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An Illustrative Review of Protective Factors That Foster Resilience Among Refugee Populations

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Abstract

Refugees are individuals who involuntarily move from their home due to the exposure of traumatic experiences such as persecution, war, or natural disaster. Our efforts concentrated on the protective factors that promote resilience (or the ability to adapt to challenges) during resettlement, which are investigated less in current empirical literature (Masten, 2018). To guide our endeavor, we searched for relevant key terms (e.g., refugee, protective factors, and resilience) in scholarly databases (e.g., PsycINFO). We found a total of 30 articles: 22 were cross-sectional studies and eight were longitudinal. For this review, we examined protective factors in multiple layers or ecologies, as motivated by the Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), that were linked to positive outcomes for refugees within the individual, among interpersonal relationships, and community support systems. Overall, this review highlights several factors that promote resilience (e.g., religiosity, family dynamics, school connectedness, and social support) despite past trauma and resettlement stress. Findings may inform theory development, as well as programs and policies intended to support refugees during resettlement.

An Illustrative Review of Protective Factors that Foster Resilience among Refugee Populations

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Background

➤ Currently 70.8 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced from their homes due to war, conflict, and persecution (UNHCR, 2019)

➤ If given the opportunity to resettle in a safer country, many refugees still tend to experience psychological distress, often as a result of acculturative stressors in their new community.

➤ An abundant amount of research has focused on these negative factors (e.g., trauma, stressors, and distress) that follows a refugees' path, but less work has concentrated on the protective factors that promote resilience.
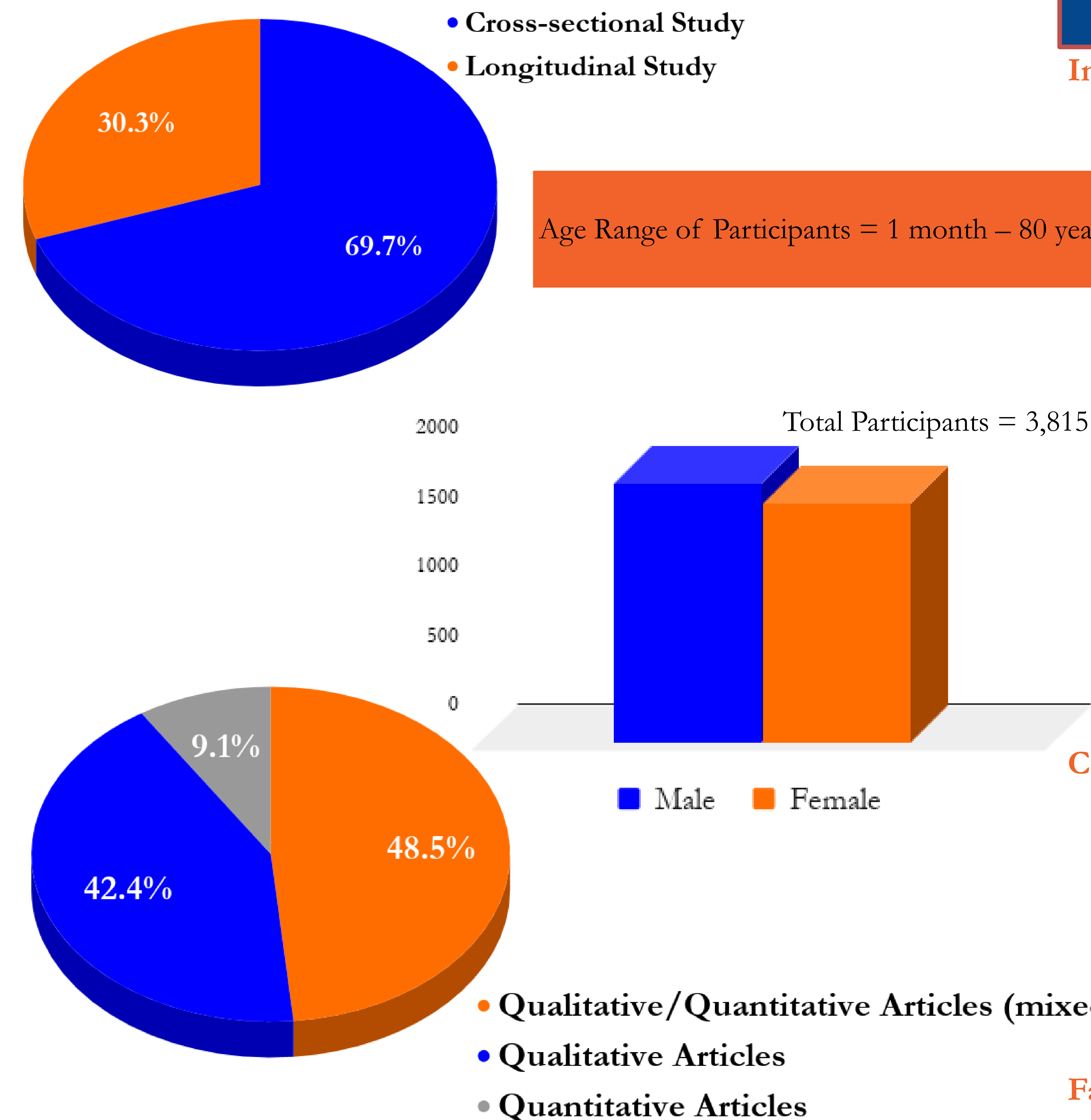
Aims/Goals

➤ Review existing empirical research on protective factors that promote resilience (or the ability to adapt to challenge: see Masten, 2018) during resettlement among refugees.

➤ We relied on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and a strengths-based approach to understand how protective factors in various ecologies promote resilience during resettlement despite past traumas and current resettlement stressors.
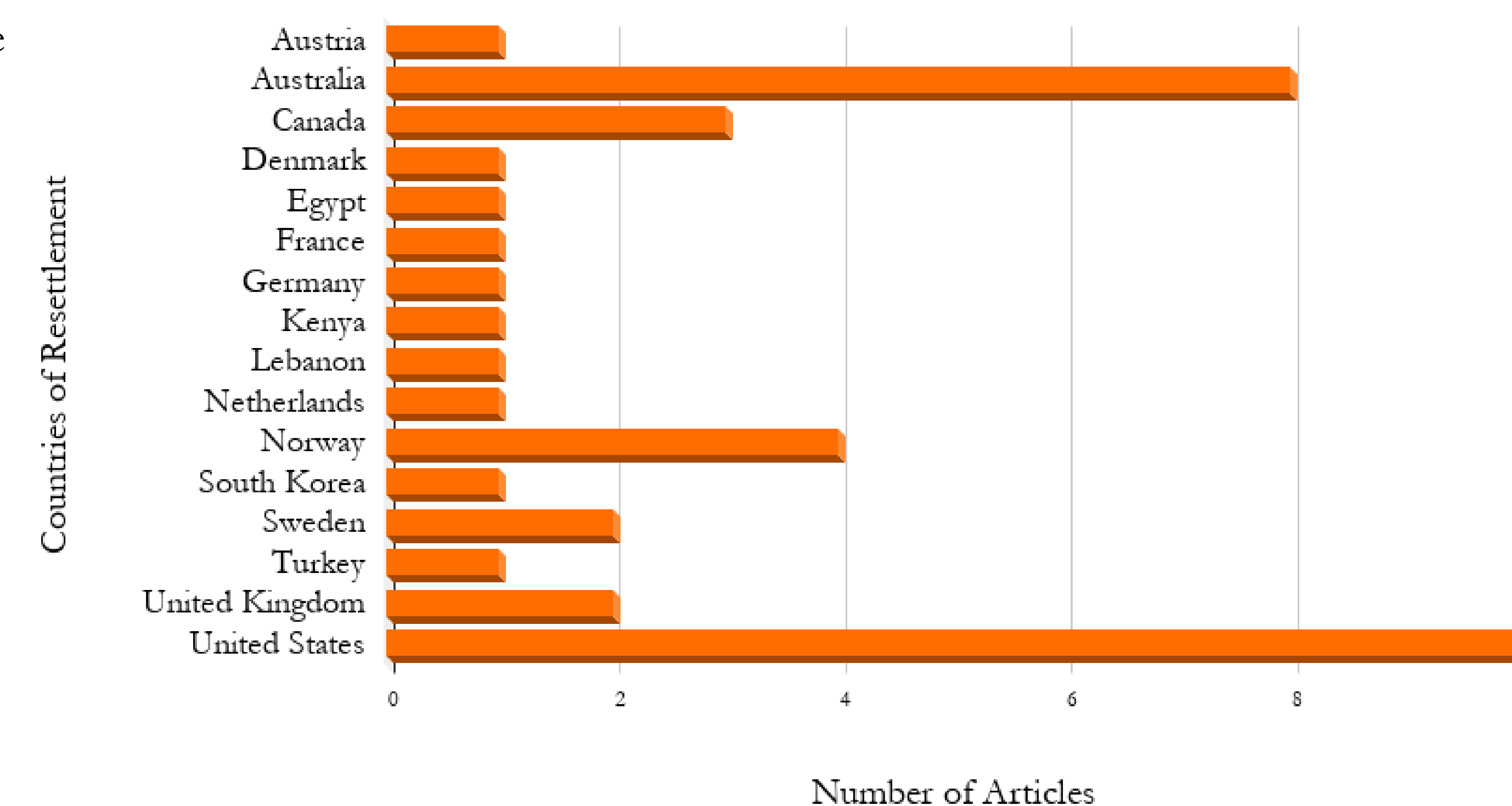
Method & Analysis

➤ We searched scholarly databases (e.g., PsycINFO) using relevant key words (e.g., refugee, protective factors, resilience, etc.) where refugees were assessed (e.g., interviewed; surveyed) during resettlement.

➤ We limited our search to peer-reviewed journals that were published from the year 2000 to present

➤ Thirty three (33) peer-reviewed articles were selected and reviewed.

➤ We created a table with participant characteristics, place of resettlement, variables (stress pathway of interest and protective factors), methodology used, and key findings for each study (available upon request).

➤ Protective factor variables included individual factors, family factors, and community.

Contact & References

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- Cross-sectional Study
- Longitudinal Study

30.3%
69.7%

Age Range of Participants = 1 month – 80 years

Total Participants = 3,815

2000
1500
1000
500
0

■ Male ■ Female

48.5%
42.4%
9.1%

- Qualitative/Quantitative Articles (mixed)
- Qualitative Articles
- Quantitative Articles

Countries of Resettlement

Austria
Australia
Canada
Denmark
Egypt
France
Germany
Kenya
Lebanon
Netherlands
Norway
South Korea
Sweden
Turkey
United Kingdom
United States

Countries of Resettlement (y-axis)

0   2   4   6   8   10
Number of Articles

Key Findings

Individual Protective Factor Themes

➤ Religion
  ➤ Prayer was reported as a helpful method to overcome past trauma [3, 4, 31]
➤ Participants reported that religiosity allowed them to gain a sense of control [11, 21]
➤ Participants reported religiosity as a valuable protective factor in a broad sense [5, 8, 11]
➤ Resilience was related to reduced psychological distress [1, 18]

➤ Commonly Measured Coping Strategies
  ➤ Problem-focused coping [3, 10]
  ➤ Social support seeking [3, 7, 10]
  ➤ Engagement (active) and disengagement (avoidant) [9, 15, 23]
  ➤ Reflection and relaxation [3]
  ➤ Cognitive reframing (positive thinking) [11]

Community Protective Factor Themes

➤ School connectedness led to resilience and increased wellbeing [12, 13, 28]
➤ Involvement in athletic clubs led to a greater sense of belonging [16, 24]
➤ Friendships led to a greater sense of belonging and led to other connections [5, 16]
➤ Religiosity was reported to be a healthy community function [4, 26, 30]

Family Protective Factor Themes

➤ Participants reported that the presence of family members was a source of emotional support [8, 21, 30]
➤ Family cohesion was significantly related to decreased depressive symptoms [18]
➤ Participants reported extended family members to be a helpful support system [19, 25]

Future Directions & Implications

➤ Longitudinal research designs focused on protective factors, strengths, and resilience of refugees.

➤ Empirical research of protective factors among resettled refugee populations are important so improvements can be made to policies and programs.