

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program

Explainer | July 2023

Introduction

The United States has the largest refugee resettlement program in the world and has resettled over 3 million refugees since 1975.¹ The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) resettles and assists refugees in host communities nationwide through public-private partnerships between the U.S. government and 10 resettlement agencies. HIAS is one of these agencies and the oldest resettlement organization in the world. Below is an explanation of how USRAP admits, resettles, and integrates refugees in the United States, and the role of refugee resettlement agencies like HIAS in this program.

USRAP's history

In 1950, the United Nations created the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, also known as the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), to help and protect millions of refugees that were displaced after World War II.² In 1951, the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees³ was enacted, which set forth basic principles and defined legal protections for refugees. Although the United States did not sign the 1951 Convention, it later signed the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees⁴ that amended and broadened the scope of the Convention.⁵ In 1952, the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA),⁶ which reorganized and placed immigration and nationality laws under the same statute for the first time, but lacked refugee-specific provisions. The INA was later amended in the 1960s and 70s to allow refugees who were granted temporary immigration status in the United States to adjust to permanent resident status.

USRAP was established after Congress passed (with broad bipartisan support) the Refugee Act of 1980, an amendment to the INA that created a comprehensive policy and process for the United States to admit refugees.⁷ The Act:

- Removed geographic and ideological limits on the definition of a refugee and formally adopted the UN definition (see next section);
- Provided a legal process and requirements to apply for asylum in the United States;
- Allows the president to set an annual number of refugee admissions and allocations for nationals of certain countries; and
- Established the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) that provides resources to newly arriving refugees and asylum seekers to help them integrate into their communities.⁸

Who is a refugee?

The INA and UNHCR define a refugee as a person who is outside of their country of origin (or under certain circumstances within it)⁹ and is unable or unwilling to return based on persecution they experienced or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.¹⁰ Asylum seekers may also fall under this definition, but the main difference between an asylum seeker and a refugee is where they ask for protection and how they enter the United States. Refugees are referred to USRAP for resettlement in the United States and their cases are initiated overseas. Asylum is available to people who meet the above definition and seek this type of protection within the United States or at a port of entry.

3 million

refugees were resettled in the United States since 1975 under USRAP, which is the largest refugee resettlement program in the world.

108 million

people were forcibly displaced worldwide by mid-2022, 35.3 million of whom are considered refugees.

125,000

President Biden has committed to admit 125,000 refugees to the United States in FY2024, a number not reached by the United States in three decades.

Presidential determinations and processing priorities for refugee admissions

Every year, the president consults with Congress to determine the number of refugees that can be resettled in the United States during the next fiscal year.¹¹ The president also allocates a certain number of spots for refugees from five regions, including Africa, East Asia, Latin America/Caribbean, Near East/South Asia, and Europe/Central Asia, based on humanitarian concerns that year.¹² These determinations set goals for refugee admissions for the government and refugee resettlement agencies like HIAS to strive for, even though the refugee ceiling may not be met. They are

important because refugee resettlement needs are growing rapidly around the world. UNHCR estimated that by mid-2022 there were over 108 million people who were forcibly displaced worldwide, 35.3 million of whom are considered refugees.¹³

In 2022, UNHCR also projected that 1.47 million of the most vulnerable and at-risk refugees needed resettlement worldwide.¹⁴ In FY 2022 and 2023 the Biden administration set the refugee ceiling at 125,000, which is the largest annual resettlement cap by any country. This was a significant increase after the former

Processing priority categories

Priority 1 (P-1) covers individual refugees (usually the most vulnerable and at-risk) who were referred to USRAP by UNHCR, a designated non-governmental organization (NGO), or U.S. embassy or government agency.

Priority 2 (P-2) covers groups of special humanitarian concern to the U.S. that are designated by the Department of State. The two main types of P-2 groups are predefined groups and direct access groups:

Predefined Groups are identified based on similar persecution claims and apply to people in specific locations. This allows for more efficient processing and eliminates the labor-intensive process of individual referrals. For example, in August 2021, the DOS Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) announced a P-2 designation for certain Afghans who may be at risk due to their affiliation with the United States, but do not meet the employment-related criteria to be eligible for the Afghan special immigrant visa (SIV) program.

Direct Access Groups are established by PRM and define specific criteria and application procedures. Individuals who meet these specifications can apply for P-2 status inside or outside of their country of origin. Some examples of this include:

- The *Lautenberg Amendment*¹⁷ program for citizens of former Soviet Union countries and Iran who are members of certain religious minority groups with close family in the U.S. This program expires at the end of the fiscal year and must be reauthorized by Congress annually.
- *The Central American Minors (CAM)* program allows parents and legal guardians in the U.S. to request that their child in a Northern Triangle country be admitted to the U.S. as a refugee.

Priority 3 (P-3) is a pathway that aims to reunite refugees with their immediate family members who were recently resettled in the U.S. These family members can petition for their relatives to join them in the U.S. and be admitted as refugees.

Priority 4 (P-4) is a new category for FY 2023 that covers privately sponsored refugees who can come to the U.S. under a new program called Welcome Corps that was launched in January 2023. This program will allow private sponsors, including U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, and organizations, to sponsor refugees and take on tasks to resettle them in the U.S., such as securing housing, education, and employment.¹⁸ Private sponsors will also be able to identify refugees and refer them to USRAP.

Trump administration decreased the ceiling to an all-time low of 15,000 in FY 2021.¹⁵ President Biden has committed to admit 125,000 refugees to the United States in FY2024, a number not reached by the United States in three decades.¹⁶

The Department of State determines refugee processing priorities at the beginning of each fiscal year that specify which refugees from around the world are eligible for resettlement in the United States.¹⁶ To be considered for admission to the United States, refugees must meet the refugee definition and be referred to USRAP through one of the priority categories, detailed above.

How do refugees come to the United States through USRAP?

Refugees who are referred to USRAP through one of the four priority category pathways above can apply for refugee status with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Their cases are processed at Resettlement Support Centers (RSCs) around the world that are managed by PRM and run by partner NGOs and intergovernmental organizations.¹⁹ RSCs conduct pre-screening interviews of refugees and collect their biographic and biometric information for security checks. USCIS officers then conduct in-person interviews with applicants to verify their eligibility for refugee status, collect additional information, and clear up any inconsistencies in their file. Based on this interview and security/background checks, the USCIS officer then issues a decision on the case.

If USCIS approves the case, additional security vetting is conducted and refugees' biographic and biometric information are checked against databases maintained by the U.S. Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and international law enforcement organizations like Interpol. Security vetting of refugees is the most rigorous of any population admitted to the United States. Medical screenings are also done toward the end of the process shortly before refugees travel to the United States to resettle. After they pass security vetting and medical checks, RSCs match refugees with a sponsoring U.S.-based resettlement agency such as HIAS, that will provide them with initial resettlement assistance when they arrive in the United States. They also go through a cultural orientation to learn about norms in the United States and receive a loan for and assistance with their travel to the United States.²⁰

Customs and Border Protection (CBP) screens their travel information before they depart and ultimately decides whether to admit them to the United States as a refugee.²¹ This entire process can take 18-24 months, sometimes longer.

How are refugees resettled in the United States?

The Reception and Placement (R&P) Program is managed by PRM and provides resettlement assistance to refugees before and up to 90 days after they arrive in the United States. PRM facilitates this by entering into cooperative agreements with 10 national resettlement agencies, including HIAS, that provide R&P assistance to refugees. These agencies maintain a network of hundreds of affiliated offices and communities that provide R&P services, including:

- Pre-arrival services;
- Reception upon arrival;
- Support for basic needs such as housing, food, and clothing for at least 30 days;
- Cultural orientation;
- Assistance with healthcare, employment, education, and other services; and
- Development of an initial service plan for each refugee.²²

ORR Programs provide refugees with resettlement assistance beyond their first 90 days in the country to help them transition and integrate to life in the United States.²³ ORR offers several different programs to refugees that provide services such as:

- Cash and medical assistance;
- Employment services, job placement, and vocational and skills training;
- English language classes and interpretation and translation services;
- Case management and legal support;
- Childcare and youth mentoring;
- Transportation; and
- Health and psychosocial support.

Resettlement agencies participate in these ORR programs to help refugees thrive in the long-term. For example, HIAS participates in several ORR-funded programs, including the Matching Grant (MG) and Preferred Communities (PC) Programs.²⁴

The MG program begins during the first month of arrival and aims to help refugees become economically self-sufficient through employment within 240 days.²⁵ It offers services such as resume writing assistance and job placement, as well as cash assistance for housing, food, transportation, healthcare, and other costs. The PC program provides long-term case management and community and health support to refugees with special needs who have arrived in the United States within the past five years.²⁶ This includes refugees with medical conditions, LGBTQ, older, and minor refugees, single-parent households, and survivors of trafficking or torture.

State and local governments also provide services for refugees and have dedicated refugee staff at assistance offices. Every state that participates in the refugee resettlement program is required to have a State Refugee Coordinator (SRC) and some also have a State Refugee Health Coordinator (SRHC). Resettlement agencies meet with the SRC and/or SRHC and other key community stakeholders, such as local school systems, assistance offices, and municipal governments, on a quarterly basis to ensure cohesive integration of refugees within communities across the country.

Private actors also contribute to refugee integration through community sponsorship models such as HIAS' Welcome Circles²⁷ and other Community Co-Sponsorship programs where groups of individuals or organizations provide refugees with resettlement needs including financial, housing, and health support, and mentorship.

Several studies have been done to examine the **integration outcomes** of the resettlement process.²⁸

Below are some insightful findings from the studies:

- The support provided by the USRAP soon after refugees' arrival helps them integrate and has a positive economic impact on local communities. Refugees identify medical care, housing, and employment as the most helpful services during their first three months in the country.²⁹
- Most refugees become U.S. citizens, and many become home and business owners.³⁰
- Refugees have higher entrepreneurship rates and are more likely to start their own businesses than U.S.-born populations. Their businesses generate billions of dollars in income annually and provide

jobs, goods, and services to their communities in the United States.³¹

- On average, refugees' participation in the labor force is high. Their income levels increase, and public benefits use decreases as they spend more time living in the United States.³²
- One study found USRAP encourages refugees to work jobs that don't match their skills and credentials, doesn't provide enough integration or financial support after three months, and takes too long to reunite families.³³
- Refugees' English proficiency improves over time and refugee children have strong educational attainment rates. However, many adult refugees remain limited by low English proficiency and educational attainment, which affects their economic outcomes.³⁴ USRAP's employment requirements limit the time needed for refugees to learn English and pursue higher education.³⁵
- Integration outcomes vary by time in the United States, country of origin, educational background, gender, and age at arrival.³⁶

Can refugees become U.S. citizens?

Yes. One year after refugees enter the United States through USRAP, they are required to apply for lawful permanent resident status. Refugees later become eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship five years from the day they entered the country. Refugees have some of the highest naturalization rates among immigrants in the United States.³⁷ Many refugees go on to live prosperous lives in the United States and become homeowners, entrepreneurs, employees, and taxpayers.

About the Center

The HIAS Center for Refugee Policy seeks to advance the rights of refugees and displaced people across the globe by publishing research and policy analysis, generating new policy-relevant ideas, and bringing new voices to the public conversation. The Center leverages HIAS' global presence and over a century of experience to provide practical responses and policy solutions to the most pressing challenges concerning displaced populations.

Endnotes

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5. *Id.*
6. See Immigration and Nationality Act 8 U.S.C. §1101 (1952).
7. Immigration and Nationality Act 8 U.S.C. §1101 (1952). Refugee Act, Pub. L. No. 96-212 (1980).
8. *Id.* See also USCIS (2023) *supra* note 2.
9. Under INA §101(a)(42)(B), the president can specify circumstances for individuals who are still within their countries of origin to be considered refugees so they can be resettled in the United States through USRAP.
10. See INA §101(a)(42)(A), 8 U.S.C. §1101(a)(42)(A). See also *supra* notes 3 and 4.
11. INA § 207(a); 8 U.S.C. §1157(a). See also Dep’t of State, Dep’t of Homeland Security, and Dep’t of Health and Human Services, *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2023 Report to Congress* (2022). https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/FY-2023-USRAP-Report-to-Congress_FINAL_7-Sep-2022.pdf.
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23. See *Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2023*, *supra* note 11.
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26. See ORR 2022a, *supra* note 25.
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