Title: Minds Under Siege: Measuring the Impact of Traumatic Stress and a Psychosocial Support Intervention on the Executive Functioning of Syrian Refugee Children

Presenter: Alexandra Chen, Doctoral Candidate, Harvard University | chen21@g.harvard.edu

Co-Authors:
Prof. Catherine Panter-Brick | Yale University | catherine.panter-brick@yale.edu
Prof. Margaret Sheridan | UNC-Chapel Hill | sheridan.margaret@unc.edu

1st Choice: Educational Effectiveness in Global & Immigration-Related Contexts
2nd Choice: Social and Emotional Learning in Education Settings

Around 14 million children are suffering from armed conflict in Syria and Iraq (UNICEF, 2015), and those who have fled to neighbouring countries are struggling with the hardship of protracted displacement. A major concern is the lasting harm that both past traumatic experiences and continued toxic stress are having on refugee children – particularly on their cognitive development and, thus, their abilities to learn and academically succeed. While exposure to toxic stress has been shown to have severe long-term adverse consequences, from increased risk for mental illness to decreased school success (Hanson et al., 2014, Shonkoff & Gardner, 2012; Nelson & Sheridan, 2011), there is little evidence indicating whether toxic stress impairs cognition specifically and, if the inverse is true – that interventions aimed at decreasing psychosocial stress can in fact improve children’s cognitive abilities.

The goals of this research is thus twofold – (1) to investigate the relationship between trauma history, mental health and cognitive functioning among refugee children; and (2) to evaluate the impact of Mercy Corps’ psychosocial intervention for 400 randomly-selected Syrian refugee children aged 13-17 years in four areas of Jordan. The study measures the Executive Functions (a set of core cognitive skills that include working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility) using the Rapid Assessment of Cognitive and Emotional Regulation (RACER) tablet-based assessment tool developed at a neuropsychological lab in Boston. Results are then compared with the same children’s Trauma History as well as their scores on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), an international measure of child mental health.

The results of this research are one of the first to reflect how exposure to trauma and toxic stress affect the cognitive abilities of refugee children in the Middle East. In a context where the average length of displacement for refugees is now approaching 20 years (Milner and Loescher, 2011) – well over the entirety of a refugee’s childhood – the evaluative aspect of the study also serves to advance our current understanding of humanitarian intervention models that have the potential to protect and foster children’s cognitive development despite conflict and adversity.