

Critical Trends Among Afghan Immigrants in Washington State: *Areas Requiring Attention*

Date: February 26, 2024

By: Fahim Ahmad Yousufzai

Background:

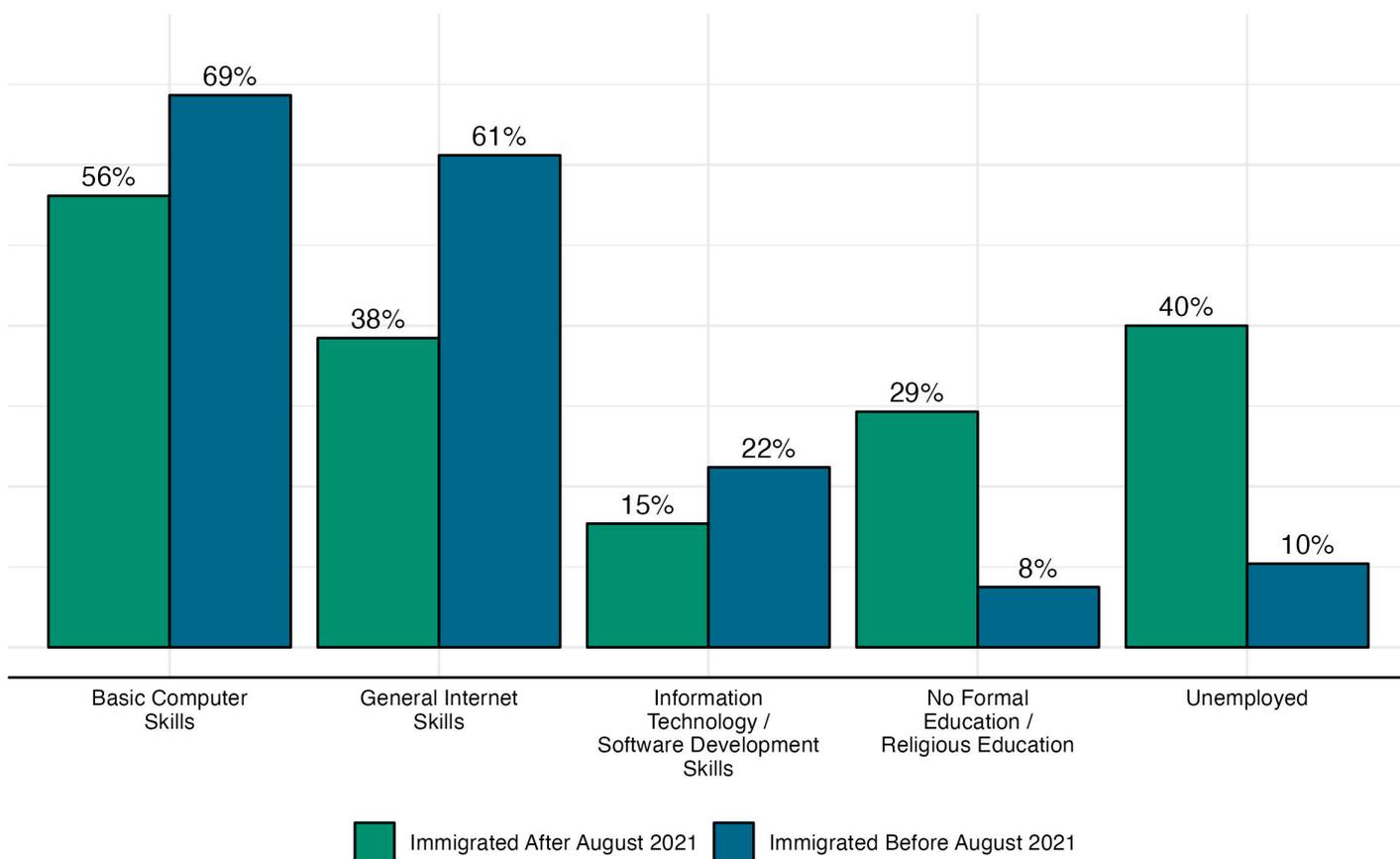
The population of Afghan immigrants in the United States (U.S.) has experienced significant growth in recent decades. It increased from around 4,000 in 1980 to 28,000 in 1990 and 45,000 in 2000. Within two decades, there was a notable surge in Afghan immigrants entering the country, reaching approximately 132,000 in 2019. Additionally, the U.S. withdrawal and subsequent collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021 into the hands of the Taliban led to an influx of Afghan immigrants to the U.S. By September 2022, some 86,000 Afghans had moved to the U.S. through the Operation Allies Welcome (OAW) program.

Utilizing recent survey data collected by the Porsesh Policy Research Institute (PR) from Afghan immigrants in Washington, this paper aims to provide some major trends of the resettlement experiences of Afghan immigrants and their integration in Washington State. By comparing those who moved to the U.S. before and after the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021, the study examines and provides a comparative analysis of educational and employment status, immigration pathways, access to and utilization of health services, and integration into Washington's society.

Education and Employment Status

Overall, the survey highlights varying levels of education, skills, and work experience among Afghan immigrants. Less than ten percent of respondents who moved to the U.S. before August 2021 indicated having either no formal education (6%) or only religious education (1.5%). In contrast, among those who moved to the U.S. after 2021, this percentage significantly rises to nearly thirty percent (no formal education, 26.2%; religious education, 3.1%).

While exploring the skill sets of respondents, those who moved post-August 2021 were marginally less inclined to report proficiency in skills crucial for the job market and employment. For instance, 15% of this group cited familiarity with Information Technology (including software development, web design, AI), whereas this figure is 22.4% among those who moved before August 2021. Additionally, a greater proportion of individuals who migrated to the U.S. before August 2021 exhibited basic computer skills and general internet familiarity (68.7% and 61.2%) compared to those who immigrated after 2021 (56.2% and 38.5%)



Based on the above findings, the unemployment rate among individuals who migrated to the U.S. after 2021 is four times higher than those who migrated prior to August 2021 (40.0% vs. 10.4%). Within this group of respondents, females are nearly three times more likely to encounter unemployment challenges compared to males (68.1% vs. 24.1%).

Resettlement agencies play a crucial role in facilitating job access for immigrants.

The survey findings suggest that, beyond the networks of family and friends among respondents, the involvement of resettlement agencies and community organizations is vital in assisting migrants in accessing the job market. Almost one-third of participants (30%) reported securing their initial job through these agencies and organizations. This trend persists among migrants who moved to the U.S. both before and after August 2021.

Immigration Avenues and Reasons to Emigration

Afghan immigrants employ diverse paths and routes to reach the U.S., including the Special Immigration Visa (SIV), Diversity Visa (DV), marriage, student or professional visas, and seeking asylum. Some even choose to cross the Southern (Mexican) border as part of their journey. Notably, Special Immigrant Visa holders constitute a significant portion of Afghan immigrants. Specifically, individuals who arrived before August 2021 are twice as likely to have migrated to the United States through the Special Immigration Visa (SIV) program compared to recent immigrants (76.1% vs. 39.2%). This information is based on responses to questions about the respondents' immigration status.

Among individuals who arrived before August 2021, 50.7% declared themselves as U.S. citizens. Among individuals who arrived post-August 2021, various responses were noted, including undocumented status (2.3%), parolee status (16.2%), and living under temporary protection status (20%). However, both groups similarly reported being Green Card holders (around 45%). Notably, the latter group is more likely to be classified as asylum seekers or asylees (15.4% vs. 4.5%).

Concerns regarding security and escaping the Taliban remained predominant factors motivating Afghans to migrate to the United States, regardless of whether they arrived before or after August 2021. However, the latter group places greater emphasis on fleeing the Taliban, with 70.8% citing it as their primary reason for immigration, compared to 59.7% among those who arrived earlier. Notably, over half of immigrants from both groups, whether they arrived before or after August 2021, expressed motivations such as seeking better living standards and career prospects (64.2% and 56.9%, respectively). However, a higher percentage of individuals who arrived before 2021 cited access to education (32.8% vs. 17.7%) and political or religious factors (16.4% vs. 13.1%) as their primary reasons for migrating to the U.S.

Health Access and Utilization

Generally, the survey respondents express satisfaction with their physical health since their arrival in the U.S. (78.7%). The same trend holds true among individuals who arrived before and after August 2021 (74.6% and 80.8%, respectively). A similar pattern emerges when asking about the respondents' mental health, with more than three-fourths of both groups reporting being happy with their mental health condition (80.6% and 76.2%, respectively). However, it's important to note that self-reporting on poor mental health conditions is highly stigmatized among Afghans, which can act as a barrier to accurate reporting.

In terms of the gender breakdown, females are less likely to report being happy with their physical health condition and are two times more likely to report that their physical health has worsened compared to males since coming to the U.S. (10.9% vs. 4.6%).

Regarding access to healthcare services, the survey data indicates that 9 out of 10 individuals have access to health insurance. Notably, individuals who moved to the U.S. after 2021 are more likely to have access to free health insurance (85%), whereas those who arrived before August 2021 predominantly have health insurance from their employer (32.8%).

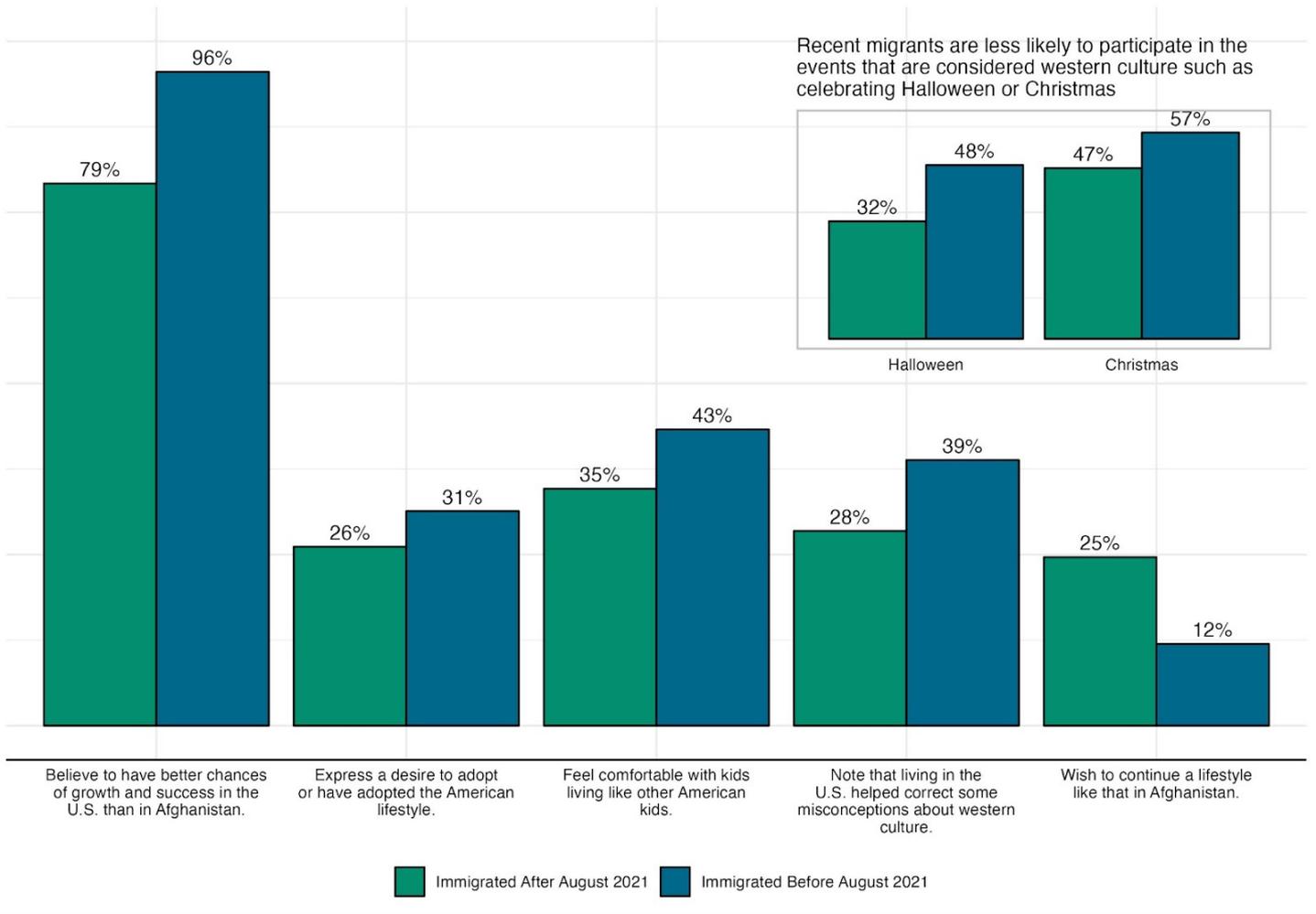
In addition to having access to health insurance, when looking at the actual utilization of healthcare services, the data uncovers notable differences between individuals who moved to the U.S. before and after August 2021. A significant portion of both groups is assigned to specific primary care providers (PCP). This number is lower among the newly arrived population (71.5% vs. 91.0%, respectively). The latter group is also less likely to state they can visit a doctor when necessary (37.7% vs. 53.7%, respectively).

The financial burden associated with accessing healthcare services serves as a pivotal determinant influencing the utilization of health services.

While analyzing the factors influencing limited utilization of health services, two prominent barriers emerge: the costs associated with accessing these services and, surprisingly, the language barrier. The cost associated with health services is cited more frequently by individuals who arrived before August 2021 (37.3%), while language as a barrier is cited more frequently by those who arrived after 2021 (29.3%). Transportation is the third influencing factor in the utilization of health services, which is cited at an equal proportion by both groups (12%). Additionally, the survey findings reveal that privacy concerns, cultural issues, and distrust of healthcare providers are perceived as obstacles toward utilizing health services as well, although stated by fewer numbers of respondents.

Integration into the Host Community

Recent Afghan immigrants to the U.S. demonstrate a stronger tendency to adhere to traditional Afghan values and religious beliefs, with 52.3% expressing such inclination. Additionally, a significant portion, accounting for 24.6%, express a strong desire to maintain a lifestyle similar to what they experienced in Afghanistan. In contrast, those who moved to the U.S. before August 2021 exhibit a willingness to adapt to the American lifestyle, as indicated by 31.3% of respondents. Furthermore, a substantial 43.3% of this group express comfort with the idea of their children adopting an American lifestyle. Additionally, a considerable percentage of this cohort (38.8%) cited that living in the U.S. has broadened their understanding of Western culture, indicating a willingness to engage with and learn from their new environment.



Consistent with the above findings, individuals who immigrated after August 2021 show a lower intention to participate in events considered part of Western culture, such as celebrating Halloween or Christmas (32.3% and 46.9%, respectively), compared to individuals who moved to the U.S. before August 2021, where the participation rate stands at a higher rate (47.8% and 56.7%, respectively).

Recent Afghan immigrants to the U.S. tend to uphold traditional values and desire to maintain a lifestyle akin to Afghanistan, while those arriving before August 2021 show greater willingness to embrace American culture and encourage their children's involvement in U.S. politics and civics.

The above trend persists when examining respondents' perspectives on political and civic involvement. Among those who immigrated to the U.S. before August 2021, there is notable eagerness for their children to participate in American politics and civics, with 49.3% expressing such desires. Additionally, slightly more than half of them (53.7%) perceive active political engagement as crucial to democracy. Individuals who migrated recently to the U.S., however, exhibit lower levels of aspiration for their children's involvement in U.S. politics and civics (39.2%) and place less emphasis on the importance of political engagement (38.5%).

Summary of Key Findings and Policy Recommendations

- The post-2021 surge of Afghan immigrants entering the United States highlights a worrying pattern of lower education levels and job skills. This trend can contribute to a rise in unemployment rates, especially among female migrants. Consequently, there is a pressing need for tailored support systems, with resettlement agencies assuming a crucial role in facilitating job opportunities for these migrants. This underscores the necessity for ongoing investment and cooperation to tackle the employment obstacles encountered by recent arrivals.
- Additionally, financial constraints significantly affect healthcare utilization among Afghan immigrants. Therefore, policy actions are necessary to alleviate these financial burdens and enhance access to essential healthcare. This can be achieved by expanding affordable healthcare options to mitigate cost-related barriers, ultimately improving the health and well-being of Afghan immigrants in the United States.
- Furthermore, to foster social inclusion, policy initiatives should target bridging the cultural and systemic understanding gap between recent and earlier immigrants. This can be achieved through the promotion of cultural programs and the provision of resources for language acquisition and further civic engagement initiatives.