



From Harm to Home

IRC Frequently Asked Questions about Refugees and Resettlement*

Who are refugees and displaced persons?

Refugees are men, women and children fleeing war, persecution and political upheaval who have been uprooted with little warning, enduring great hardship during their flight. They become refugees when they cross borders to seek safety in another country and are called “internally displaced” when they are forced to flee their homes, but remain within the borders of their native country.

The 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, as amended by its 1967 protocol, defines a refugee as a person who, *"owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country..."*

The United States will not recognize persons who have participated in war crimes and violations of humanitarian and human rights law, including the crime of terrorism, as refugees. They are specifically excluded from the protection accorded to refugees. See a list of [famous refugees through the ages](#).

What is the difference between a refugee and an immigrant?

Refugees are forced to flee their homes and seek safety in another country, often times without warning. Immigrants are people who make a conscious decision to leave their countries to seek a better life elsewhere.

How many refugees and displaced persons are there, and who makes up the majority of the refugee population?

Right now there are nearly 65 million forcibly displaced people in the world, 1.19 million of them in need of resettlement, according to a [June 2016 report](#) by the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR. In 2017, Syrians are projected to account for 40% of needs, followed by Sudan (11%), Afghanistan (10%) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (9%). More than half of all refugees are children.



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What are the options for resettlement?

Most refugees and displaced persons return to their communities when peace and stability return to their country. When conditions in countries of origin remain unstable or there is a danger of persecution upon repatriation, some refugees are able to stay in a refugee settlement in another country. Unfortunately, many host countries are unable to accept refugees permanently. Resettlement in a third country, such as the United States, is the last option, and is available to only a tiny fraction of the world's refugees.

The United States has a tradition of offering refuge to those fleeing persecution and war and the U.S. government maintains a long-established humanitarian program that grants sanctuary in this country to a limited number of refugees who cannot safely return home or stay in a host country.

*Adapted and updated 04/17

How many refugees have the opportunity to resettle?

Very few refugees are ever even considered for resettlement. There are three internationally accepted durable solutions for refugees:

- **Voluntary repatriation.** Refugees return to their former country of nationality when conditions prevail that allow return in safety and dignity;
- **Local integration.** Local settlement and integration of refugees in their country of first asylum upon receiving agreement from the host country;
- **Resettlement.** Most frequently used for refugees whose life, liberty, safety, health or human rights are at risk in the country where they have sought refuge. Resettlement to a third country becomes the primary objective or priority when there is no other way to guarantee the legal or physical security of the refugee.

How does the U.S. determine if a refugee is eligible for resettlement?

Applicants for refugee admission to the U.S. must satisfy the following criteria:

- The definition of a "refugee" as determined by U.S. government officials.
- Be among those refugees determined by the President to be of special humanitarian concern to the U.S.
- Be otherwise admissible under U.S. law.
- Not be firmly resettled in any foreign country.

Although a refugee may meet the above criteria, the existence of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program does not create any entitlement for that person to be admitted to the U.S.



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How many refugees does the U.S. accept for resettlement?

The United States accepts a limited number of refugees each year. The President in consultation with Congress determines the authorized target for refugee admissions through a Presidential Determination. For many years, approximately 75,000 refugees were invited to resettle in the United States but that number is currently in flux.

How do refugees make it to the United States?

The Department of State's Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) oversees the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program through U.S. embassies worldwide. The State Department develops application criteria and refugee admission levels and presents eligible cases for adjudication by officers of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

USCIS officers travel to the country of asylum to interview refugees who fall within the priorities established for the relevant nationality or region. The USCIS officers interview potential applicants to determine whether or not they are refugees as defined under U.S. law. A refugee of any nationality may be referred by UNHCR, however this does not guarantee admission to the U.S., for they must still qualify under U.S. law.

Upon completion of security and medical screening, the USCIS officer may approve the refugee's application for U.S. resettlement. After approval, arrangements are made for his/her placement with a U.S. voluntary agency and travel to the U.S.

What happens to refugees when they come to the United States?

Refugees must rebuild their lives from traumatic and tragic circumstances. The majority embrace their newly adopted homeland with tremendous energy and success. They go on to work, attend universities, build professions, purchase homes, raise children and contribute to their communities. Ultimately refugees obtain citizenship and become fully participating members of society. They become Americans.

Many refugees come to the United States without any possessions and without knowing anyone. Other refugees come here to be reunited with family members. All refugees receive limited assistance from the U.S. government and non-profit organizations. The U.S. State Department works with nine domestic resettlement agencies, including the IRC, which help refugees find housing, learn about life and customs in America, secure jobs, learn English, and become citizens. These agencies provide most of the basic things



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refugees need to restart their lives here and help them overcome cultural barriers so that their adjustment is as easy as possible.

What benefits do refugees receive?

The circumstances under which refugees leave their country are different from those of other immigrants. Often in fleeing persecution, they are without the luxury of bringing personal possessions or preparing themselves for life in a new culture. Recognizing this fact, the federal government provides transitional resettlement assistance to newly arrived refugees. In the first 90 days, agencies such as the IRC contract with the Department of State to provide for refugee's food, housing, employment, medical care, counseling and other services to help the refugee make a rapid transition to economic self-sufficiency. Refugees are expected to work out a reasonable repayment schedule for their travel expenses which are considered a loan not a subsidy.

How can I help refugees?

Everyone can help refugees by welcoming them as new and valuable members of American society. You can help refugees by volunteering at a local resettlement agency, becoming an English tutor, a tour guide, a mentor to a family, donating money, furniture and household items, teaching other people about refugees, and employing or encouraging local businesses to employ refugees. You can urge the U.S. government to be generous in its welcome to refugees. And you can contribute funds to the IRC or other refugee resettlement agency. [For details, see the “Call to Action” section of the Screening Guide on this website.](#)