



Updated July 24, 2025

Global Refugee Resettlement: Background and Selected Issues

During the past decade, the global number of refugees (including asylum-seekers—those who have applied for refugee status but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated) more than doubled to over 45 million people worldwide. Congress funds and oversees U.S. humanitarian assistance to refugees, and some Members have demonstrated an ongoing interest in the policies and practices that govern refugee resettlement at the global and domestic levels.

Global Displacement and Resettlement

As of June 2025 (latest data available), the United Nations estimated that 122.1 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide due to armed conflict, widespread violence, or human rights violations. Those displaced include refugees, asylum seekers, and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Displaced populations may be separated from their homes for long periods, particularly in instances of large-scale, protracted crises or ongoing armed conflicts where political solutions have proven elusive. According to the United Nations, on average, a person is displaced as a refugee for 20 years. Some refugees are able to return to their country of origin and others integrate with local populations in the country to which they fled; however, for millions of refugees without these options, less than 1% may be eligible for *refugee resettlement* in another country.

Refugee resettlement is the transfer of refugees from a host country where they have received temporary asylum to another country that has agreed to admit them and usually grant them permanent settlement with legal and physical protection, including access to civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals. Generally, resettlement eventually leads to permanent resident status or even citizenship in the resettlement country.

Although the number of global resettlement spots available is significantly smaller than the refugee population, experts view resettlement as an important tool of refugee protection and response. Resettlement is a way for governments to demonstrate that they are carrying some of the burden of the impact of refugees, even symbolically. UNHCR cooperates with countries that may also support refugees through “complementary pathways” (CPaths), such as humanitarian admission programs, individual sponsorship, and admission of relatives beyond existing family reunification programs. Other approaches include labor mobility and private investor schemes, and student scholarships. CPaths initiatives provide solutions for many thousands more refugees than are reflected in UNHCR’s refugee resettlement data.

Key Entities and Mechanisms

Several global entities and mechanisms play key roles in refugee resettlement.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Established by the UN General Assembly in 1950, UNHCR is mandated to lead and coordinate international action for the protection of refugees and the resolution of refugee problems worldwide, including the global refugee resettlement program (see below).

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Convention) and its 1967 Protocol.

The Convention outlines the standards for the rights and protection of refugees; it is also the primary legal instrument related to global refugee resettlement. Its 1967 Protocol removed geographic and time-based limitations in the Convention, expanding the scope to apply universally to persons fleeing conflict and persecution. A cornerstone of the Convention is the principle of “non-refoulement,” which means that a refugee should not be returned to a country where he or she faces serious threats to his or her life or freedom. The Convention defines a *refugee* as a person fleeing his or her country because of persecution or “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside of the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” Once an individual is considered a refugee, that individual automatically has certain legal rights, and States Parties to the Refugee Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol are obligated to provide certain resources and protection. The United States has not ratified the Convention; however, it is party to the 1967 Protocol.

Refugee Status Determination (RSD). RSD is the administrative process governments or UNHCR use to determine whether a person seeking international protection is a refugee under international, regional, or national law. Host countries have the primary responsibility for determining the status of asylum-seekers; UNHCR may do so when countries are unable or unwilling. During mass movements of refugees, individual asylum interviews cannot be conducted for everyone who has crossed the border, and with the agreement of the host country, these groups are often declared “prima facie” refugees.

Processes for Refugee Resettlement

The global refugee resettlement process typically involves the following steps, which are coordinated between UNHCR and the government of the resettlement country:

1. UNHCR registration (includes taking biometrics, such as iris scans, digital photos, and fingerprinting);
2. UNHCR conducts RSD or confirms host country RSD;
3. UNHCR identification of a need for resettlement;
4. UNHCR confirmation of resettlement country;
5. Resettlement country RSD/admissibility determination;
6. Resettlement country clearances; and
7. Travel to and reception in resettlement country.

Resettlement Eligibility. UNHCR is usually involved in the process of identifying those refugees who may be eligible for resettlement referral. Refugees identified for resettlement usually fall into a category of need or vulnerability, such as legal or physical insecurity; lack of foreseeable alternative durable solutions; survivors of violence or torture; women and girls at risk; medical needs; family reunion; and children and adolescents. UNHCR may use different mechanisms to identify eligible refugees, including the registration process; UNHCR staff referral; a “Best Interest Determination” (which is required for all unaccompanied minors); and nongovernmental organization (NGO) referral. Countries may also use direct referrals through their embassies, private sponsorships, and other programs. UNHCR stresses the need for coordination among those organizations making referrals to avoid multiple claims. The length of time required to identify a case for resettlement varies and could happen the day the person registers with UNHCR as a refugee or years later.

Participating Countries. Since 2019, on average, 25 countries, including the United States, annually have taken part in UNHCR’s global refugee resettlement program. The United States has been a main recipient of UNHCR submissions (formally presenting a refugee case to a resettlement country for consideration).

**UNHCR Resettlement Figures
Calendar Year (CY) 2019-2024**

CY	Number of Resettlement Countries	UNHCR Total Resettlement Submissions	UNHCR Submissions to the U.S.
2019	29	81,671	24,810
2020	25	39,534	6,740
2021	23	63,190	32,851
2022	25	116,481	80,553
2023	24	155,486	105,490
2024	23	203,777	159,790

Source: UNHCR Global Resettlement Fact Sheets, CY 2019-2024, and <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/resettlement-data.html>.

Resettlement Country: Criteria for Selection. UNHCR considers several factors when deciding where to resettle eligible refugees, including family or other significant connections; resettlement country criteria; timing (normal, urgent, emergency); availability of quota or places; refugee input (but the refugee cannot choose); and/or prior agreement with a resettlement country. Countries vary in their approach and priorities with regard to resettlement, depending on the individual case and circumstance. Resettlement is determined in part by whether the case involves an individual or a group. With many individual cases, UNHCR will have a detailed history of refugee status (biometric data and other information). If the person arrived as part of a group (or as a “prima facie” refugee), registration would have taken place in a camp or at a point of arrival, but more information and review would be required to make a determination on resettlement eligibility.

Security. Resettlement countries tend to have extensive security measures; UNHCR typically has relied on them to check against their own databases and intelligence information. UNHCR does not perform security checks; it has no access to terrorist databases. When UNHCR

conducts RSD interviews to ensure refugee status eligibility under the Convention, it screens for exclusion factors such as the commission of crimes against humanity or serious nonpolitical crimes. If UNHCR makes such a discovery, it may withdraw the individual from the resettlement pool or even deny refugee status, depending upon the situation. Because resettlement places are scarce, problematic cases are likely to be set aside unless the person is in imminent peril. Biometric data plays a key role in resettlement by providing continual identification that confirms the person who registered as a refugee is the same person referred for resettlement. It also ensures greater protection and assistance for refugees by minimizing fraud and linking information across locations.

U.S. Policy and Congressional Role

The United States has participated in refugee resettlement processes at both the national and global level. The U.S. refugee admissions program is administered by the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) of the Department of State, and authorized by the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), which uses a definition of a refugee that conforms with that of the Refugee Convention. Resettlement referrals from and in consultation with UNHCR and other entities (such as a U.S. embassy, U.S. government agency, or a designated NGO) help inform the U.S. refugee admissions process. In addition, members of groups of U.S. “special humanitarian concern,” designated by the Department of State in consultation with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), UNHCR, NGOs, and other experts, may be considered for U.S. refugee admission without a referral from one of these entities. Under the INA, the U.S. worldwide refugee admissions ceiling is set annually by the President after consultation with Congress. In January 2025, President Trump issued an executive order (E.O.) to suspend the U.S. refugee program. During the suspension, refugees may be admitted only if the Secretaries of State and DHS determine that their entry is in the U.S. national interest. For more information, see CRS Report R47399, *U.S. Refugee Admissions Program*.

At the global level, the United States has generally supported UNHCR and its global refugee resettlement program and engaged in U.S. humanitarian diplomacy efforts with other countries. Congress has lent bipartisan support to UNHCR’s work, primarily through funding the Migration and Refugee Assistance account in annual State Department-Foreign Operations appropriations. Looking ahead, Congress may broadly consider U.S. humanitarian funding levels, whether to expand or limit U.S. support for global refugee resettlement, and possible oversight activities. Congress could also consider the pros and cons of alternatives to resettlement and whether best practices undertaken in other countries have possible application in the United States, such as the U.S. Welcome Corps, launched in 2023, which is modeled after Canada’s Private Sponsorship of Refugees program (though refugee case processing activities are currently suspended).

Rhoda Margesson, Specialist in International Humanitarian Policy

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.