



Factsheet: U.S. Refugee Resettlement

Who is a refugee?

A person outside the U.S. seeking refuge. The U.S., based on international law, [defines](#) “refugee” as a person outside the country of his or her nationality, who is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution based on his or her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

The legal basis for humanitarian admissions of refugees and asylum seekers to the United States began with the [Refugee Act of 1980](#), which defined a refugee, established the Reception and Placement (R&P) program for initial resettlement under the U.S. Department of State, and created the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) under the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Who determines the number of refugee admissions?

The President of the United States. The number of refugees accepted to the United States each year is [set by the President](#) in consultation with Congress.

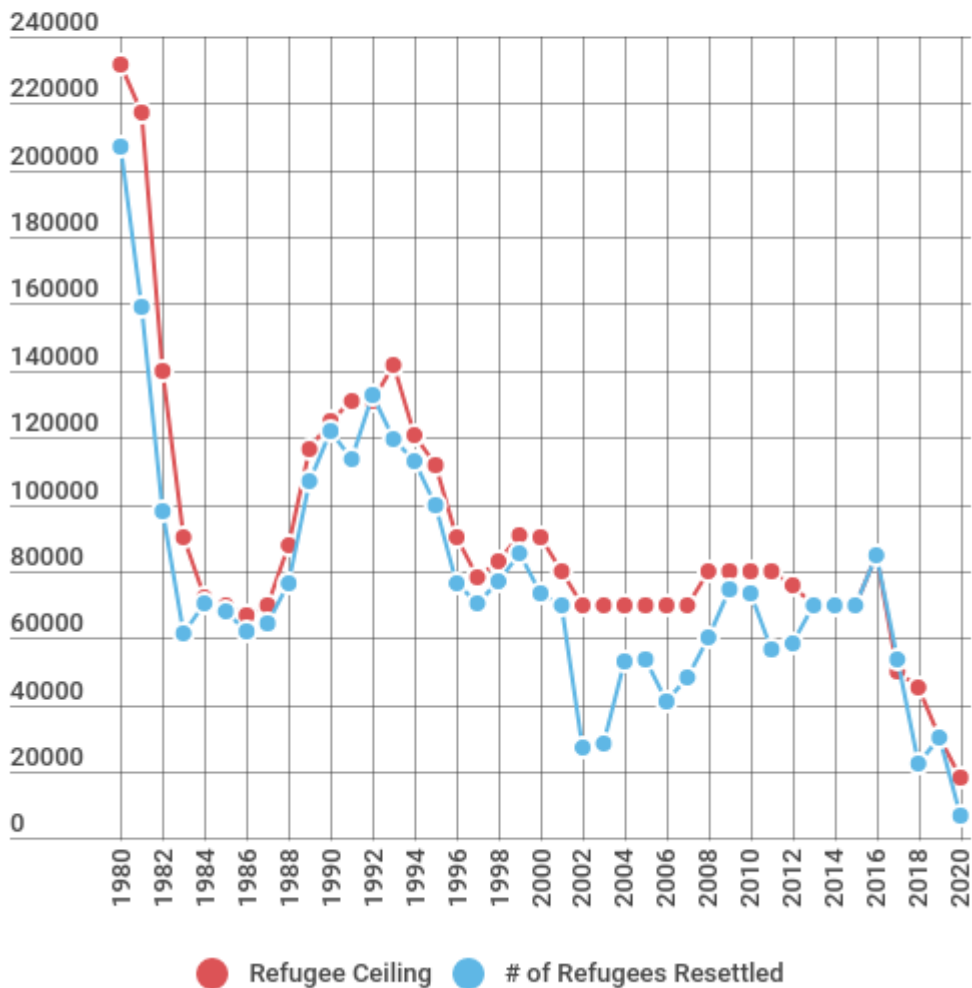
What is the refugee limit for fiscal year 2020?

18,000. Although historically the U.S. has [resettled](#) more refugees than any other country, its resettlement program has not kept up with increase of the global refugee population that has increased by about 50 percent over the past five years. In [FY 2020](#), the U.S. refugee limit was the lowest it has been since the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980.

While there were approximately [26 million](#) refugees worldwide as of fiscal year (FY) 2020, the U.S. currently resettles just a small fraction of them. Less than 1 percent of the total number of displaced people on the world has been [resettled](#) to one of 37 current resettlement countries each year. In FY 2016, the U.S. admitted nearly [85,000 refugees](#), a number that declined to fewer than [54,000 refugees](#) in FY 2017, the lowest number in a decade after President Trump [reduced the cap](#) on refugee admissions via [executive order](#). In [FY 2018](#), the president further reduced the refugee admission cap to 45,000, the lowest since the enactment of the Refugee Act of 1980. For 2019, the administration [cut](#) the number of admissions even more to 30,000. For FY 2020, the administration further cut the number of refugee admissions to [18,000](#). However, the cap represents the maximum number of refugees that may be resettled in a year and the Trump administration is unlikely to resettle 18,000 people in FY 2020. As of September 25, 2020, some 10,892 refugees had been [resettled](#) and the new fiscal year begins on October 1, 2020. What will

happen for [FY 2021 is uncertain](#) with the possibility of delaying resettlement and further cuts. The refugee consultations with Congress have yet to be scheduled, and that is a prerequisite to the Presidential Determination on FY 2021 refugee arrivals.

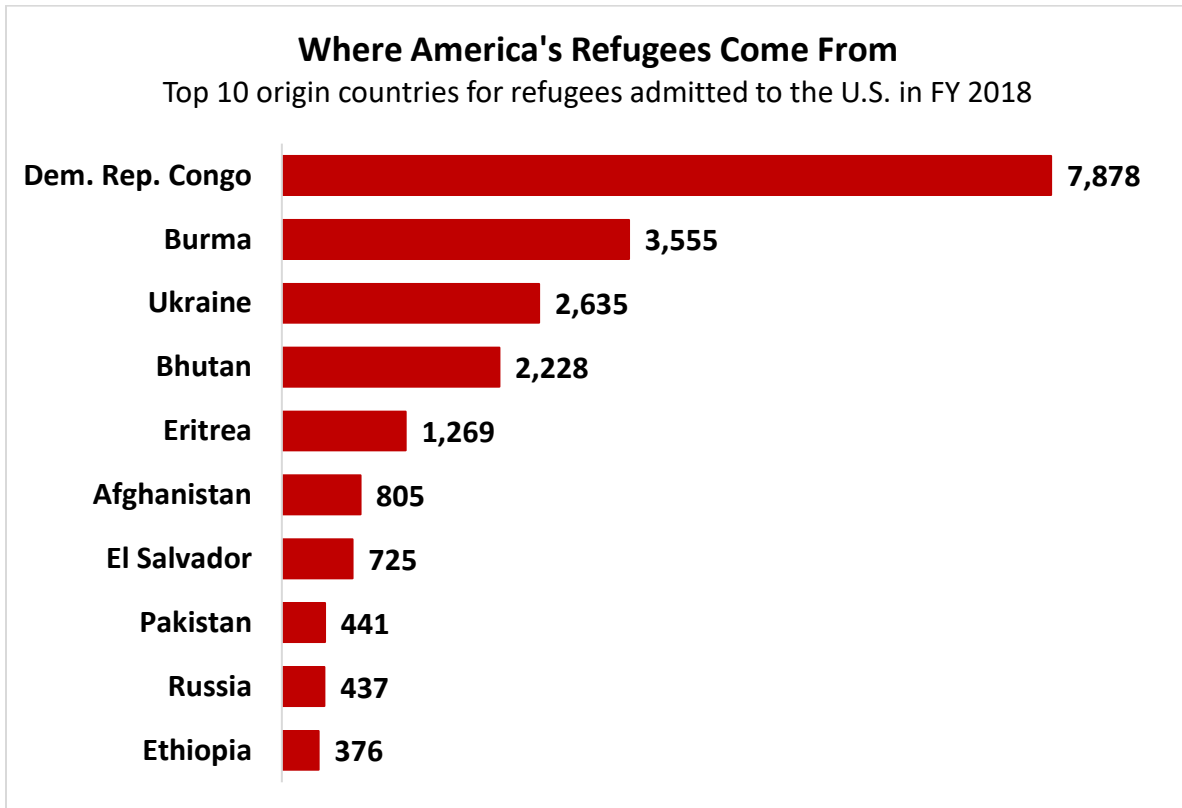
U.S. Refugee Ceiling & Resettlement



Source: [Migration Policy Institute](#)

Where do refugees resettling in the U.S. come from?

All around the world. The United States admits refugees from more than [60 countries](#) all around the globe. In FY 2018, U.S. refugees [came mainly](#) from Democratic Republic of Congo, Burma, Ukraine and Bhutan.

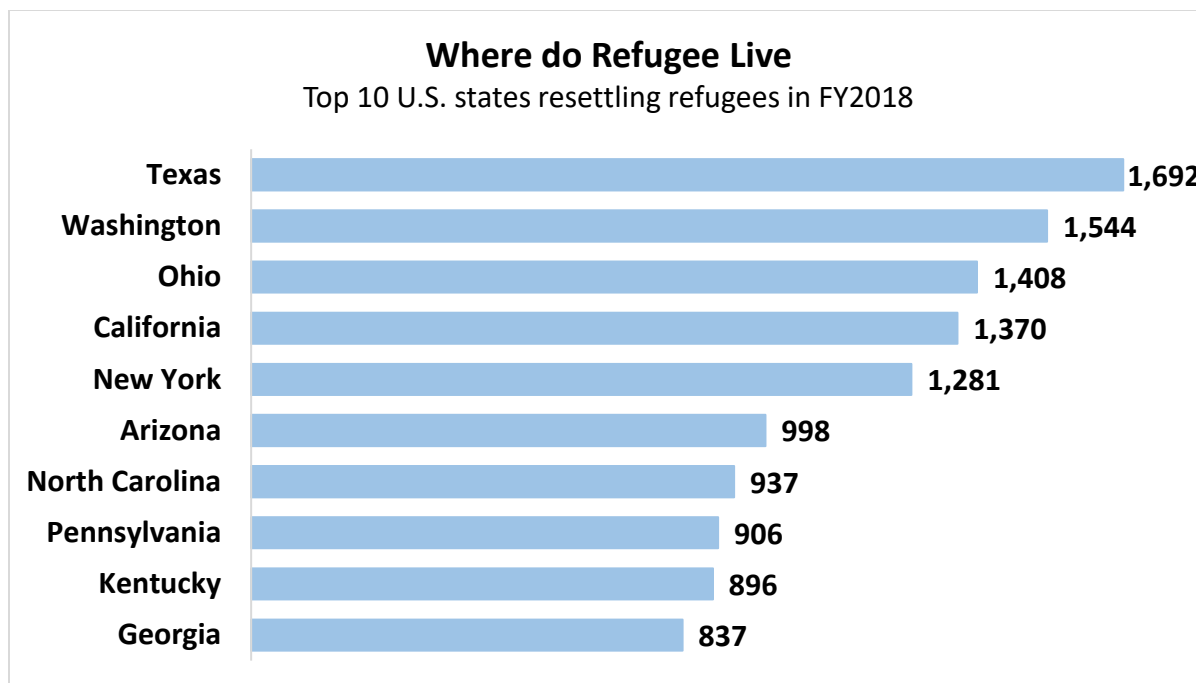


Source: [Refugee Processing Center](#)

The number of U.S. refugees from Syria and Iran dropped considerably in FY18 due to implementation of the latest version of the Trump administration's [travel ban](#), which prevents individuals from Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen and certain government officials from Venezuela from entering the U.S. Because the travel ban has been in effect since June 2018 after being [blocked](#) by courts for nine months, the two countries are no longer among the top 10 countries of origin for U.S. refugees.

Where do refugees resettle?

All across the United States. Refugees have been resettled in 49 U.S. states, with Texas, Washington and Ohio [resettling](#) the most refugees in FY 2018.



Source: [Refugee Processing Center](#)

Who refers refugees to the U.S. for resettlement?

Primarily the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). UNHCR, the United Nations (UN) Refugee Agency, is an [international agency](#) dedicated to protecting forcibly displaced communities and stateless people. UNHCR screens applicants to [determine](#) whether they qualify as refugees and if they are in particular need of resettlement, and, if so, refers them to the U.S. and other countries. In some cases, for the U.S. refugee admissions program (USRAP), refugees are referred by a U.S. Embassy or a specially-trained nongovernmental organization; certain groups with family members in the U.S. or who served U.S. missions in Iraq also have application pathways.

How long does it take to screen and vet a refugee?

An average of nearly two years. While the total processing time varies depending on an applicant's location as well as other circumstances and policy changes, the [vetting time](#) – from the refugee's initial UNHCR referral to his or her arrival in the U.S. – has averaged approximately [18 to 24 months](#) in recent years. Given recent developments, the length of the wait will likely increase.

To be admitted to the U.S., refugees go through [several rounds](#) of background checks, screenings and interviews under the [United States Refugee Admissions Program \(USRAP\)](#), including:

- After an initial screening by UNHCR, the nine Resettlement Support Centers (RSCs) located around the world **collect** applicants' biographic and other information.
- After the State Department preliminarily approves an application to begin the resettlement process, they are reviewed by officers from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), as well as ongoing vetting by a variety of intelligence agencies (including the FBI, CIA, and others).
- USCIS also conducts an in-person interview with each refugee applicant before deciding whether to approve him or her for resettlement in the U.S.
- All USCIS-approved refugees then undergo health screening to prevent those with contagious diseases from entering the U.S.
- Most refugees undergo also a cultural orientation course prior their arrival.
- Before refugees arrive, it is established where in the United States they will initially live and which refugee resettlement agency will help orient them to life in the United States.
- After arrival to the U.S., all refugees are **checked** at the airport by a U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officer to ensure they are the same people that were screened and approved for admission.

What do refugee resettlement agencies do?

Assist refugees after their arrival in the U.S. After the final screenings by the U.S. government, the refugees are **picked up** at the airport by a representative of one of the nine domestic resettlement agencies, all of which have cooperative agreements with the U.S. Department of State.

Shortly before the arrival of the refugees, the resettlement agencies arrange for their housing, which include basic furnishings, appliances, climate-appropriate clothing, and some of the food typical of the refugees' culture. When the refugees arrive, the resettlement agencies' representatives then take refugees to their new homes.

After arrival, the resettlement agencies help refugees to start their lives in the U.S., assisting them with applying for a Social Security card, registering children in school, learning how to access shopping facilities, arranging medical appointments, and connecting them with needed social or language services.

How is the refugee resettlement funded?

Through the Department of State and the Department of Health and Human Services. The State Department's Reception and Placement (R&P) program **provides** refugees with a loan to travel to the U.S., which they are required to start repaying after they arrive. The R&P program then supplies resettlement agencies a one-time sum per refugee to finance their first 30-90 days in the U.S. That money goes mostly towards rent, furnishings, food, and clothing, as well as costs of the agency staff case management and other integration services.

After three months, HHS's Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) then works through the states and other nongovernmental organizations to provide refugees with **limited** cash and medical

assistance, as well as short-term language, employment, and social services, and longer term integration services.

Can refugees legally work in the United States?

Yes. Upon arrival in the U.S., refugees [receive](#) employment authorization and are encouraged to become employed as soon as possible so that they can support themselves.

Can a refugee become a U.S. citizen?

Yes. All refugees are [required](#) to apply for a green card to become a permanent resident after one year in the United States. After five years of residency, they become eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship.