

# REFUGEE FACT SHEET

**FAQ | DEFINITIONS | PROCESS** January 2018

---

## **Refugee**

A person outside of his or her country of nationality who is unable or unwilling to return because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

## **Asylum Seeker**

A person who flees his or her country seeking sanctuary and reaches a U.S. port of entry, or is already in the U.S. without official resettlement documents, can apply for asylum — the right to be recognized as a refugee and receive legal protection. Asylum seekers must demonstrate that their fear of persecution in their home country is well-founded. People granted asylum can work and receive social security cards and apply for a state driver's license.

---

Source: [unrefugees.org](http://unrefugees.org) | [uscis.gov](http://uscis.gov)

## **Screenings**

The UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, screens and interviews each resettlement candidate. The United States then conducts its own vetting process to decide whether to accept a refugee. The process is conducted abroad, can take up to two years, and involves eight U.S. federal government agencies, six different security databases, five separate background checks, four biometric security checks, three separate in-person interviews, and two interagency security checks. After the U.S. government approves a refugee, that person's case is assigned to one of nine NGOs (six of which are faith-based) by the U.S. State Department. The NGO helps refugees to find work, aids them in adjusting to their new life, and assists them as they integrate into their new communities in the United States.

---

Source: [UNHCR.org](http://UNHCR.org)

## **Numbers**

In the 2017 calendar year 33,368 refugees resettled in the U.S., half the number accepted in 2015, and roughly a third of those who arrived in 2016. The total number of refugees coming to the United States fluctuates with global events and U.S. priorities. Historically the United States has led the world in refugee resettlement, but it lags behind other countries when the numbers are measured against population or gross domestic product.

**American Beat**

Past numbers: from 1990 to 1995, an average of 112,000 refugees arrived in the U.S. each year, with many coming from the former Soviet Union. Refugee admissions dropped off to fewer than 27,000 in 2002 following the 9/11 attacks. By fiscal year 2015 the number of refugees was 69,933, and in fiscal year 2016 it was 84,994. Note: the government's fiscal year (FY) is Oct. 1–Sept. 30.

---

Sources: USNews.com 1-10-18; UNHCR; Pew Research Center; Migration Policy Institute analysis of U.S. State Department data.

## **Caps**

The Refugee Act of 1980 mandated that the president consult with Congress and set an annual cap for refugee admissions to the United States. The first cap in 1980 was 231,000. For FY 2018 the cap was 45,000, down from 50,000 in FY 2017 and 85,000 in FY 2016.

## **Countries of Origin**

Most of the refugees that resettled in the United States in 2017 were from Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Bhutan, Iraq, or Ukraine, according to a *U.S. News & World Report* analysis of data from the U.S. State Department's Refugee Processing Center. According to Pew Research, in fiscal year 2017 (which ended 9-3-17) the largest refugee group was from Democratic Republic of Congo (9,377), Iraqis made up the second-largest group (6,886).

---

Source: USNews.com 1-10-18 Pewresearch.org 11-2-17

## **Faiths**

Nearly 39,000 Muslim refugees entered the U.S. in FY 2016, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. State Department data. This put Muslim refugees at nearly half, or 46 percent, of refugee admissions. This was a larger percentage of Muslims than in past fiscal years. Christians accounted for 44 percent of the refugees admitted. From 2002 to 2016, 46% of all refugees were Christian, while 32% were Muslim.

---

Source: Pew Research Center 10-5-16

## **Resettlement States**

Generally, refugees are dispersed across the U.S. based on local community resources, efforts to reunite families, or the ability of nonprofit agencies to receive and resettle them. The resettlement organizations are responsible for receiving the refugees and providing them with help in the first 90 days, including finding safe and affordable housing and promoting self-sufficiency through English-language classes, job training, and other services. Once refugees no longer need the help of a resettlement agency, they are free to move to the city or state of their choice.

---

Source: Pew Research Center 11-2-17 | State.gov 1-20-17

## **Top Ten Refugee-Receiving States During the 2017 Calendar Year**

1. California: 9.3 percent, or 3,100 individuals
2. Texas: 8.5 percent, or 2,825 individuals
3. Ohio: 6.2 percent, or 2,085 individuals
4. Washington: 5.8 percent, or 1,939 individuals
5. New York: 5.7 percent, or 1,903 individuals
6. Pennsylvania: 4.5 percent, or 1,489 individuals
7. Michigan: 4.2 percent, or 1,403 individuals
8. North Carolina: 3.8 percent, or 1,280 individuals
9. Illinois: 3.3 percent, or 1,100 individuals
10. Georgia: 3.2 percent, or 1,075 individuals

\*Two states accepted no refugees: Wyoming and Hawaii

---

Source: USNews.com 1-10-18

## **Resettlement Agencies**

Nine nonprofit agencies in the United States are authorized by the U.S. State Department to resettle refugees and to receive federal funds:

- Church World Service (CWS)
- Episcopal Migration Ministries
- Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC)
- Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS)
- International Rescue Committee
- Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS)
- U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services
- World Relief

In total there are about 300 resettlement offices spread across 49 states. According to Reuters, in fiscal year 2018 the U.S. State Department will stop authorizing offices that handle fewer than 100 refugees, forcing agencies to downsize.

---

Source: Reuters.com 12-21-17

## **Refugee Economic Contributions**

Refugees receive employment authorization when they arrive; they are required to apply for a green card after a year, and they are eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship after five years. In 2015 New American Economy analyzed a group of almost 2.3 million refugees. According to NAE's analysis, these refugees earned a collective \$77.2 billion in household income and contributed \$20.9 billion in federal, state, and local taxes. Of those who had been in the country for 16 to 25 years, 84 percent had become citizens. Additionally, 13 percent started their own businesses, and 57.4 percent of these refugee households owned their homes.

---

Sources: [NewAmericanEconomy.org](http://NewAmericanEconomy.org) | U.S. Department of State/Reception and Placement Program