

National Migration Week **Spotlight:** 2021 **Refugees**



Credit: Migrants and Refugees Section/Vatican

“[Refugees] are human people, I stress this, who are appealing for solidarity and assistance, who need urgent action but also and above all understanding and kindness. God is good, let us imitate God. Their condition cannot leave us indifferent.”

- Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the Plenary of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, May 24, 2013

Ghaiath was 11 years old when violence broke out in his hometown in Syria. Soon, his village became a battleground. For 21 days, his family couldn't go outside because of the risk of snipers. Bombs fell every night, landing as close as the house across the street. His family made the dangerous journey across the border to Jordan and were eventually approved for resettlement in the United States. Today, Ghaiath is safe and prosperous in his new home and is currently studying to go to medical school.¹

What is a refugee?

A refugee is any person who is unable to return to their home country out of a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Refugees do not voluntarily migrate but instead are forced to do so out of immediate necessity. This is often in the context of civil unrest, armed conflict, human rights violations, or other violence motivated by one of the 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.

Where do refugees end up?

Once refugees have arrived in a host country, they often stay in refugee camps or increasingly in urban settings, often for years. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) promotes 3 durable, long-term solutions to displacement:

- 1) **Voluntary repatriation:** If conditions change at home, many refugees choose to return home once they can do so safely.
- 2) **Integration into the country of first asylum:** Some refugees attempt permanent integration into the host country where they are currently residing.
- 3) **Resettlement into a third country:** Only around 5% of refugees are designated by UNHCR for resettlement, and less than 1% are resettled each year. Individuals designated for resettlement are usually in danger not only in their home country, but also in their host country.

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](#)² 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.³ 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](#) 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.

Do refugees create a burden on receiving communities?

In fact, it’s the complete opposite. Soon after resettlement, refugees become self-reliant and productive members of the community. One [study](#) of refugees in the Cleveland area found that the fiscal impact of refugees was \$2.7 million in tax revenue and \$48 million in economic benefit in 2012 alone, in addition to 38 businesses started by refugees that created 141 jobs in the area.⁴ In addition, refugees culturally enrich receiving communities by adding new perspectives, stories, and cultures. More recently, the [New American Economy](#) has reported on the significant contributions made by refugees across the United States. For example, they found that in 2015, “the almost 2.3 million refugees captured in our analysis earned a collective \$77.2 billion in household income. They also contributed \$20.9

billion in taxes.” Furthermore, refugees do not just contribute economically, but desire to become American, with “more than 84 percent of refugees who have been in the country for 16 to 25 years have taken the step of becoming citizens.”⁵

Refugees by the numbers:⁶

125,000: The Presidential Determination for admission goal of refugees to the United States in FY 2022. Each year, the President works with Congress and federal agencies to authorize the admission of a certain number of refugees into the country. This is a vast increase from the FY21 designation of only 15,000, the lowest ever in the history of the U.S. resettlement program, and much closer to the historic norm of 95,000

26 million: The number of refugees forcibly displaced from their home countries in the world today

1%: The percentage of the world population that is displaced, whether as a refugee, an asylum seeker, or an internally displaced person

What does the Church say about 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.

Endnotes

1 Religion and Resettlement Oral History Project, Princeton University

2 RCUSA, “The Resettlement Process,” <http://www.rcusa.org/resettlement-process/>

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

4 Chmura Economics and Analytics, “Economic Impact of Refugees in the Cleveland Area,” October, 2013, www.rscleveland.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ClevelandRefugeeEconomic-Impact.pdf .

5 New American Economy, “From Struggle to Resistance: The Economic Impact of Refugees in America,” June, 2017, http://www.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/NAE_Refugees_V5.pdf

6 “Figures at a Glance,” UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>



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