



Effects of Stress Upon the Physical Development of Syrian Refugee Adolescents

Kenan Saleh (COL 2019)

Advisor: Abraham Wyner

For my research project, I traveled to the Zaatari refugee camp that houses tens of thousands of displaced Syrians -- a place few outsiders are permitted to enter. While there, I interviewed and examined hundreds of children between the ages of 9 and 17 living within the camp. After asking them about their stress levels and conditions while living within Zaatari as opposed to those previously in Syria, I measured and recorded their height and weight. The objective of my study is to determine the effect of enduring large amounts of stress upon the physical development of these refugees. To do this, I statistically compared the health indicator data of the refugees that I measured to the normalized national averages for their respective age and gender.

During my project, I learned about how the lives of numerous children were turned upside down as a result of a politically charged civil war. I witnessed the toll of long-term stress due to living in fear of a bomb being dropped from the sky at any moment. The few days I spent at Zaatari camp taught me more about humanity and justice than I had learned in the previous 18 years of my comfortable life. I also learned the logistics and structure of the modern refugee system -- both its advantages and disadvantages. After preliminary analysis of the data from my research, I found a peculiar trend: my data suggests that indeed male refugee adolescents have a significantly lower BMI than average across all age groups. What was interesting, however, is that my data also suggests that female refugee adolescents do not have any difference in BMI and are very much average. The causes of this are unclear, and I have not been able to identify any real explanation for this trend. One thing I did notice during my time in the camp that may relate to this trend is that the male adolescents often took part in heavy physical labor due to the lack of adult males living there (since refugees are typically either women or children). I speculate this could lead to the male adolescents requiring a much larger calorie intake than their female counterparts; however, each family is given a fixed amount of money for food that does not take this discrepancy of necessity into account. The implications of this could be tremendous, and could possibly lead to the reevaluation of distribution standards in Zaatari and refugee camps around the world.

Participating in this research project has been an invaluable experience to me academically and personally. I have been able to learn the logistics of conducting research from the ground up and the specifics of each step in the process. This experience will equip me with the skills necessary

to conduct more advanced research in the future. Simultaneously, the nature of my work has prompted reflection and maturation within myself. Participating in this project has enhanced my awareness not only as a student, but also as a researcher and humanitarian.