



Specialized Care for Survivors of Torture in the United States and California

What is torture? Torture is the intentional infliction of physical or psychological pain and suffering on another, including severe beatings, rape, deprivation, humiliation, threats, mock executions, kidnapping, sensory stress, forced postures, asphyxiation, burning, witness to murder and torture of family, and more. Systematic torture is carried out in approximately half of the nations in the world by brutal dictators, government officials, or unchecked gangs as a method of controlling their populations and destroying the identity and humanity of individuals.

Who are survivors? Survivors of torture are educators, lawyers, farmers, journalists, doctors, nurses, students, scientists, shopkeepers, engineers, and others. Many were leaders in their home countries who worked for democratic change. They are resilient and driven to succeed, creating businesses, learning English, and making other important contributions to local communities and local economies. The 39 members of the National Consortium of Torture Treatment Programs (NCTTP), including six programs in the California Consortium of Torture Treatment Centers (CCTTC), operate in 21 states and the District of Columbia to facilitate the healing and recovery of survivors.

How many survivors are there in the U.S.? Research from the Center for Victims of Torture suggests that as many as 44% of refugees, asylum seekers, and asylees in the U.S. are primary or secondary torture survivors.¹ Given this prevalence rate, an estimated two million torture survivors live in the U.S. today, and more than 125,000 in California

What are the long-term impacts of torture? Experiences of torture commonly lead survivors to demonstrate symptoms such as chronic pain, nightmares and sleep disorders, severe depression and anxiety, inability to concentrate, and thoughts of suicide. NCTTP analyzed from 9,025 torture survivors from 125 countries who sought services at one of 23 NCTTP member centers in the U.S. A diagnostic study of a portion of these survivors found that 69% had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and 52.4% had major depressive disorder (MDD).²

How do specialized services help survivors? Nearly 25 years ago, Congress recognized the unique needs of torture survivors and passed the first Torture Victims Relief Act (PL 105-320—OCT. 30, 1998) with strong bipartisan support. Without the benefit of help, torture survivors can become immobilized by their distress, unable to function within their communities or contribute to their family's well-being. Effective torture rehabilitation programs address a survivor's physical, psychological, legal, and social needs to reduce suffering and restore functioning as quickly as possible. Data from NCTTP's member centers shows that earlier treatment limits depression and also increases employment rates.

How are NCTTP members responding to current migration issues? Recently arrived populations from Afghanistan, Ukraine, and Nicaragua (the 222 former political prisoners who arrived in February) include significant numbers of torture survivors. Of the more than 70,000 Afghans arriving in the US since August 2021, most of these individuals are likely to be survivors of torture, whether primary or secondary, especially if they have family members still living in Afghanistan under threat and targeting by the Taliban. Russia is also a more common country of origin lately.

Who do we serve in California and what services are provided? In FY2022, the California programs in CCTTC served 956 clients from 76 countries in 13,970 sessions. We provide a menu of direct services that are client-centered, trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and linguistically appropriate, including individual and group therapy, medical care, psychiatry, medical case management, dental care, intensive clinical case management, and forensic evaluations (medical affidavits and psychological evaluations) submitted as critical evidence in asylum cases. The psychological evaluations and medical affidavits we provide are critically important to a survivor being granted asylum. For asylum seekers represented by attorneys, the national asylum grant rate is less than 50%, and without an attorney, the grant rate is lower³. More than 85% of torture survivors receiving forensic evaluations from CCTTC members are granted asylum.

¹ Office of Refugee Resettlement. See <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/services-survivors-torture>. Center for Victims of Torture, "Updating the Estimate of Refugees Resettled in the United States who have Suffered Torture." (September 2015).

² NCTTP. "Descriptive, inferential, functional outcome data on 9,025 torture survivors over six years in the United States." *Torture Journal*, Volume 25, No. 2. (2015). See <https://jtrct.org/publications/torture-journal/119>

³ Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, Syracuse University, Asylum Data through February 2023 <https://trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/asylum/>