



Commonly Asked Questions About Refugees

“Migrants trust that they will encounter acceptance, solidarity, and help, that they will meet people who will sympathize with the distress and tragedy experienced by others, recognize the values and resources the latter have to offer, and are open to sharing humanly and materially with the needy and disadvantaged.”

—Pope Francis, Message for the 2013 World Day of Migrants and Refugees, October 12, 2012

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 status in a particular social group.¹ Refugees do not voluntarily choose to migrate but instead do so out of immediate necessity – often in the context of civil unrest, armed conflict, 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 control.

What is the current state of the refugee system internationally?

Today’s levels of displacement are one of the highest ever recorded. Worldwide, there are 65.3 million people that have been forced out of their homes—with an estimated 34,000 people displaced per day. [While](#) the majority of forced migrants remain in their home country, 21.3 million have become refugees in other countries.² Over half of refugees globally are under the age of 18.

Only those individuals who are considered to be the

most vulnerable are referred for resettlement in a third country. Despite the extent of global displacement, less than 1% of refugees are submitted for resettlement worldwide. The United States traditionally [resettles](#) over half of these individuals. In Fiscal Year 2016, the United States resettled just under 85,000 refugees, with the most coming from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burma, Ethiopia, Syria and Iraq. In recent years, there has also been an increased flow of refugees from Central America to the United States.

How does the processing 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 assists in ensuring the safety and well-being of refugees as they await a placement determination. However, temporary protection for refugees remains a challenge for the international community. Not only do refugees often have to endure life-threatening conditions in order to arrive at their first host country, but, once there, they usually live in confined refugee camp sites or in urban settings, sometimes for as long as a decade.

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

2 Adrian Edwards, “Global Forced Displacement Hits Record High, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, June 20, 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html>

How Does Refugee Resettlement Work in the United States?

Each year, the President of the United States 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, the President, and various federal agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the U.S. Department of State (DOS). A refugee is typically referred to the United States by UNHCR, an embassy, or an authorized non-governmental organization (NGO). A government-funded Resettlement Support Center (RNC) then facilitates the application process by completing application paperwork and gathering biometric and biographical information needed for the determination and vetting process. During this application process, which typically takes 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, the Department of State, the National Counterterrorism Center/Intelligence Community, and finally the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a branch of DHS.⁴ In addition, the refugee is interviewed by a highly-trained U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) officer to determine eligibility to the U.S. resettlement program and admissibility to the country. 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 undergo a final screening

by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection prior to entry into the country.

Admitted refugees are assigned to an experienced [resettlement agency](#)⁵ in the country 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 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 life of mercy of Christ, who himself was a migrant and a child of refugees. 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 Catholic Church’s Role in American Refugee Resettlement

The [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Migration and Refugee Services](#) (USCCB/MRS) seeks to fulfill the teachings of the Church in the arena of migration. USCCB/MRS is one of nine NGOs in the United States that resettles refugees and advocates for the refugee community. Through cooperative agreements with the federal government, USCCB/MRS works in coordination with partner agencies around the United States to welcome and ensure that the basic needs of each arriving refugee are adequately met. USCCB/MRS also engages in assessment trips to regions with large refugee populations. Find our reports [here](#).

3 Amy Pope, “Infographic: The Screening Process for Refugee Entry into the United States,” November 20, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/20/infographic-screening-process-refugee-entry-united-states>

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

5 Refugee Council USA, www.RCUSA.org

