

# **FACT SHEETS: REFUGEES & US REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT POLICY**

There is a lot of confusion and misinformation about refugees in the US and about the US government's laws and policies concerning refugees.

In order to help to dispel misinformation and to provide a starting point for learning more about refugees, these "fact sheets" provide basic information about refugees and the US's federal policies towards refugees.

# DEFINING A REFUGEE

- Based on the UN's legal definition of a refugee, the US government defines a refugee as a person who is unable or unwilling to return to their country because of fear of persecution, due to race, membership in a particular social group, political opinion, religion, or national origin.
- All refugees living in the US were approved for entry as a refugee *prior* to coming to the US. The Department of Homeland Security works with the United Nations (and other government agencies) abroad to conduct comprehensive and thorough background checks and interviews (often referred to as "vetting") for all potential refugees. This vetting process typically takes 1-2 years.
- After vetting and being approved to enter the US, refugees are "resettled" in a pre-determined city or town. They are aided in their transition into their new homes by one of 9 federally approved Refugee Resettlement Agencies. State and local governments are also involved in the resettlement process.
- Refugees are legally different from asylum seekers. Often referred to as "spontaneous" or "unplanned" migrants, asylum seekers arrive in the US and then apply for asylum status. It often takes years for their cases to be decided and many are denied and forced to return.

# US POLICIES ON REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT

- Accepting refugees is based on the moral principle of humanitarian concern and core values of providing protection and safety for people who are experiencing violence, persecution, or oppression.
- The U.S. Congress enacted its first refugee legislation in 1948, in the aftermath of WWII and the mass displacement of Europeans.
- During the Cold War, US refugee laws allowed for the entry of people fleeing Communist countries.
- In 1980, Congress passed into law the US Refugee Act. This law authorized & standardized federal assistance for refugee resettlement and created the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which is under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, in the US.
  - The ORR oversees resettlements and works with the 9 Refugee Resettlement Agencies to help settle refugees. Individual US citizens cannot sponsor or resettle refugees (unlike many other countries).
  - The ORR provides cash and medical assistance for a maximum of eight months. For up to five years, ORR provides ESL classes, job trainings, and other services that help refugees achieve economic self-sufficiency.

# REFUGEES IN THE US

- Since 1975, when records begin, 3,457,895 refugees have been resettled in the US. The majority coming from Communist countries.
- Annual admissions numbers have ranged from a high of 207,116 in 1980 to a low of 11,184 in 2020.
- In fiscal year 2021, the US anticipates resettling up to 62,500 refugees. This number is set annually by the White House and is referred to as the “refugee ceiling” or maximum capacity of refugees to be granted entry per year.
- Many studies have shown that refugees become self-sufficient in the short and long term.
  - At first, they often take jobs in industries that many US citizens balk at, like agricultural harvesting and meat packing. Over time, they tend to become educated and often start their own businesses. Within 10 years, refugees have similar rates of labor force participation and business ownership as U.S.-born citizens.
  - The large majority have learned to speak English within 10 years and have become naturalized U.S. citizens after 20 years.
- Refugees have experienced trauma and face many struggles, but they are amazingly resilient people. There are millions of success stories in the US! Albert Einstein, Madeline Albright, and Freddie Mercury are just a few examples of incredibly successful and influential people who were refugees in the US.

# LEARN MORE/ RESOURCES

- **Admission data and legal definitions**

- <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/grant-funding/resettlement-agencies>
- [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/orr/orr\\_fact\\_sheet\\_asylee.pdf?nocache=1358884219](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/orr/orr_fact_sheet_asylee.pdf?nocache=1358884219)
- [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/orr/orr\\_fact\\_sheet\\_refugee.pdf?nocache=1358883968](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/orr/orr_fact_sheet_refugee.pdf?nocache=1358883968)
- <https://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>

- **Data and examples of integration, self reliance, and success**

- <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/integration-outcomes-us-refugees-successes-and-challenges>
- <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2016/06/16/139551/refugee-integration-in-the-united-states/>
- <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/success-story>

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