



Commonly Asked Questions about Refugees

Credit: CNS/Baz Ratner Reuters

“Every stranger who knocks at our door is an opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who identifies with the welcomed and rejected strangers of every age (Matthew 25:35-43). The Lord entrusts to the Church’s motherly love every person forced to leave their homeland in search of a better future.[1] This solidarity must be concretely expressed at every stage of the migratory experience—from departure through journey to arrival and return.”

-Pope Francis, Message for the 2018 World Day of Migrants and Refugees January 14, 2018

What is a refugee?

Under U.S. law, a [refugee](#) is a person who is forced to flee his or her home country due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted on account of nationality, race, religion, political beliefs, and/or membership in a particular social group.¹ Refugees do not voluntarily migrate but instead are forced to do so out of immediate necessity – often in the context of civil unrest, armed conflict, human rights violations, or other violence motivated by one of the five factors listed above and carried out by a state actor, an individual colluding with the state, or an individual whom the state cannot or will not control.

How many refugees are there currently?

Worldwide, there are 68.5 million people that have been [forced](#) out of their homes—with an estimated 44,400 new displacements every day While the majority of forced migrants remain in their home countries, 25.4 million have become refugees in other countries. Over half of refugees globally are under the age of 18.²

How does the refugee protection system work?

The international community has traditionally promoted three durable solutions to displacement situations: (1) voluntary repatriation, (2) integration into the country of first asylum, or (3) resettlement into a third country. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) works to find the best solution for each displaced person on an individual basis.

UNHCR is generally responsible for identifying and designating individuals as refugees. UNHCR, with support from the international community, assists in ensuring the safety and well-being of refugees as they await a placement determination. Not only do refugees often have to endure life-threatening conditions in their home countries and in transit, but, once they arrive in a host country, they sometimes live in confined refugee camp sites or more often in recent times in urban settings, sometimes for as long as a decade, before having their refugee situations resolved and achieving resettlement or another of the durable solutions.

What is the current state of the refugee protection system internationally?

Refugees often flee to neighboring countries, many of which are developing countries that are already challenged in meeting the needs of their own people. Refugees need international support to ensure a safe and dignified welcome. After finding initial safety, refugees most often rely on the durable solutions mentioned above of voluntary, safe, and dignified repatriation to their home countries when conditions have changed there or refugees attempt permanent integration into the nearby host country where they are currently residing.

Only about 5% of refugees are identified by UNHCR for the third durable solution - resettlement to a third country, and usually less than 1% of all refugees are resettled every year. Resettlement is generally reserved for people who are not only in danger in their own country but also in danger in the country where they first take refuge. Since 1980, the United States has [resettled](#) over half of these individuals, with the majority in FY 2018 coming from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burma, Ukraine, Bhutan, and Eritrea.

Since the election of President Trump, the number of refugees admitted into the United States for resettlement has decreased significantly. In FY 2016, the United States resettled almost 85,000 refugees, in FY 2017 the U.S. government welcomed less than 54,000 refugees, and in FY2018 under 23,000 refugees were admitted. The FY 2018 admission numbers were the lowest number in the history of the resettlement program. Most recently, the Administration set the Presidential Determination or annual refugee cap at 30,000 refugees, which is the smallest number of refugees targeted to be resettled since passage of the Refugee Act of 1980.

How Does Refugee Resettlement Work in the United States?

Each year, the President authorizes the admission of a certain number of refugees into the country. This number, described as the “Presidential Determination” is based on a consultative process between Congress and the President, and includes federal agencies, including the Department of State (DOS), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Following the Presidential Determination, qualified refugees are typically referred to the United States by UNHCR, although sometimes by a U.S. embassy, or an authorized non-governmental organization (NGO). Often, a government-funded Resettlement Support Center (RSC) facilitates the refugee’s application process by completing application paperwork and gathering biometric and biographical information needed for the refugee’s status determination and vetting process. The International Catholic Migration Commission is one of several agencies worldwide. During this application process, (which typically takes at least 18 to 24 months to complete) the prospective refugee remains outside of the United States.

Prospective refugees to the United States undergo a rigorous and thorough [screening process](#)³ that includes a variety of security screenings with the FBI, the Department of Defense, DOS, the National Counterterrorism Center/ Intelligence Community, and finally the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a branch of DHS.⁴ Further review is conducted if an individual’s application raises safety or national security concerns and, ultimately, he or she will not be resettled in the United States if such concerns are not resolved. Once

USCIS conditionally approves the applicant, he or she must complete a medical examination. Those individuals who receive approval for resettlement then undergo a final screening by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection prior to entry into the United States.

Admitted refugees are assigned to one of nine experienced [resettlement agencies](#)⁵ in the United States prior to arrival to help ensure successful integration into our country. Once in the United States, refugees engage in cultural orientation, English lessons, medical evaluations, and other forms of social support through the resettlement community and other community organizations.

What is the Catholic Church's teaching on refugees?

It is a core Catholic teaching that every human being is created in the image of God and is therefore entitled to dignity and respect. The Catholic Church views assisting those in need as a fundamental Christian duty that is derived directly from the words and the life of Christ, who himself was a migrant and part of a refugee family. We as Christians are called to welcome our new neighbors with the same love and compassion we would want ourselves to be shown in a time of persecution. We must remember that refugees from all over the world are sent to our communities and are fleeing danger, exploitation, and persecution.

The USCCB's Refugee Resettlement Priorities

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) urges the U.S. government to 1) address root causes of forced migration so people can thrive in their home countries, 2) support those forced to migrate and the developing countries that host them, and 3) restore the U.S. refugee resettlement program to welcome at least 75,000 refugees per year.

[USCCB's Migration and Refugee Services \(USCCB/MRS\)](#) is one of nine national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the United States that resettles refugees through local affiliates and advocates for the refugee community on a national level. Through cooperative agreements with the federal government, USCCB/MRS works in coordination with Catholic partner agencies around the United States to welcome and ensure that the basic needs of each arriving refugee are met. USCCB/MRS also engages in solidarity, assessment trips to regions with large refugee populations, seeking to understand refugee protection challenges and to advocate for solutions. Find our reports [here](#).

(Updated January 2019)

Endnotes

1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "What is a Refugee?" <http://www.unrefugees.org/what-is-a-refugee/>

2 "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2017," UNHCR, June 2018. <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2017/>, p.3.

3 RCUSA, "The Resettlement Process," <http://www.rcusa.org/resettlement-process/>

4 See www.dhs.gov; www.state.gov; www.nctc.gov; www.fbi.gov

5. <http://www.rcusa.org/members/>



we are one family under God