Vulnerable Afghan Immigrant’s Resettlement and Integration Challenges in Sacramento The Example of the PC-ICM Program,” *University of California Davis*, (2019): 27.

[https://communitydevelopment.ucdavis.edu/sites/g/files/dgvnsk1186/files/inline-files/Thesis%20Project\\_Samir%20Noory.pdf](https://communitydevelopment.ucdavis.edu/sites/g/files/dgvnsk1186/files/inline-files/Thesis%20Project_Samir%20Noory.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Samir Ahmad Noory, 28.

women have never worked outside their homes. Many have no education beyond high school. Therefore, while both the male Afghan SIV recipients and their wives face challenges integrating into American society, interviews reveal that the challenges the wives face are more pronounced and, in some case, specific to them as women.

**b. Background of the Special Immigrant Visa program in the United States**

The Special Immigrant Visa for Afghan and Iraqi individuals was first introduced in 2009. Prior to 2009, Indo-Chinese individuals were also given special visas to come to the United States. Michael Fix describes how under the Indochinese Refugee Migration and Assistance Act of 1975, about 807,321 refugees were resettled in the U.S. by 1985.<sup>8</sup> This resettlement consisted of two waves. Initially, the U.S. prioritized the resettlement of individuals who had ties with the military and were involved in politics.<sup>9</sup> This group was more educated, more skilled, and also familiar with Western culture, compared with individuals who came after 1978.<sup>10</sup> In the 1970s, the U.S. preferred to admit individuals based in their ranking of priority. Those with high priority included individuals with immediate family members who were citizens of the U.S., “Amerasian children, and, perhaps most significantly, current and former prisoners from re-education camps.”<sup>11</sup> Those who were a low priority of Indochinese immigrants were less skilled, from rural areas, and they had lived in refugee camps prior to resettling in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Fix, et.al, “How are Refugees Faring? Integration at US and State Level,” *Migration Policy Institute*, (2017): 6.

<sup>9</sup> Justin Huynh, “Tales of the Boat People: Comparing Refugee Resettlement in the Vietnamese and Syrian Refugee Crises,” *Columbia Human Rights Law Review* no 1, (2016): 202, <https://web-b-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=1&sid=38c4c5de-704c-49d2-af2e-9329c5fb634c%40pdc-v-sessmgr02>

<sup>10</sup> Ruben G. Rumbaut and John R. Weeks, “Fertility and Adaptation: Indochinese Refugees in the United States,” *The International Migration Review* no. 2, (1986): 429, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2546043>

<sup>11</sup> Robinson W. Courtland, “The Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese Refugees, 1989–1997: Sharing the Burden and Passing the Buck,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* no 3, (2004): 325, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/17.3.319>

<sup>12</sup> Courtland, “The Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese Refugees, 1989–1997: Sharing the Burden and Passing the Buck”, 429.

With the launch of the wars in Afghanistan (2001) and in Iraq (2003), the United States began employing Afghani and Iraqi individuals to work alongside American troops or organizations supporting the war effort. Beginning in 2006, with the National Defense Authorization Act, the U.S. began issuing a limited number of visas to Afghan and Iraqi individuals who served as translators for American troops under the 1059 SIV program.<sup>13</sup> A second SIV program exclusively for Iraqi nationals was created in 2008 and closed to new applications in 2014.<sup>14</sup> The third and largest SIV program was created for Afghans under Section 602 of the 2009 Afghan Allies Protection Act.<sup>15</sup> This act included an additional 2,500 visas on top of the 1,500 visas for five years that had been previously authorized.<sup>16</sup> In 2014, 2015, and 2016 extensions of the visa program were passed making 8,500 more visas available.<sup>17</sup>

There are two classifications under the Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) category, one for individuals who have worked as translators or interpreters and the other for individuals who were employed by or worked on behalf of the U.S. government or the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> Similar to the first group of Indochinese special immigrants, those who are eligible under the SIV program are mostly educated, they have worked for the U.S. military or government and for this reason might be persecuted if they remain in their homeland.<sup>19</sup> Prior to 2021, Afghan SIV recipients came directly to the U.S. from Afghanistan, rather than residing in refugee camps or countries where they could access U.S. embassies

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<sup>13</sup> “Special Immigrant Visa Program – Background.” *International Refugee Assistance Project. News and Resources*, (n.d), (n.p), <https://refugeerights.org/news-resources/special-immigrant-visa-programs-background/>

<sup>14</sup> “Special Immigrant Visa Program – Background,” (<https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/Afghan-SIV-Fact-Sheet-Dec-2016.pdf>)

<sup>15</sup> “Special Immigrant Visa Program – Background”.

<sup>16</sup> “Special Immigrant Visa Program – Background”.

<sup>17</sup> “Special Immigrant Visa Program – Background”.

<sup>18</sup> Bruno Andorra, “Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Programs,” *Congressional Research Service*, (2020): 3, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/homsec/R43725.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Fix Michael et.al, “How are Refugees Faring? Integration at US and State Level,” (2017): 14.

prior to arrival. They were eligible to become lawful permanent residents (LPR, known as green card holder) of the U.S. within weeks of arriving in the U.S. and naturalized citizens five years later.<sup>20</sup>

While the process of obtaining a special immigrant visa was mandated by law to take nine months or less, the actual processing time for the four stages and fourteen steps involved was longer.<sup>21</sup> This was true especially during the Trump Administration, which deliberately “broke the SIV processing system in 2017”; this resulted in a substantial backlog of SIV cases, along with typical processing times of more than two years.<sup>22</sup> Processing times as long as three and a half years were reported.<sup>23</sup> This backlog was compounded beginning in March 2020 when, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan canceled or postponed the interviews required of SIV applicants.<sup>24</sup> Exact numbers of SIV applicants caught up in these backlogs are not yet available.

Upon taking office in 2021, the Biden Administration immediately initiated efforts to expedite the process of reviewing and accepting SIV applicants to coincide with the final U.S. troop drawdown. Operation Allies Refuge was undertaken by the U.S. military beginning in July 2021 to include evacuation of SIV applicants.<sup>25</sup> Congress passed the Averting Loss of Life and

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<sup>20</sup> “Special Immigrant Visa Program – Background.” *International Refugee Assistance Project. New and Resources*, (n.d), (n.p), <https://refugeerights.org/news-resources/special-immigrant-visa-programs-backgrounder>

<sup>21</sup> “Joint Department of State/Department of Homeland Security Report: Status of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Program,” *Travel.State.Gov*, (n.d): 1, [https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/SIVs/Afghan\\_SIV\\_Report\\_September2017.pdf](https://travel.state.gov/content/dam/visas/SIVs/Afghan_SIV_Report_September2017.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Mark C. Storella, “How Trump Broke the System that Offers Protection to Afghan Allies”, *The Hill*, (2021): (n.p), <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/570076-how-trump-broke-the-system-that-offers-protection-to-afghan-allies>

<sup>23</sup> Alisa Chang, Casey Morell, Amy Isackson, “U.S. Special Immigrant Visa Program Facing Criticism Over Slow Speed,” *NPR*, (2021): (n.p), <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/16/1028198510/u-s-special-immigrant-visa-program-faces-criticism-over-slow-speed>

<sup>24</sup> Glenn Kessler, “Jake Sullivan Bungles a Line About Visa Processing for Afghans,” *The Washington Post*, (2021): (n.p), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/08/24/jake-sullivan-bungles-line-about-visa-processing-afghans/>

<sup>25</sup> “Fact Sheet: Department of Defense Support in the Continental United States to Operation Allies Refugee.” *US Northern Command Public Affairs*, (n.d): (n.p),

Injury by Expediting SIVs Act (ALLIES Act) that same month adding 8,000 more visas and streamlining the process for obtaining the visas.<sup>26</sup> This brings the total number of visas allocated for Afghan Special Immigrants to 34,500 since December 19, 2014.<sup>27</sup>

Regardless of the efforts to expedite the process, the process of SIV is still slow for several reasons. There exists a backlog of applications and in 2021 the Department of State has articulated that it will take more than two years for all the applications that are in the pipeline to get processed.<sup>28</sup> Table 1 shows the actual number of Afghan Special Immigrant visas granted and the year these visas were issued.<sup>29</sup> As of March of 2021, 20,829 visas had been granted.

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<https://www.northcom.mil/Newsroom/News/Article/Article/2712865/fact-sheet-department-of-defense-support-in-the-continental-united-states-to-op/>

<sup>26</sup> Daniel F. Runde. Elena Mendez Leal, “The Case for Expediting Special Immigrant Visas Amid Transition of Power in Afghanistan,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, (n.d): (n.p), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/case-expediting-special-immigrant-visas-amid-transition-power-afghanistan>

<sup>27</sup> “Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans – Who Were Employed by/on Behalf of the US Government,” *Travel.State.Gov. US Department of State*, (n.d): (n.p). <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/special-immg-visa-afghans-employed-us-gov.html>

<sup>28</sup> “U.S. Announcement of Afghan SIV Withdrawal Leaves more Questions than Answers; Population Remains in Risk,” *International Rescue Committee*, (2021): (n.p), <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/irc-us-announcement-afghan-siv-withdrawal-leaves-more-questions-answers-populations>

<sup>29</sup> “Iraqi and Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Programs,” *Congressional Research Service*, (2021): 29, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43725/17#page=32>

**Table A-4. Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans Who Worked for the U.S. Government**

Fiscal Year	Principals	Dependents	Total
2008	199	195	394
2009	262	366	628
2010	7	36	43
2011	3	28	31
2012	63	62	125
2013	652	846	1,498
2014	3,441	5,666	9,107
2015	2,301	4,411	6,712
2016	3,626	8,460	12,086
2017	4,120	12,050	16,170
2018	1,649	5,585	7,234
2019	2,347	7,394	9,741
2020	1,799	6,024	7,823
2021 <sup>a</sup>	360	1,676	2,036
<b>Totals</b>	<b>20,829</b>	<b>52,799</b>	<b>73,628</b>

Table 1: Special Immigrant Visas awarded to Afghans (2008 through March of 2021).

***c. Characteristics of the Afghan Special Immigrant Visa Recipients (2008-2020)***

***Number of Afghan Immigrants:***

By 2020, over 18,000 Afghan SIV recipients and 45,000 immediate family members had received U.S. visas and traveled to the United States.<sup>30</sup> While many more Afghan SIVs are being processed in 2021, I will focus on those who came prior to 2021. As indicated in Figure 1, in

<sup>30</sup> Noah Coburn, “The Costs of Working with Americans in Afghanistan: The United States’ Broken Special Immigrant Visa Process,” *The Costs of War*, (2021): 1, [https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Costs%20of%20Working%20with%20Americans\\_Coburn\\_Costs%20of%20War.pdf](https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Costs%20of%20Working%20with%20Americans_Coburn_Costs%20of%20War.pdf)

2019, there were 132,000 Afghans living in the U.S.<sup>31</sup> Sixty percent of these individuals arrived after 2010.

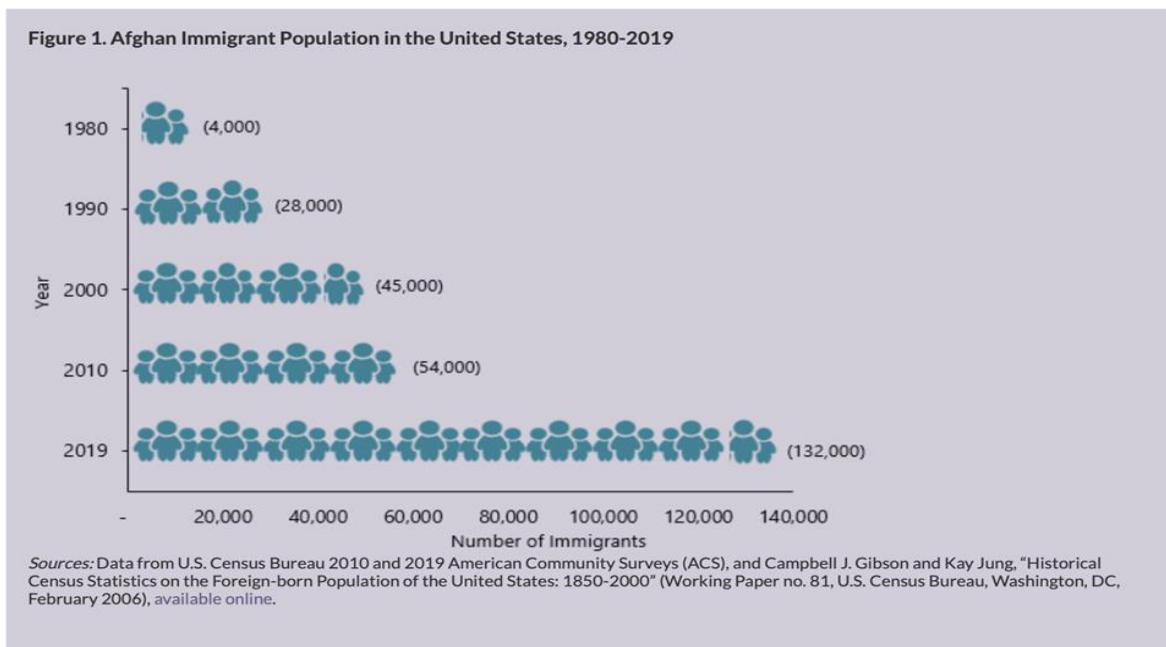


Figure 1: Afghan Immigrant Population in the United States (1980-2019)

The number of Afghan immigrants in the United States began to increase after 2006 when the Afghan SIV program was created.<sup>32</sup> This increase was more rapid after 2009, when the SIV program was expanded.<sup>33</sup> An average of 2,300 green cards were distributed to Afghans between 2001 and 2013. This number increased to an average of 12,300 green cards between 2014-2019.<sup>34</sup> The majority of Afghan immigrants individuals arriving to the U.S. after 2006 became permanent residents who came as SIV holders.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Jeanna Batalova, "Afghan Immigrants in the United States," *Migration Policy Institute*, (2021): (n.p), <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/afghan-immigrants-united-states>

<sup>32</sup> Jeanna Batalova, "Afghan Immigrants in the United States," *Migration Policy Institute*, (2021): (n.p),

<sup>33</sup> Batalova, "Afghan Immigrants in the United States," *Migration Policy Institute*. 2021: (n.p).

<sup>34</sup> Batalova, "Afghan Immigrants in the United States," (n.p).

<sup>35</sup> Batalova, (n.p).



### ***Locations for Resettlement:***

Immigrants from Afghanistan mainly settled in California (41 percent), Virginia (18 percent), and New York and Texas (each 7 percent).<sup>36</sup> The top four counties that are home to Afghan immigrants are Sacramento County in California, Fairfax County in Virginia, Alameda County in California, and Contra Costa County in California.<sup>37</sup> Prior to August 2021, the US Department of State allowed resettlement agencies to match Afghan SIV recipients to a location considering the visa holder’s biographic information and stated preferences by the SIV recipient.<sup>38</sup> Resettlement agencies look at the cost of living, availability of housing, employment opportunities, and available resettlement services and support.<sup>39</sup> The SIV applicant can list a person or family near whom they want to resettle.<sup>40</sup> As shown in Figure 2, having specific family members or friends is one of the main reasons that SIV recipients end up concentrated in certain states and counties. Many of the recent Afghan SIV recipients have gone to communities in California, Virginia, Texas, and New York.

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<sup>36</sup> Batalova. (n.p).

<sup>37</sup> Batalova. (n.p).

<sup>38</sup> Batalova. (n.p).

<sup>39</sup> “Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans and Iraqis— Resettlement Options,” *Travel.State.Gov. US Department of State*, (n.d): (n.p), <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/special-immigrant-visas-for-afghans-and-iraqis-resettlement-options.html>

<sup>40</sup> “Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans and Iraqis— Resettlement Options,” *Travel.State.Gov. US Department of State*, (n.p).

Figure 2. Top States of Residence for Afghan Immigrants in the United States, 2015-19

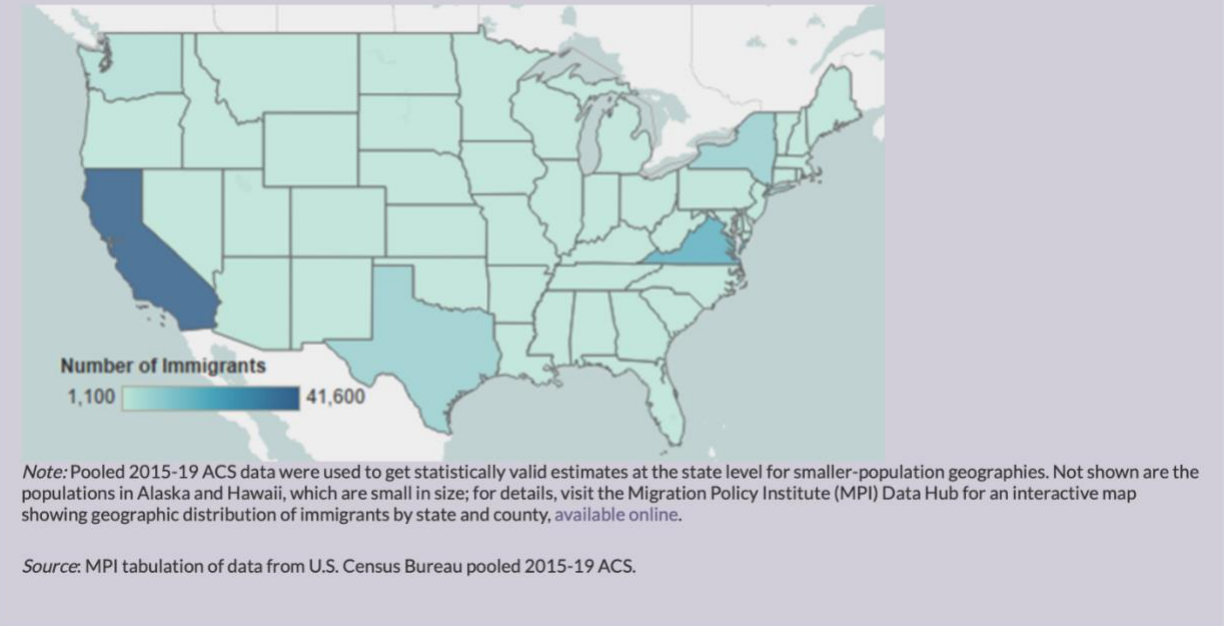


Figure 2: Map showing populations of Afghan immigrants in the U.S. (2015-2019)

### ***General Characteristics of Afghan Immigrants in U.S:***

While data is not available to delineate the characteristics of the SIV population from the general Afghan immigrant population in the U.S., the characteristics of Afghan immigrants, in general, provide a useful picture of this population. Overall, Afghan immigrants are less proficient in English when compared to other foreign-born population in the U.S.<sup>41</sup> English proficiency among Afghans also depends on gender and period of arrival. For example, women and girls are less likely to be proficient in English as compared to men.<sup>42</sup> But generally, Afghan

<sup>41</sup> “Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans and Iraqis—Resettlement Options,” (n.p).

<sup>42</sup> “Special Immigrant Visas for Afghans and Iraqis—Resettlement Options,” (n.p).

immigrants are less likely to be proficient in English compared to other foreign-born population.<sup>43</sup>

The language spoken most commonly by Afghan immigrants at home is one of the dialects of Persian (62 percent either Farsi or Dari), with Pashto being spoken by 25 percent.<sup>44</sup> Language tends to align with religion, in which case Persian speakers tend to be Shia Muslim (and ethnically Hazara) and Pashto speakers Sunni Muslim (and ethnically Pashtuns, the majority of Afghans). Among immigrants who arrived since 2010, 34 percent speak Pashto and 57 percent speak a Persian dialect (Farsi 31 percent and Dari 26 percent).<sup>45</sup> Afghan immigrants were younger than other foreign-born populations in the U.S. and also younger than natural-born citizens.<sup>46</sup> Afghans have lower educational attainment than other foreign-born populations in the U.S., but educational attainment among Afghan men is higher than among Afghan women.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Batalova, (n.p).

<sup>44</sup> Batalova, (n.p).

<sup>45</sup> Batalova, (n.p).

<sup>46</sup> Batalova, (n.p).

<sup>47</sup> Afghans in the labor force are in less skilled jobs as compared to all immigrants. “Afghan immigrants who were employed were much more likely to be in production, transportation, and material moving occupation, followed by sales and office occupations” Batalova.

## Chapter Three: Literature Review and Methodology

### *a. Literature Review: Integration*

Because integration is one of the most important concepts needed to understand the findings presented in this thesis, I will start with examining how integration is defined and at the process of integration. To better understand the process of integration, Ager and Strang proposed a comprehensive model that identifies four levels of integration. The first level is called *markers*, under which falls housing, health, education, and employment.<sup>48</sup> These are also called the functional aspects of integration.<sup>49</sup> The second level is *social connections*, which include social bonds, social links, and social bridges.<sup>50</sup> These are focused on the social relationships of the immigrants.<sup>51</sup> The third level is *facilitators*, which includes language, cultural skills, safety, and stability.<sup>52</sup> The last level is called *foundation*, which includes rights and citizenship.<sup>53</sup> This model is an excellent example of how multidimensional integration is and how each of the components of integration (represented by these four levels) are unique, yet interrelated and interdependent. For example, if you don't have good quality functional aspects to begin with then it hinders the development of all the other levels of integration. Through the study of male Afghan SIV recipients and their wives that is reported in this thesis, all of the levels of integration mentioned above are easily identifiable, as are the challenges that these refugees face at each level.

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<sup>48</sup> Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, (2008): 169, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016>

<sup>49</sup> Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, (2008): 169.

<sup>50</sup> Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," 177.

<sup>51</sup> Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, 177.

<sup>52</sup> Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, 181.

<sup>53</sup> Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, 173.

There is no universal definition for integration, in fact, different scholars define integration by using different terms.<sup>54</sup> Integration is complex with a multidimensional concept that includes economic, educational, health, and social contexts.<sup>55</sup> In reality, the process of integration is unique to each group of immigrants and to their communities, which is why there is no simple definition of integration.<sup>56</sup> The process of integration is not only different for each group, but it is different for each individual refugee and immigrant who comes to a new country. Each refugee/immigrant brings with them their own set of skills, and these skills will determine how each immigrant will interact with the economic, educational, and social contexts they will experience in the community where they resettle. These contexts are the main components of integration and thus the concept of community comes into play. Understanding the concept of integration and how it has been used by different scholars is key to helping the Afghan SIV recipients integrate into American society.

A complicating factor that impacts the process of integration is the characteristics of the host community where immigrants settle. Tomas Jiménez argues that integration is a process through which refugees and the communities where they settle adapt to one another.<sup>57</sup> The location where refugees settle consists of the individuals who live in the community.<sup>58</sup> In fact, integration is the interaction of newcomers and the host country, and these interactions produce measurable social,

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<sup>54</sup> Landecker Wener S., “Types of Integration and Their Measurement,” *The University of Chicago no. 4*, (1951): 332, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2771696>

<sup>55</sup> Mihaela Robila, “Refugees and Social Integration in Europe,” *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Social Policy and Development*, (2018): 2, [https://www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2018/05/Robila\\_EGM\\_2018.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2018/05/Robila_EGM_2018.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> Tomas R. Jiménez argues that even the process of integration has been different for various waves of immigrants entering the United States. While measures of integration focus on “socioeconomics attainment, political involvement, social interactions,” the components of integration have changed over time. For contemporary immigrants, language, socioeconomic attainment, citizenship and political participation, residential locale, and social life are all considered necessary parts of integration.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Tomas R Jiménez, “Immigrants in the United States: How Well Are They Integrating into Society?” *Migration Policy Institute*, (2011): 4, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/integration-Jimenez.pdf>

<sup>58</sup> Tomas R Jiménez, “Immigrants in the United States: How Well Are They Integrating into Society?” 4.

political and economic patterns that reflect the degree of integration.<sup>59</sup> Jiménez emphasizes that integration is the everyday interaction that takes place between new immigrants and the community where they live.<sup>60</sup> Thus, refugees with language skills, in this case English, can be expected to integrate into a community faster than refugees who do not have the language skills to facilitate this interaction with the community. In the case of male Afghan SIV recipients, they have English language skills, as a result of working with the U.S. military or U.S. affiliated organizations, but their skills are sometimes not sufficiently advanced to merit them employment at the level of their education and experience. Their wives have no or rudimentary English language skills.

Another scholar, Mihaela Robila, expands on this idea and argues that integration is what happens when refugees engage in activities with people from different groups (communities) while maintaining their original culture.<sup>61</sup> When an immigrant family moves to a new country, various members of that family tend to engage in different activities with various groups of people based on their skills and cultural experiences. This is very pronounced for Afghan SIV recipients (all men), their wives, and their children. The Afghan SIV recipients themselves speak English, know how to drive, and have worked outside the home with Americans, for these reasons, they end up interacting with various groups of people through work and other outside activities based on these skills. In contrast, their wives typically do not know English because they have been at home taking care of children, they do not know how to drive, have not worked outside the home, and have grown up in a more restrictive patriarchal society. This set of skills and experiences results in a different and often a much more limited set of interactions with those

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<sup>59</sup> Tomas R Jiménez, “Immigrants in the United States: How Well Are They Integrating into Society?” 4.

<sup>60</sup> Tomas R Jiménez, “Immigrants in the United States: How Well Are They Integrating into Society?” 4.

<sup>61</sup> Mihaela Robila, “Refugees and Social Integration in Europe,” *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Social Policy and Development*, (2018): 2.

This situation tends to isolate the wives, who get left behind in this process of integration and who as a result tend to hold tighter to their own culture.

Thomàs R. Jiménez discusses language skills, socioeconomic integration, residential integration, political integration, and social integration.<sup>62</sup> According to Jiménez, knowing the language – English in this case – helps immigrants integrate faster because it is through speaking the language that they will be able to fully participate in American society.<sup>63</sup> Some groups of immigrants do not know how to speak English when they come to the United States. This is one of the major problems that the wives of the Afghan SIV recipients face, making it much more difficult for this subgroup of Afghan immigrants to be able to integrate. To many, understanding English is considered an important component of national identity.<sup>64</sup>

Jiménez observes that residential integration is also important when it comes to integration. Residential integration examines where people live in relation to one another.<sup>65</sup> This again brings the notion of community into play. It is important for refugees to move to a place where they feel that they belong. Settling in communities presents a dilemma. One way to make refugees feel like they belong is for them to settle where they are surrounded by people who share similar cultures and values, but integration takes place more quickly when refugees live with individuals who are not from the same national origin. So, on one hand, it is good and comforting for refugees to live in a community that they can relate to, but on the other hand, this hinders their ability to learn English and the skills necessary to fully integrate into American society. In the case of the Afghan SIV recipients and their families, they often choose to settle where there are other Afghans. They have been drawn to the existing Afghan communities like in California,

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<sup>62</sup> Tomas R Jiménez, “Immigrants in the United States: How Well Are They Integrating into Society?” 6.

<sup>63</sup> Jiménez, 6.

<sup>64</sup> Jiménez, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Jiménez, 9.

New York, and Northern Virginia. This is not unusual, because most of the time refugees are drawn to places where there is a high concentration of co-nationals – immigrants from the same background.<sup>66</sup> As a result, groups, such as the wives of Afghan male SIV recipients, who typically do not have English language skills when they arrive and have never worked outside the home, end up having a more difficult time with the process of integration when they settle in Afghan communities within the U.S. because they do not feel the same imperative to learn to speak English or to understand and adapt to the culture.

Jiménez also discusses political integration, which includes legal status, naturalization and citizenship, voting and voter registration, and informal political participation, which all can help immigrants integrate into their new society.<sup>67</sup> Jiménez mentions a set of social processes, such as intermarriage or the perception of belonging, which he labels as social integration.<sup>68</sup> Perception of belonging refers to an immigrant's desire to understand what it means to be an American.<sup>69</sup> Being an American can be defined in different ways for different individuals. In the case of Afghan male SIV recipients, their progress on social integration and their perception of belonging can be expected to be different from their wives, due to the fact that the male SIV recipients worked and interacted with Americans in Afghanistan and speak English, whereas their wives did not have the same experiences and do not speak English.

Some scholars make the case that integration is not a straightforward, one-way process that depends only on the immigrants themselves. For example, Miheala Robila, in a 2018 study of immigrants, argues that integration is a two-way process that depends both on how resourceful

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<sup>66</sup> Jiménez, 10.

<sup>67</sup> Jiménez, 11-13.

<sup>68</sup> Jiménez, 15.

<sup>69</sup> Jiménez, 16.



the individual, meaning the refugee/immigrant is and how open the society is.<sup>70</sup> “*Immigrant integration* refers to the incorporation of new elements (immigrants) into an existing social system.”<sup>71</sup> Thus the concept of integration is a multi-dimensional concept, and these dimensions are related to each other in different ways under different circumstances, which makes the process of integration more complicated.<sup>72</sup> For Afghan SIV recipients and their families, the resourcefulness of the men SIV recipients themselves as compared with their wives is likely to be very different based both on the different roles and expectations of men and women in the patriarchal Afghan culture that they come from. Add to this the consideration of whether or not they settle in a community that embraces, ignores, or even worse, shuns them. Both of these considerations make the process of integration complicated.

Because there have been many waves of immigrants, host countries are trying to gain a better understanding of how to be more efficient when it comes to meeting the needs of the immigrants and how to be more successful in achieving the goal of supporting and accelerating the integration of these individuals into the host society. However, for all the reasons cited above, it remains difficult to find one universal way to help refugees integrate into a new society, because of the differences that exist with each wave of refugees and differences among those within each wave. Certainly, this is true for the Afghan SIV recipients and their families, who are themselves a distinct group from previous waves of immigrants in the U.S. They have also added the complications that the Afghan male SIV recipients, their wives, and their school-age children are very differently situated when it comes to the criteria that lead to successful integration.

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<sup>70</sup> Mihaela Robila, “Refugees and Social Integration in Europe,” *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Social Policy and Development*, (2018): 10.

<sup>71</sup> Mihaela Robila, “Refugees and Social Integration in Europe,” 2018): 10.

<sup>72</sup> Mihaela Robila, 10.

### ***Successful Integration:***

After discussing how scholars define integration, the next consideration is how to measure successful integration. Ager and Strang focus on what constitutes successful integration.<sup>73</sup> They look at the kinds of programs that are provided for refugees by host countries, specifically vocational training and education that enables them to acquire skills and qualifications.<sup>74</sup> The authors argue that it is through education that refugees are put in a position to contribute to their new society, in addition to becoming part of a community.<sup>75</sup> The most obvious support for this argument is the children, who once they begin to attend local schools learn English and quickly adapt to a new culture. Another aspect of this argument is the need for refugees, such as the Afghan SIV recipients with higher education degrees from countries like Afghanistan, to have their degrees recognized or certified through additional education in the U.S., so that they may be employed in jobs that match their skill sets and education. Or in the case of refugees without higher education and/or without English language skills, such as many of the wives of the Afghan SIV recipients, there is a need for English language classes and the subsequent need for opportunities to pursue vocational or higher education opportunities so that they can become an integral part of the community where they have resettled. I mentioned previously that economic, educational, health, and social contexts are the key aspects that will determine an immigrant's ease or difficulty when it comes to integration. It is clear that educational opportunities are the key to better economic opportunities and to social integration into a community.

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<sup>73</sup> Alastair Ager and Alison Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, (2008): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016>

<sup>74</sup> Ager and Strang, "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework," 171.

<sup>75</sup> Ager and Strang, 175.

### ***Patterns of Integration:***

Patterns of integration are one way to measure the success of integration. These patterns emerge over time because it can take years or generations to see changes in a group of immigrants.<sup>76</sup> Jiménez points out that socioeconomic integration includes educational attainment, income, occupational status, and homeownership.<sup>77</sup> Normally the socioeconomic attainment of the descendants of immigrants exceeds those of the original immigrants because the American born generation does not experience the hardships that their parents had to go through as first-generation immigrants.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, these measures need to be tracked for a long period of time to understand the improvement.<sup>79</sup>

These patterns of integration depend not just upon the immigrants and the communities in which they settle, but upon additional actors, including the non-profit organizations that are responsible for resettlement, as well as the governmental programs set up by the host country for the purpose of helping refugees integrate into their new society. Zepinic, Bogic, and Priebe studied the support that refugees receive from host countries and the kinds of support that they wish to receive.<sup>80</sup> The authors discuss key factors that affect the ability of non-profit organizations and agencies "to understand the hopelessness, insecurity, devastation, and desperation" that in turn impact the ability of immigrants to integrate successfully in the host countries.<sup>81</sup> These key factors were seen among the Afghan SIV recipients that I interviewed. What the authors found was that when immigrants are given satisfying jobs and are able to work,

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<sup>76</sup> Tomas R Jiménez, "Immigrants in the United States: How Well Are They Integrating into Society?" 4.

<sup>77</sup> Tomas R Jiménez, 7.

<sup>78</sup> Jiménez, 7.

<sup>79</sup> Jiménez, 7.

<sup>80</sup> Zepinic Vito, Bogic Maria, Priebe Stefan, "Refugees' Views of the Effectiveness of Support Provided by Their Host Countries", *Eur J Psychotraumatology* no. 3, (2012): 1, doi: 10.3402/ejpt.v3i0.8447.

<sup>81</sup> Zepinic Vito, Bogic Maria, Priebe Stefan, "Refugees' Views of the Effectiveness of Support Provided by Their Host Countries", *Eur J Psychotraumatology* no. 3, (2012): 2.

studies show that they are much quicker to adapt and be accepted, in addition to the fact that employment has a positive impact on their mental health.<sup>82</sup> Reading this literature, it is clear that the Afghan SIV recipients need a satisfying job in order to integrate into American society more quickly.

Zepinic, Bogic, and Priebe also looked at the structure of programs designed to assist immigrants with integration.<sup>83</sup> They found that the structure of these programs is focused on short-term and temporary achievement, rather than on long-term and more lasting achievement.<sup>84</sup> The authors argue that “it would be helpful to re-structure the ways in which support is provided, targeting selective achievements over the long term rather than seeking general and temporary challenges.”<sup>85</sup> This approach will lead to a healthier integration over time, and also help avoid factors that can prevent integration for many years.<sup>86</sup> These ideas are reflected in the challenges that the Afghan SIV recipients and their families face as local resettlement agencies focus on short-term solutions without regard to the long-term consequences. For example, in Sacramento, California where I interviewed, placing Afghan immigrants into public housing in conflicted-afflicted neighborhoods and marginalized schools, or placing them in low-level jobs that does not match their education and experience, slowed integration. In these critical aspects of

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<sup>82</sup> Zepinic Vito, Bogic Maria, Priebe Stefan, "Refugees' Views of the Effectiveness of Support Provided by Their Host Countries," 8.

<sup>83</sup> Resettlement programs have been used by different host countries to help refugees and immigrants when they arrive in the U.S. The US Refugee Admission Program managed by the Department of State is in charge of admitting refugees and immigrants in the United States, and the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration is in charge of resettlement of those admitted. The Bureau requests proposals for resettlement services (e.g., placement, receiving refugees and meeting their basic needs, assistance with employment and education) from nonprofit organizations that provide such services to refugees and immigrants with the goal of helping refugees and immigrants both to resettle and to integrate into US society. It is important to note that U.S. resettlement and integration policies and approaches have changed many times since the US federal government first took responsibility for regulating immigration in the late 1800s, and these changes have been in response to successive waves of refugees and immigrants and due to changing presidential / congressional / public attitudes.

<sup>84</sup> Vito, Maria, Stefan, 8.

<sup>85</sup> Vito, Maria, Stefan, 8.

<sup>86</sup> Vito, Maria, Stefan, 8.

integration - housing and employment - the agencies meet short-term goals, with no consideration given to the impact of these decisions on long-term integration and how these decisions compound the special challenges faced by the wives of the Afghan SIV recipients.

**b. Studies of Previous Special Immigrant Visa Recipients**

By the end of 1979, four years after the fall of South Vietnam, nearly a quarter million Vietnamese had been resettled in the U.S.<sup>87</sup> That same year, the U.S. Social Security Administration awarded a contract to the Bureau of Social Science Research (BSSR) to study the adaptation of these refugees to the United States.<sup>88</sup> Many of these refugees were also considered to be special, and similar to the Afghan SIV recipients, these refugees had worked with the U.S. government and/or had held high-level positions in Vietnam. A key finding was that refugees who completed their education in Vietnam and knew some English had a better chance of economic success in the U.S. because these individuals were able to more quickly find better work opportunities, which enabled economic integration.<sup>89</sup> In addition, their English language skills made it easier for them when it came to getting along in their everyday life.<sup>90</sup> These findings and my findings are consistent with the previous studies discussed above. One of the main reasons that integration takes longer for the male Afghan SIV recipients is their lack of sufficient English language fluency. This is even more true when it comes to the wives of the SIV recipients who typically do not arrive in the U.S. with the same level of English language skills as their husbands.

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<sup>87</sup>David, W. Haines, *Refugees as Immigrants: Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese in America*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers. (1989): 55. Bruce B. Dunning, "Vietnamese in America: Adaption," Bruce B. Dunning, "Vietnamese in America: Adaption".

<sup>88</sup> W. Haines, David, *Refugees as Immigrants: Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese in America*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers. (1989): 56.

<sup>89</sup> W. Haines, David, *Refugees as Immigrants: Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese in America*, (1989): 64

<sup>90</sup> Bruce B. Dunning, "Vietnamese in America: Adaption" 71-73

Participation in the labor force was key to the economic integration of immigrants from Vietnam.<sup>91</sup> The study also found gender to be a factor in economic integration. Compared to men, women were less likely to participate in work outside of the home and when they participated, they had lower wages when compared to men.<sup>92</sup> Because it was the women's responsibility to take care of the home and the children, this put them at a disadvantage when they were able to enter the labor market.<sup>93</sup> In fact, this study found that economic integration was one of the most difficult components of integration for Vietnamese women to achieve. This situation is analogous to the situation for the wives of Afghan SIV recipients. Coming from a patriarchal society, the women have responsibility for the home and children and typically have not worked outside the home. Their responsibilities in the home limit their opportunities to learn English, to enter the labor market, and, as a result, to adapt to a new culture.

The study also identified age as another factor, which had a significant impact on the economic integration of Vietnamese refugees in the United States. In general, the youngest and oldest groups of refugees "were less likely than others to be engaged or be successful in economic activities".<sup>94</sup> Younger individuals (18-20 years old) were mostly pursuing their education. While not contributing economically, they tended to be more economically more successful once they finished their education.<sup>95</sup> Over time, they tended to be able to contribute more to society and were able to integrate faster.<sup>96</sup> Older individuals (over 50 years old) were less successful when it came to economic integration, because they had a difficult time learning

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<sup>91</sup> Dunning, 67.

<sup>92</sup> W. Haines, David, *Refugees as Immigrants: Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese in America*, 149.

<sup>93</sup> W. Haines, 149.

<sup>94</sup> W. Haines, 66.

<sup>95</sup> W. Haines, 66.

<sup>96</sup> W. Haines, 66.

new things and taking risks than younger people, and as a result, they had a more difficult time integrating into society.<sup>97</sup>

From this literature review, it is clear that there are many factors that work together to either help or hinder a refugee's integration into a new society. These factors include culture, experiences, and skills that the refugees bring with them and the characteristics of the communities in which they settle, as well as the appropriateness of the assistance they receive as they resettle. The ideas put forward in the literature were all evident in the interviews I conducted with the male Afghan SIV recipients and their wives.

The final section of this chapter focuses on the methodology used in conducting the interviews with male Afghan SIV recipients and their wives in Sacramento, California. In addition, important demographic data for those interviewed is presented.

### *c. Methodology*

I carried out qualitative research, through semi-structured, in-person interviews with Afghan SIV families living in Sacramento, California during June and August of 2021. I chose Sacramento, California because there is a large group of Afghan Special Immigrant Visa recipients living in this city. This SIV community has developed over many years, so there were both long-term residents and newer SIV recipients in the community. The Sacramento SIV group is also diverse when it comes to their educational backgrounds and the size of their families.

I identified my initial participants through my older brother, an SIV recipient, and his wife because they resettled in Sacramento when they came to this country. Their presence in the community led other members of the SIV community to trust me and be willing to grant me

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<sup>97</sup> W. Haines, 66.

interviews. In the beginning, only eight people agreed to participate, because many individuals were worried that what they said might impact their status in the United States. However, as I gained the trust of these first participants, they spoke to others and these individuals reached out to my brother and sister-in-law to say they were willing to give an interview. Subsequently, I was able to interview six more individuals. Overall, I interviewed fourteen individuals – six men and eight women. For five of the men, I also interviewed their wives. For one of the men and three of the women, I did not interview the spouse. Relevant information for each of those interviewed is given in Table 2 below.



Table 2: Afghan Male SIV Recipients and their Wives Interviewed in Sacramento, California

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>No. of Children</i>	<i>Education Level prior to coming to U.S.</i>	<i>Job or focus in Afghanistan</i>	<i>Arrival in the U.S.</i>	<i>Resettlement Agency</i>	<i>English Language Skills</i>	<i>Housing assigned upon arrival in Sacramento, CA and Years Spent Living in this Housing</i>	<i>Additional Education after Arriving*</i>	<i>Current Housing Chosen by SIV Recipients and Family</i>	<i>Job or Focus in the US</i>
Male	20-29	Married	1 child age 8 months	Bachelor's Degree in construction engineering from Afghanistan	Assistant engineer in a construction company	2016	Department of Human Assistance	Very Good	Apartment by Organization  3 years	Some English classes at community college	Apartment found by themselves	Initially worked for 1 year in retail packaging children's clothes, then as an Uber driver, currently Draftsperson in an engineering company
Male	30-39	Married	2 children ages 9 and 4	Bachelor's Degree in Civil Engineering from Afghanistan	Safety Manager in a construction company	2016	World Relief, Department of Human Assistance	Very Good	Apartment by Organization  4 years	None	Their own House	Initially worked for California Division of OSHA; Currently, working for California Office of Emergency Services
Male	30-39	Married	1 child age 4	Bachelor's in Economics from Afghanistan	Project Manager in an Afghan Company	2016	International Rescue Committee, Department of Human Assistance	Very Good	Apartment by Organization  2 years	Some English classes at the community college	Apartment found by themselves	Initially worked at Apple Store as a technician, currently working in Administration at a Solar Power Company

Male	30-39	Married	3 children ages 7, 5, and 8 months	Bachelor's in Economics from Afghanistan	Ministry of Higher Education	2017	Food Bank, Department of Human Assistance & International Organization for Migration	Very Good	Apartment by Organization 3 years	Started community college in 2018 with the goal of earning a degree in accounting	Apartment found by themselves	Uber driver
Male	30-39	Married	3 children ages 4, 2, and one month	Bachelor's in electrical engineering from Afghanistan	Electrician	2018	World Relief, Department of Human Assistance	Good	Apartment assigned by Organization 4 years	Attended English classes for a few months	Their own House	Initially bread-maker, Currently an electrician
Male	20-29	Married	3 children ages 7, 5, and 1	High School Graduate from Afghanistan	Translator	2019	No One Left Behind, Department of Human Assistance	Good	Apartment assigned by Organization 2 years	None	Apartment found by themselves	Grubhub Food Delivery Driver
Female	30-39	Married	3 children ages 7, 6, and 2	Finished 3 <sup>rd</sup> year college in Afghanistan in Dari Literature	Homemaker	2014	Opening Doors, International Organization for Migration, and Department of Human Assistance	Basic	Apartment assigned by Organization 3 years	Taking English classes at community college	Apartment found by themselves	Working in packaging at a warehouse
Female	20-29	Married	1 child age 8 months	Studying for Bachelor's degree in accounting from Iran	Homemaker	2016	Department of Human Assistance	Good	Apartment assigned by Organization 3 years	Taking English classes at community college	Apartment found by themselves	Initially Cashier at thrift store; currently, online tutor for college students
Female	20-29	Married	2 children ages 9 and 4	Finished 8 <sup>th</sup> grade in Pakistan	Homemaker	2016	World Relief, and Department of Human Assistance	Basic	Apartment assigned by Organization 4 years	Taking English classes at community college	Purchased their own house	Homemaker

Female	20-29	Married	3 children ages 7, 5, and 8 months	Graduated From High School in Afghanistan	Homemaker	2017	Food Bank, Department of Human Assistance & International Organization for Migration	Basic	Apartment assigned by Organization 3 years	Taking English classes at community college	Apartment Found by Themselves	Homemaker
Female	20-29	Married	No children	High school graduate	Teacher prior to marriage; then Homemaker	2017	International Rescue Committee, and Department of Human Assistance	Basic	Apartment assigned by Organization 4 years	Took English classes at community college	Still in original apartment	Prior to pandemic, Cashier, Thrift Store, and Door Dash
Female	20-29	Married	3 children Ages 5, 4, and 1	Medical Student in Afghanistan, but did not finish her studies because she got married	Homemaker	2018	World Relief, International Organization for Migration, and Department of Human Assistance	Basic	Apartment assigned by Organization 2 years	Taking English classes at community college	Apartment Found by Themselves	Homemaker
Female	20-29	Married	3 children ages 4, 2, and one month	Finished 11 <sup>th</sup> grade in Afghanistan before getting married	Homemaker	2018	World Relief, and Department of Human Assistance	Basic	Apartment assigned by Organization 4 years	Taking English classes at community college	Purchased their own House	Homemaker
Female	20-29	Married	3 children Ages 7, 5, and 1	Finished 11 <sup>th</sup> grade in Afghanistan before getting married	Homemaker	2019	No One Left Behind, and Department of Human Assistance	No Skill	Apartment assigned by Organization 2 years	None	Apartment Found by Themselves	Homemaker

\*All English classes and community college courses were online during the initial year of the pandemic.

I interviewed the men (SIV recipients) and women (wives) separately to gain their different perspectives. I offered individuals the choice of conducting the interview in English or Dari. Among the six males, three of the participants said they felt comfortable giving an interview in English. All of the women chose Dari. Those who participated were in their twenties and thirties and had arrived in the U.S. between 2014 and 2019. Five of the men were university educated and had, in addition to working with U.S. organizations, worked in government ministries and offices prior to coming to the U.S. One of the men had a high school education, and had worked as a translator prior to coming to the U.S. Among the eight women, three attended some university, prior to coming to the U.S., but none had graduated, having terminated their education after getting married. Most of the women were married during or right after high school. Three of the women had or are working outside the home since coming to the U.S. Those interviewed had between zero and three children.

All of the interviews were conducted in person, conducted in the participants' houses as they felt comfortable in their own homes. Eight of the interviews were conducted in June and six more were conducted in August.

## Chapter Four: Findings

Chapter 3 presents findings based on my interviews with fourteen individuals, all either Afghan male SIV recipients or their wives, in Sacramento, California. I begin this chapter with a brief overview of the resettlement approach experienced by Afghan SIV recipients and their families in Sacramento, California. Subsequently, I draw upon my interviews to understand and analyze the challenges that the Afghan male SIV recipient and their wives face and their perceptions regarding integrating into American society. Despite being classified as a special group of immigrants, the challenges they face are similar to the challenges faced by other waves of refugees coming to the United States.

### *Resettlement of Special Immigrant Visa Recipients and their Families in Sacramento, California*

In Sacramento, California, there are a number of non-profit organizations that directly help Afghan SIV recipients to resettle and integrate in the United States. These non-profit organizations include World Relief, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Open Doors, and No One Left Behind.<sup>98</sup> These organizations provide items needed for a refugee family's

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<sup>98</sup> **World Relief:** World Relief helps newly arrived individuals with securing housing, supplying basic necessities, and enrolling children in school. This organization prepares refugees and immigrants for work in their communities through job placement, workplace education and training, financial literacy training, economic empowerment and resiliency, and ongoing career counseling. World relief also provides the support and knowledge the refugees and immigrants need to obtain their legal status and resources for healthy development. Lastly, this organization also recruits and trains ambassadors to assess with needs within their own communities.

<https://worldrelief.org/spokane/our-work/community-ambassadors/>

**International Rescue Committee:**

**Immigration and citizenship:** This program ensure that the refugees have equal protection under the law and civic integration of refugees and immigrants by helping them to achieve citizenship. IRC offers high quality and low-cost legal services and citizenship assistance.

**Resettlement:** IRC provides services that help refugees with self-reliance and integration. IRC helps to translate each immigrant's skills, interests, and past experiences into assets that are valuable in their new community.

**Economic Empowerment:** IRC helps refugees find their first job under an Early Employment Program. Later, IRC helps refugees transition from low income and low-skill jobs to higher paying and higher skilled careers.

apartment and clothing for all members of the family. They offer or require English lessons, typically insisting on attendance at classes at the community college, but in one case sending a language instructor to the home once a week. Some of the organizations offer additional programs. For example, the Afghan male SIV recipients and their wives that I interviewed noted that the IRC provided a caseworker that helped them schedule appointments with doctors and assisted them with finding their footing in the United States, including for example helping them to get their driver's licenses.<sup>99</sup> One of the participants indicated that the IRC provided training on domestic violence to both men and women, so everyone understood U.S. law and the assistance available to anyone experiencing domestic violence.<sup>100</sup> The IRC also offered orientation sessions, which helped the Afghan immigrants understand local rules, including quiet hours for the building in which they lived, or in case of emergency to call 911.<sup>101</sup>

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**Health, safety and wellbeing:** this program focuses on health promotion and education, outreach to medical providers, food security and nutrition. This program also focuses on women and girls and mental health of refugees.

**New roots** (food security and agriculture): This program gives the refugees tools and training to grow healthy produce, provide affordable food to their neighbors, build their business skills, and support community wellness, Youth services: the goal of this program is to provide educational and developmental opportunities that build the essential academic, personal and social skills that children need in order to succeed. This service provides: extra-curricular support, family support, and school coordination.

**META: M&E:** Data-driven decision-making is one of the six guiding principles in the Office of Refugee Resettlement which is the cornerstone of effective service delivery. The META project helps to put the principles into action by helping to improve ORR-funded organizations' capacity to collect meaningful data, manage it, analyze it and used the results to improve project designs. META helps refugee service providers to improve their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) practices.

**Research, Analysis, and Learning (RAL):** This is focused on the research based-understanding of IRC's refugee resettlement programs in the United States. RAL helps USP's practice to become more evidence based. <https://www.rescue.org/page/us-program-offerings>

**Open Doors for Refugees:** This is an all-volunteer organization whose mission is to help refugees make a home in the Madison area located in Sacramento, California. Open Doors collects furnishings items and sets up apartments, provides translation, transportation, English language as a second language classes, childcare, and employment services for arriving refugees. They also organize events for the community and refugee families to help the refugees get to know the community. <https://opendoorsforrefugees.org>

**No One Left Behind:** This is a nonprofit organization that is committed to ensuring that America keeps its promise to Afghan allies left behind in Afghanistan. This organization has worked to improve and streamline the State Department's 14-steps SIV process and also provides financial aid and vehicles to newly arrived SIV recipients. They do not engage in resettlement. <https://nooneleft.org>

<sup>99</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, 2021.

<sup>100</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, 2021.

<sup>101</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, May, 2021.

In addition, the Sacramento County Department of Human Assistance (DHA) helps all SIV recipients who resettle in Sacramento, California. DHA designs and oversees programs to help people move off of public assistance and become more independent.<sup>102</sup> DHA focuses on providing assistance to find employment, housing, and health care, as well as transportation, education, and childcare. Refugees indicated that the assistance that DHA provided lasted for six months.<sup>103</sup>

**a. Challenges Experienced by Afghan Male SIV Recipients and their Wives in Sacramento, California**

There are numerous challenges that the Afghan SIV recipients and their families who reside in Sacramento, California experience, which slows down their integration. Based on my interviews, these challenges include: insufficient duration and amount of support provided when SIV recipients and their families arrive; the quality and location of housing assigned upon their arrival; what is perceived by the SIV recipients themselves to be a lack of recognition or certification of their university degrees resulting in difficulty finding appropriate employment commensurate with their education and experience (which may in reality, as will be discussed later, related to their level of English fluency, not a lack of recognition of their degrees); the lower level of education of the wives and their lower level of or no English language skills as compared with their husbands; the lack of frequent and efficient public transportation in areas where the SIV recipients are assigned housing combined with the difficulty of affording private transportation; and the tension between a desire to integrate and cultural pressure.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> “About the Department of Human Assistance”, Department of Human Assistance. <https://ha.saccounty.net/Pages/About-DHA.aspx>

<sup>103</sup> “About the Department of Human Assistance”, Department of Human Assistance.

<sup>104</sup> Interviews by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, June, and August, 2021

### ***Length of Support:***

SIV recipients receive support for six months, because it is expected that after six months they will be financially and socially independent. All of the Afghan SIV recipients that I interviewed indicated that six months was not enough to both adapt to a new culture and U.S. ways of doing things and to achieve financial independence.<sup>105</sup> In addition, all of the SIV recipients built very good relationships with their caseworkers and other individuals in charge of helping them. It was difficult for them to lose those relationships and this support system after six months. When asked how long this initial level of support should continue almost all those interviewed said two years. The reasons for the insufficiency of this six-month period of support will become clear in the discussions of the various challenges, perhaps particularly on the impact of their English language skills on SIV recipients' ability to gain employment commensurate with their experience and education, which in turn affects their ability to finding better housing, or buying a car.

### ***Housing:***

All the Afghan male SIV recipients and the wives that I interviewed lived in their own house in Afghanistan. These are family homes with multiple generations under one roof (married sons remain in their parent's home, married daughters go to the husband's family home) and the houses have or are added onto to have enough space for the entire family.

Prior to immigrating, if the SIV recipient indicates that they need assistance finding housing in their application, then the non-profit resettlement organizations arrange for an apartment for them when they arrive in the U.S. Every person interviewed talked about the poor quality of

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<sup>105</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, June, and August, 2021



housing they were assigned initially. Small, not clean, and in very bad shape were words most commonly used.

All of those interviewed, both men and women, complained about the location of the assigned apartments as well, noting that they were in noisy, dangerous areas, and that the neighbors were not friendly.<sup>106</sup> Only one of the women said she liked the location of her apartment, and when asked why said it was because she had easy access to an Afghan market and a Walmart, but even she observed that those in the neighborhood were not welcoming or friendly.<sup>107</sup> One of the men said “Our neighbors who lived downstairs always complained about us.<sup>108</sup> For this reason, my children felt restricted. They were not able to make noise and play as much as they wanted.”<sup>109</sup>

Because the SIV recipients do not have credit histories or social security cards when they first arrive in the U.S, it is hard for the nonprofit resettlement organizations to find good apartments for them. For this reason, the resettlement organizations seem to find the least expensive housing, without considering the condition of the apartment or the impact of the location on the SIV recipients and their families’ ability to feel welcome and to adapt and integrate. One of the most important findings of this study is how the poor quality of their housing and the dangerous location impacted the short and longer-term outlook of the Afghan SIV recipients and their families. One of the SIV recipients said, “I do not have a good picture or fond memories from our first apartment, although the rent was low.”<sup>110</sup> He did not want to answer further questions regarding their experience. Another SIV recipient spoke of the

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<sup>106</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, June, August 2021.

<sup>107</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, 2021.

<sup>108</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.

<sup>109</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.

<sup>110</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, August, 2021.

dangerous location noting that at “our first apartment location we heard gunshots two nights in a three-month span.”<sup>111</sup> He observed these incidents affected his family’s perception about the United States.<sup>112</sup>

Compared to the Afghan male SIV recipients themselves, their wives were affected far more when it came to the quality and location of the first apartments, because they spend more time at home than their husbands. These women are responsible for keeping their apartment clean and most of them noted that the kitchens were not clean and the apartments had cockroaches. One woman said that their first apartment was small and very dark, saying “[m]ost of the time I found myself feeling suffocated.”<sup>113</sup> Another woman reflected on the fact that her husband had to work at night. She found herself alone and scared at night and she was not able to sleep, because “fights were going on every night until 2 or 3 am... I did not feel safe. I felt insecure... then my children would get up in the mornings, and I had to be awake with them, so I suffered from lack of sleep.”<sup>114</sup>

All the participants that I interview stayed in their initial apartment between 2-4 years, with only one participant still living in the initial apartment (at four years), before they were able to afford better housing. Subsequent apartments or houses were chosen by the SIV recipients themselves. All, but one of the participants I interviewed are currently living in their choice of housing. Among the six married couples interviewed, two now live in their own homes, which located in diverse neighborhoods. All but one of the others are in apartments of their choosing. When those in apartments of their choosing were asked about the quality of their current apartment, all indicated that they are much better than their first apartment. They said that their

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<sup>111</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>112</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>113</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.

<sup>114</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.

current apartments are clean and spacious. The neighborhoods are quieter and the neighbors – other Afghan SIV recipients and their families – are friendly. So, the result of initial low-cost sub-standard housing in dangerous, unwelcoming neighborhoods was that the Afghan SIV recipients, when renting their next apartment, chose to live in neighborhoods with other Afghans. One woman observed that other Afghans understand our problems better.<sup>115</sup> She said that when more Afghans came to their neighborhood, she found a community where she could share her experiences, make friends, and have a support network. “Afghan families share the same language and culture. We celebrate Eid and Ramadan with each other. When there was an explosion [in Afghanistan], we come together and tell each other how we feel.”<sup>116</sup>

While they now feel comfortable and in a welcoming community, some of them also expressed the desire for a more diverse group of friends. One woman said, I really want to have American friends because I want to learn from them and talk to them.”<sup>117</sup> Another said that while interacting “with Americans it was harder... in order to understand the American culture, it is important to [also] have American neighbors... because from Americans, we learned about American culture and traditions and also [U.S.] rules and laws.”<sup>118</sup>

All those I interviewed lived in their first apartment assigned by the resettlement organizations from one to four years, making this choice of initial housing a critical decision made for the Afghan SIV recipients and their families.

### ***Level of Education:***

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<sup>115</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>116</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>117</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, May, 2021.

<sup>118</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, August, 2021.

All, but one, of the Afghan male SIV recipients I interviewed had earned a bachelor's degree in either engineering or economics from universities in Afghanistan. All spoke very good English when I interviewed them- two to five years after their arrival. In contrast, five of eight wives had gotten married either during or right after graduating from high school and stopped attending school once they married. The other three wives who were attending university (two in Afghanistan in Dari Literature and Medicine and one in Iran in Accounting) also stopped attending university after marriage due to their responsibilities at home; none of them finished their university degrees. According to one participant, "I finished high school and started college, but did not finish. Getting married was one reason that I did not continue going to college."<sup>119</sup>

A challenge that the SIV recipients perceived upon arrival in the U.S. was the acceptance or perception of their university degrees. Most, although not all, expressed the reality that when they first came to the United States, regardless of their degree and experience, they had to find work as a laborer or a ridesharing or delivery driver. This experience made their first few years in the U.S. difficult and demoralizing.

In order to get a good job, many of the male SIV recipients felt they needed to pursue additional education, blaming the issue on what they perceived as not having a valid degree or certification from the United States. When interviewed, most of these male SIV recipients articulated that they had to take the same classes they took in Afghanistan in order to get the certificates they felt necessary to gain good employment. However, what became clear to me listening to their stories related to employment (discussed below), was that the issue when they first arrived may well have been their level of English language fluency when interviewing for jobs, not their lack of U.S. degrees or credentials.

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<sup>119</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

For those without college degrees, two years of community college is free in California. However, pursuing an additional degree or a first degree proved difficult, because the SIV recipients were also responsible for supporting their families.

In only one case was the wife of SIV recipient supporting the family. In this case, her husband (an SIV recipient) is attending community college, and his wife works an early morning shift at a warehouse. The husband takes care of the children in the morning, when his wife is at work. None of the wives were pursuing a first or additional degree currently, although a number planned to do so when their children were older. However, all of the participants had absorbed the importance that the U.S. gives to education.

### ***English Language Skills:***

All of the Afghan male SIV recipients spoke very good English by the time I interviewed them two to five years after they arrived in the U.S., which fits with their role as SIV recipients (working with Americans in Afghanistan) and the fact that they have been in the workplace and interacting with English speaking individuals daily since arriving in the U.S. They have the motivation to continue to improve their English in order to get better jobs in the future. One man observed, “I have my dream job, but I still need to learn more [English]... Sometimes I do not understand other people because they talk too fast, and they are using words that I do not know the meaning of. If I do not understand what they are saying, I cannot talk with people.”<sup>120</sup>

The English language skills among the wives was uniformly lower than their husbands and ranged from no proficiency at all (one woman) to good (one woman), with most (six women) being at the basic level. This reflects both the lack of or lower English language skills the wives

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<sup>120</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, 2021.

have when they came to the United States, and the facts that: (1) all but two of the women are working exclusively in their own homes where their native Afghan language is spoken; (2) they all initially lived in neighborhoods where they had few if any interactions with neighbors and more recently all but the two who now live in their own homes chose to live in apartments in neighborhoods with other Afghan families where communication is in their native language; and (3) those who are working exclusively in the home have fewer interactions than their husbands with English speakers.

The wives of Afghan SIV recipients did understand the importance of learning English. One woman I interviewed said she learned basic English at school when she was in Afghanistan. When she came to the United States, she took English classes because she believes that knowing English is the only way that she will be able to integrate into and get a better job in the United States.<sup>121</sup>

Most of the Afghan male SIV recipient and their wives were advised by their resettlement organizations to take English classes. In one case of one SIV recipient, the resettlement organization insisted on these classes, although he found the classes not helpful and stopped attending after a few months. In other cases, SIV recipients found these English classes helpful, but ended up having to stop attending when they found a job. “I went to the English class for three months. I really liked it, but as soon as I got a job I had to work because without work, I would not be able to pay the rent.”<sup>122</sup>

Some of the SIV recipients that I interviewed were more familiar with the U.S. education system, and from the beginning, these individuals did not attend general English classes set up for refugees, but instead took English assessment tests and were put in appropriate level classes

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<sup>121</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>122</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, 2021.

at the community college where they could learn and improve their language skills. One of the individuals who took assessment tests articulated that his goal was to improve his writing skills when he started taking English classes. After that to pursue a college degree in the United States. Now he is majoring in accounting and plans to finish his degree in two years.

The language barrier is one of the main ongoing challenges that the wives of Afghan SIV recipients face regardless of the fact that they receive an SIV visa (which assumes English language skills) and eventually their green card within months after their arrival in the United States. All of the wives except one, had taken or were taking English classes. None of them was pursuing a degree currently, although a number planned to do so, but attending English classes had the impact of allowing some of them to envision a better future for themselves. For some studying English in a community college setting was paving the way for them to eventually study for a college degree. For others, being in a college setting also introduced them to new experiences. One of the women said that after enrolling in English classes at the college, she also “attended yoga class. After that I started going to the gym.”<sup>123</sup> And for others, it expanded their aspirations. When I asked one of the women where she sees herself ten years from now, she indicated that “I want to have my own business.”<sup>124</sup> Yet another participant expressed how attending English classes enabled her to help her children with their schoolwork. She said, “I enjoyed helping them... now I want to finish [taking English classes] and start college.”<sup>125</sup>

Most of women expressed that in Afghanistan they were not given the opportunity or the power to determine their own futures. They did not have control over their own lives. One woman I interviewed described the impact of this lack of opportunity and control over one’s own

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<sup>123</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, 2021.

<sup>124</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, 2021.

<sup>125</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, May, 2021.

life, which “limits women from pursuing what they really want to be and what they want to do. But in the United States, we have control over our lives and our living situation. We can drive, we can take courses.”<sup>126</sup> This woman plans to finish college. She says, “I want to have my own business and work.”<sup>127</sup> Another woman expressed similar thoughts and said her goal in the U.S. is to become a dentist.

Unfortunately, some of the women did not continue with English classes because of the responsibility of taking care of their home and their young children. The COVID pandemic also caused some of the wives to interrupt their study of English, even though English classes moved online. “My children were home all the time and I had to organize everything for them. I was a student, a teacher, a cook. I was falling behind [in my own English classes]... When I felt like studying, I had to cook. Once, my daughters start going to summer school, I can again start school myself.”<sup>128</sup> For others being able to access English classes online during the pandemic afforded them an opportunity to get around the fact that the language centers and community colleges do not have childcare, which is often the reason that the wives with young children have difficulty attending English classes. One of the participants observed that, “I was able to start taking English classes now that my youngest daughter is old enough to take care of herself.”<sup>129</sup>

Another reason the wives have difficulty attending their English classes is because of the lack of public transportation in Sacramento, California. Despite the fact that all the women had learned how to drive after arriving in California, none of the families had two cars, and the result is that typically the wife is left at home without a car. Therefore, some of the women found the move to online classes during the COVID pandemic a benefit.

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<sup>126</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, 2021.

<sup>127</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, 2021.

<sup>128</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.

<sup>129</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.



During the interviews, I noticed that some of the wives who wear a headscarf felt the language barrier more acutely. Some of these women expressed that they are not able to respond to harsh comments directed at them and questions that they are asked regarding the fact that they wear a headscarf. One of the women said, “my English was not very good, and I was not very happy [when I heard what was asked]. I was very sad. That day when I came home, I started crying and told myself that I was not in a position to answer such a question... I do not want to go out anymore. But I had to go out to walk my daughter to school and pick her up afterwards. After... that incident, I got my [driver’s] license, because I did not want to have to walk, and have someone question me about my headscarf.”<sup>130</sup>

***Employment:***

Before emigrating from Afghanistan, all the SIV recipients I interviewed were happy with the pay they received from their employment as engineers and economists, or in one case as a translator. All of these jobs earn relatively high salaries in Afghanistan. In contrast, their wives did not hold a job in Afghanistan after getting married, and all of them had the responsibility of taking care of their families. Only one woman had held a job as a kindergarten teacher prior to getting married (she had a high school education).

Five of the six SIV recipients I interviewed were working full-time and supporting families with one to three children. In one case, the SIV recipient was working part-time as an Uber driver and pursuing a degree in accounting, while his wife worked full time and they shared responsibility for taking care of three children.

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<sup>130</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

Only one of the five SIV recipients with university engineering or economics degrees found an initial job that recognized his university education and experience. His English was also the best of all those I interviewed. This individual had an engineering degree and found a job with the California Division of OSHA. Not surprisingly, he and his family now live in their own home. Three others who also had university degrees eventually found jobs that recognized their degrees and experience after initial stints as a ride-share driver or a bread maker. One of these three, an electrical engineer, now works as an electrician as he did in Afghanistan and lives with his family in their own home. A fifth individual with a university degree in economics is working as a ride-share driver, while attending the community college to get his accounting degree. The sixth SIV male recipient, who has a high school education and had worked as a translator in Afghanistan, was working as a food delivery driver.

One of the SIV recipients with an engineering degree said that, when he came to the U.S., it was difficult to find a job. His perception was that “we [the SIV recipients] come with a lot of experience from Afghanistan, but the companies in the U.S. do not accept... they do not believe in our experiences and how we worked over there (in Afghanistan).”<sup>131</sup> This individual thought that his degree was not seen as being valid in the U.S. He had six years of experience as an assistant engineer in Afghanistan, but he was not able to find a good job when he arrived in the U.S. At first, he worked at a retail company for a year packing children’s clothing. Then he bought a car and started working as an Uber driver. He said he thought that one of the barriers to finding a good job in his field in the U.S. was that first he had to build his resume. After three years, he was able to find a job as a draftsman in an engineering firm.

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<sup>131</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, August, 2021.

The wife of one of the SIV recipients also complained about the kind of job that her husband has. She said that her husband studied economics for four years and graduated with a university degree in Kabul.<sup>132</sup> “He worked with Americans using his major in Kabul. He liked his work and his position.”<sup>133</sup> Her husband applied for many jobs after coming to the United States. “He gets many calls and interviews, but they ask him where he got his bachelor’s degree and when he says Afghanistan, they reject him. This rejection makes him sad. They should give him one chance of hiring him in his field... if he is not doing a good job, then they can fire him.”<sup>134</sup> This interview points to a possible difference between perception and reality. The individual’s degrees and experience and background were listed on his resume. Therefore, the employers interviewing him knew he and his degrees were from Afghanistan, but he got to the interview stage every time. It appears that the problem may have been his fluency in spoken English during the interview.

Only three of eight women I interviewed had or were working outside the home after arriving in the United States. Two of these working in the U.S. had pursued a university education in either Afghanistan or Iran before getting married and the third, with a high school education, had worked in Afghanistan as a teacher prior to getting married. So, they had more education or experience working prior coming to the U.S. than the other five women interviewed. One of the women, who had university education from Iran in accounting, initially worked as a cashier at a thrift store after coming to the United States. She told me about how she really liked her job and was happy that she had the opportunity at work to improve her English; her language skills were at a higher level

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<sup>132</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>133</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>134</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.

than any of the other wives I interviewed.<sup>135</sup> Her work experience also helped her to become part of the community.<sup>136</sup> In addition, she observed that “earning money gave me the feeling of being independent and empowered.”<sup>137</sup> Subsequently, she started working as an online tutor at the community college. “Working has had a big impact on my attitude,”<sup>138</sup> she observed. She also mentioned that once she started working as a tutor for the community college, she also started exercising. She has one child, who was eight months old when I met and interviewed the woman. Another of these three women, with a high school education and no children, also worked at a thrift store prior to closure due to the pandemic and as a Door Dash delivery driver. She also enjoyed working and being independent, and she too appreciated the opportunity to improve her English through talking with her coworkers and customers.<sup>139</sup> The third working wife, who studied Dari literature at a university for three years in Afghanistan, worked in packaging at a warehouse.<sup>140</sup> She was the oldest of the eight women interviewed. She worked an early morning shift and her husband worked part-time as an Uber driver while attending community college.<sup>141</sup> He took care of getting the three children off to school in the morning while his wife was at work. All three of the women were happy to be out of the house and busy. One of them observed that before working, she found herself bored and alone at home. In addition, she expressed that “working also helps me support my family. And I get to know people from different backgrounds.”<sup>142</sup> The five wives working as

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<sup>135</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>136</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>137</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.

<sup>138</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.

<sup>139</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.

<sup>140</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, August, 2021.

<sup>141</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, August, 2021.

<sup>142</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, August, 2021.

homemakers each had two or three young children and their husbands were working full-time.

***Transportation:***

All of the Afghan male SIV recipients I interviewed had their own cars and drove in Afghanistan. They said that when they arrived in the United States for the first time, it was difficult for them to go places, even to go grocery shopping, because the public transportation (buses) was described as infrequent, especially in the areas where Afghans were assigned to live when they first arrived, and inefficient due to the time it took to get places. As soon as they could save enough money, they bought a car and then got a driver's license. This inability to go places affected other aspects of integration. For example, one of the participants expressed that when he first came to the United States, he was not able to buy a car, so he and his wife biked to their English classes. There are not a lot of bike lanes in Sacramento, so it was very dangerous to commute this way, and eventually, they stopped attending their English classes.

The wives did not drive in Afghanistan, but all of them were eager to learn to drive upon coming to the United States. At the beginning because they did not know English, these women were not able to take the driving test, but after two or three years they indicated that they took the driving test and passed it. All those interviewed have only one car per family that is used by both the husband and wife for getting to work, taking the children to school, errands, and getting to English classes.

***The Tension between Integration and Cultural Pressure:***

A critically important challenge that I identified among Afghan SIV refugees and their wives is the tension they feel between a desire to adapt to life in a new country and at the same time to

retain their own cultural heritage. When asked about culture, most of the participants acknowledged that Afghan culture is completely different from American culture. Several individuals observed that sometimes it was the difference between these two cultures that makes them feel uncomfortable. This is especially true for the women. The different expectations for women in Afghanistan versus in the U.S. are stark, including expectations to become independent, learn how to drive, and have a job, and this difference is one of the main reasons that it takes longer for the wives to integrate into US society. The women come to the United States without having any contacts with Americans as did their husbands (the SIV recipients), without the same English language skills, and they come from a conservative patriarchal society, where all decisions that impact their lives are made first by their father (or senior male member of a household) and then by their husbands.

One SIV recipient said that when he came to the United States, he and his family wanted to keep their culture, “but what I figured out was, whenever you are living in another country you have to manage the culture of that country too. You can have your culture too, but unfortunately with time passing people tend to change their own culture and adapt to the new one.”<sup>143</sup> This dilemma of trying to keep one’s own culture while trying to learn about American culture and adopting aspects of American culture puts a lot of pressure on the Afghan SIV recipients and their wives. However, a number of both the SIV recipients and their wives expressed that there are some aspects of American culture that they appreciate and want to adopt. When asked which aspect of American culture they most admire and which aspect of American culture they have adopted that has helped them integrate into the society faster, all of the participants – both men and women – said the culture of independence. One woman emphasized that “in the United

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<sup>143</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, August, 2021.

States everyone is growing up on their own...and everyone is independent. Everyone does everything on their own.”<sup>144</sup> Another woman expressed “I like how independent women are in the United States.”<sup>145</sup> This desire to become more independent is important to integration, especially among the wives.

Becoming part of a community is important when it comes to cultural integration. As discussed in the literature review, one way for refugees to integrate in a new society is to interact with the community. However, as explained earlier in this chapter, the initial housing assigned to newly arrived Afghan SIV recipients and their families in Sacramento is in dangerous and often unwelcoming neighborhoods. Those I interviewed were not able to develop any sense of community with those in the neighborhoods where they were initially assigned housing. So, when they could choose where they wanted to live, those who again rented an apartment went to live in an area with many other Afghan families, which gives them a sense of community, but also increases the challenges to developing more fluency in English and thus integration into American society.

In addition, there are advantages and disadvantages to settling in Afghan communities in U.S. cities, especially for the wives of the SIV recipients. One of the advantages is that most of the wives do not speak English upon arrival, so settling in Afghan communities helps these women to not feel alone. “It is good to have Afghans around, because I feel comfortable with Afghans.”<sup>146</sup> The disadvantage is that being in an Afghan community slows down the development of English language skills and integration into U.S. society, especially if they are not working outside the home or studying. One of the women offered this thought: “I think

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<sup>144</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, August, 2021.

<sup>145</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, 2021.

<sup>146</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, May, 2021.

having American neighbors will be good for us, because we will learn the language and the culture quicker.”<sup>147</sup> Another SIV recipient expressed that the organizations that are in charge of helping refugees to settle might facilitate ways for the Afghan SIV recipients and their families to interact with American communities and in doing so, help the newly arrived Afghans enter society.<sup>148</sup> He further observed that then “these refugees will be able to interact with people who have lived here.”<sup>149</sup> But he also says that it will be difficult if the refugees do not know the language, because then they will find this interaction stressful. Another SIV recipient observed that it would be ideal if the Afghan refugees are settled in a community where both Afghans and Americans live. He added “I think mixed neighborhoods are good, because through this [the refugees] learn American culture and traditions from the Americans and also have an Afghan community around them. It will be hard to be surrounded only by Americans, but mixed is ideal and better when it comes to some problems that we might face. Afghans understand our problems better.”<sup>150</sup>

Many of the male Afghan SIV recipients and their wives expressed that cultural integration for them means cultural adjustment. Adjusting to a new culture can take years. According to the SIV Afghan women I interviewed, cultural adjustment also includes the way Afghan women dress or specifically whether they wear a headscarf or not<sup>151</sup>. One woman mentioned that she and other women “were invited to a program in a school and [the staff and teachers] wanted to teach us about different cultures and schools in the U.S., but the first thing that they asked was why are all of you wearing headscarves in this hot weather. They asked this with a very respectful

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<sup>147</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>148</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>149</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.

<sup>150</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.

<sup>151</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.



manner. I told them that we have lived our entire life wearing these headscarves, and it is difficult to just take them off and suddenly decide to not wear them anymore.”<sup>152</sup> Some of the women I interviewed felt accepted and gained a sense of belonging when they adapted their clothing to the American style. One of the women who was wearing a headscarf at the beginning of her arrival and then stopped wearing it later on said “now that I am not wearing a headscarf, I do not feel like I am a refugee. I feel like one of them. They think that I am one of them. No one gives me a judgmental look.”<sup>153</sup>

Cultural integration enhances the sense of belonging among the Afghan SIV recipients and their wives. The more some of these refugees integrate into the American culture, the more they start to feel like they belong in the United States. This sense of belonging gives these refugees the sense of being accepted in the American society. One of the women expressed that “[w]e do not feel like we are refugees, because of all the benefits that we receive. I feel like I am from the United States. This is because I have all the rights and benefits that an American born [in the U.S.] has. The opportunities that Americans have, we also have.”<sup>154</sup> One of the wives added that “the U.S. is trying to accept us as citizens. I have experienced inequality as a refugee in Iran, where they never accepted me as an Iranian, because I was from Afghanistan. I did not have access to many things; I was not able to buy a house or even a sim card. When a country accepts you as a human and American, I am ready to accept their culture...when it comes to a country that gives me rights and an identity, then I feel like I have to defend the culture, rules, and laws.”<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>153</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>154</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, May, 2021.

<sup>155</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, May, 2021.

The next chapter is focused on the implications of findings presented. It contains the key barriers to integration and the resulting mental health issues faced by this group of immigrants. Lastly, I present recommendations based on these findings.

## **Chapter Five: Implications of Findings and Recommendations**

In Chapter 4, I identified the key findings from my interviews of Afghan male SIV recipients and their wives who came to the U.S. between 2014 and 2019. The implications of these findings and where perceptions and reality differ are discussed in this chapter along with recommendations. It is important to point out that implications that I have drawn from my findings are interrelated. In the following paragraphs I focus on the most important issues, their interdependence, and then offer recommendations for how to address the key issues.

### ***a. Implications of Findings***

First, the government and the non-profit resettlement organizations do not provide a sufficient length of financial and resettlement organizational support. All of the participants – both men and women – were unanimous that six months was not enough. The pressure to get a job, any job, meant that often the SIV recipients themselves did not continue with needed English classes. However, this need for a longer period of financial support is also due to the difficulty of finding appropriate job opportunities experienced by most of the SIV recipients due to what they perceive is Afghan university degrees and experience not being accepted as valid in the U.S. Many of the SIV recipients recount being interviewed by companies many times, but

then rejected when they find out their degree and experience is in Afghanistan, even though this is clearly indicated on their resumes and they have good references from the Americans they worked with in Afghanistan, or they would not have received a Special Immigrant Visa. This is a case where perception and the reality may differ, because it appears that the real issue is the level of and their confidence speaking in English when they first arrive, not their job qualifications or validity of their degrees. Clearly, they had the qualifications and recommendations to get to an interview stage, but then their understanding and/or spoken English was recognized not to be what was needed for the job. Those doing the interviewing are not telling candidates the real reason why they are not being hired, because many of those interviewed said the same thing. This constant rejection and the difficulty of finding a job that they believe doesn't recognize their education and experience simply because of where they are from is demoralizing for the SIV recipients. Thus, a longer period of financial support that enables SIV recipients to achieve a higher level of fluency in English prior to feeling pressure to find a job seems critical. In addition, assessments for placement in appropriate and intensive English classes rather than being placed in general classes for refugees is also critical to achieving stronger English language skills in the shortest period of time.

The inability to get a good job commensurate with their education and experience also prevents them from moving out of the poor-quality, low-income apartments in the often dangerous and unwelcoming neighborhoods initially assigned to them as quickly as they would like. The assignment of these apartments also does not permit Afghan SIV families to develop a sense of belonging through being able to engage in activities in the community or even to meet other people in the neighborhood. The impact of this situation slows integration, because it does not give the Afghans an opportunity in day-to-day life in their community to interact with fluent

English speakers and practice their English and gain more of an understanding of American culture, the skills and knowledge they need to be hired for better jobs and to function in society. For those interviewed who could not afford to move to their own home after a period of time, these initial experiences led them to choose to live in apartments in Afghan neighborhoods, when they were financially able to select their own apartments, which can create insularity and slow development of English language skills and integration further.

The wives of the Afghan SIV recipients typically do not speak or have only the most basic English skills when they arrive. Their ability to learn English, which is so critical to their ability to function in and integrate into U.S. society, is impacted by the neighborhoods where they are assigned housing, the lack of daycare options at the language centers or community colleges, and the lack of efficient public transportation options. All, but one of the women I interviewed had young children making the lack of daycare a critical issue. Online English courses during COVID helped for some but were impossible to keep up with for others with school age children who suddenly were home all the time and whose schoolwork needed to be supervised.

### ***Impact on Mental Health:***

The experiences of these Afghan male SIV recipients and their wives led quickly to mental health issues, particularly depression, for many of them. Those who were willing to talk about it said that they were prescribed anti-depressants by their doctors.

For the men, these mental health issues are caused by the transition from being well respected by both Afghans and Americans in Afghanistan. They were among the well-educated and financially well-off population in Afghanistan with a home, car, good job, and a good income that enabled them to support their families. Once in the U.S. they found themselves thrust into poverty, poor living conditions, and isolation without the longer-term support needed

to find one's footing. One of the SIV recipients, who after being rejected from jobs he felt appropriate for his university education and experience as an engineer took a menial job packing children's clothes into boxes. He described the impact of this job, saying "I had never worked as a laborer.... [this was] not the work that I wanted, but I had to do it. It had a bad effect on my outlook."<sup>156</sup> When asked why this job had a bad effect on his mental health, he said it was because he felt worthless as a person and that all the education he had achieved and work that he had done in Afghanistan was for nothing.<sup>157</sup> It was not until he eventually found a job after a couple of years in an engineering company and was able to move his family to a nicer apartment in a friendly neighborhood that he felt his mental health improved.

For the women, their mental health issues stem from the loss of their community and their network of female family members and friends in Afghanistan, the English language barrier, the vast cultural change from being women in a highly patriarchal society to finding themselves in a culture that values independence among both men and women, and the isolation they experience in the U.S. moving from nice homes in Afghanistan to unclean apartments in neighborhoods that are unwelcoming, dangerous, and sometimes hostile to them for the way they dress. One of the women shared that after coming to the United States, she found herself depressed, because she was alone with her small daughter in small, dark apartment in a dangerous location, she did not speak English, she did not drive, and there was no support for her to turn to in times of need. Her husband, whose English was very good when they arrived, initially got a good job that recognized his education and experience, but it took him to Los Angeles, which was almost six hours drive from Sacramento.<sup>158</sup> Left alone and worried about the nightly disturbances and fights

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<sup>156</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, 2021.

<sup>157</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, May, 2021.

<sup>158</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

in the neighborhood, she was not able to sleep at night and soon found herself depressed.<sup>159</sup> Her depression lasted for nearly a year and half, but then she went home for a visit to Afghanistan, which helped.<sup>160</sup> Eventually her husband found a job based in Sacramento, and now they live in their own house, with a lot of light and which she had decorated and painted with bright colors, she is doing well.<sup>161</sup>

The findings presented in Chapter 4, reflections on these findings and their implications on the integration of the Afghan male SIV recipients and their wives presented in this section serve as the basis for the programmatic recommendations I offer in the following section.

***b. Recommendations to Aid in the Integration of Special Immigrant Visa Recipients into United States Society***

In the subsequent paragraphs I offer three key recommendations that, based on my findings, I believe will have the most significant impact on reducing barriers to and speeding the integration of the Afghan male SIV recipients and their wives into U.S. society.

First, financial and organizational support needs to be provided for longer than the current six months. My recommendation is that the duration of this support be one year and the financial allowance be increased. This longer period and higher level of support achieves two critical outcomes. It would give SIV recipients time to adapt and improve their English language skills, which would enable them to get a job more commensurate with their experience and education, without feeling pressure to get a job immediately. In addition, being provided with a higher financial allowance would: (1) allow them to be placed in a better apartment in a safe

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<sup>159</sup> Interviewed by Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>160</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, Sacramento, California, June, 2021.

<sup>161</sup> Shabnam Fayyaz, June, 2021.

neighborhood; and (2) be able to buy a car sooner, enabling their wives to learn to drive sooner and enabling both the Afghan men SIV recipients and their wives able to function in a city like Sacramento without efficient and ubiquitous public transportation.

Second, there should be English language assessment testing of each adult to place them into appropriate language classes, because the effectiveness of these classes is critical to most SIV recipients being able to find a job commensurate with their education and experience.

Resettlement organizations also need to not just require an English class but explain the importance of these classes for appropriate job placement. For the wives of the SIV recipient, childcare options and/or online classes (as offered during COVID) need to be provided so they can attend these classes despite having very young children.

Third there needs to be a focus on creating community and instilling a sense of belonging on multiple levels. Empowerment programs for women that facilitate discussions about retaining aspects of their culture while learning about and adapting to American culture, particularly around issues for women and their roles need to be offered. These should include opportunities for yoga and other exercise classes. It is also important to create support networks for women that bring them together for social and other activities, given all of the Afghan women come to the U.S. having relied on a support network of women in Afghanistan, and they find themselves absent this and any network when they arrive in the U.S. These programs should also encourage SIV recipients and their families to engage in activities in the larger community and facilitate this engagement across cultures.

All of these recommendations would substantially reduce the mental health issues faced by these the Afghan male SIV recipient and their wives.

*c. Recommendations for Further Study*

Similar studies of the perceptions of the Afghan men SIV recipient and their wives need to be carried out in other Afghan SIV communities in the U.S. The Afghan SIV communities in the greater Washington D.C. area and New York City would be two worth studying. It is important to learn whether the Afghan male SIV recipient and their wives residing in other cities in different parts of the United States are facing the same issues or are having an easier time adapting or transitioning. Taken together these studies could serve as the basis for improving approaches used by non-profit organizations and city and state governments involved in various ways in helping immigrants with resettlement and integration.

Future studies should also track, perhaps by city or region, the economic and social indicators for the Afghan SIV population in the United States. This longer-term data would help in understanding how shorter-term barriers and issues impact the long-term outlook for this group of immigrants.



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