



Updated September 3, 2026

Global Refugee Resettlement: Background and Selected Issues

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that globally in 2025, there were 41.6 million refugees (people forced to flee their country because of persecution or violence) and 9 million asylum seekers (those who have applied for refugee status but whose claim has not yet been determined). Although global refugee numbers decreased slightly in 2025, marking the first annual drop in a decade, overall displacement numbers remain near historic highs; since 2016, the number of refugees has nearly doubled and asylum seekers more than tripled. Congress funds and oversees U.S. humanitarian assistance to refugees. 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 2026 (latest data available), UNHCR estimated that 117.8 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide in 2025 due to “persecution, conflict, violence, human right violations, or events seriously disturbing public order.” Those displaced include refugees and asylum seekers, as well as 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. Some refugees can 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. They are usually granted 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 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 response. Resettlement is a way for governments to demonstrate that they are sharing the burden of the refugee impact, 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

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 (the 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. 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.” The principle of “non-refoulement,” which means that a refugee or asylum seeker should not be returned to a country where he or she faces threats to his or her life or freedom, is a cornerstone of the Convention. Once an individual is recognized as a refugee, that individual automatically has certain legal rights, and States Parties to the Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol are obligated to provide certain resources and protection. The United States has not ratified the Convention; it is a state party to the 1967 Protocol.

Refugee Status Determination (RSD). The host country government or UNHCR uses RSD, an administrative process, to decide if a person seeking international protection (e.g., an asylum seeker) qualifies as a refugee under the law. A host country government has the primary responsibility for determining this status; UNHCR may do so when a government is unable or unwilling. Large groups of refugees may be declared “prima facie” refugees based on circumstances rather than an individual interview.

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 typically helps identify refugees who may be eligible for a resettlement referral. Refugees identified for resettlement usually fall into a category of need or urgent 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” (required for all unaccompanied minors), and nongovernmental organization (NGO) referral. Countries may also use direct referrals through their embassies, private sponsorships, and other programs, necessitating coordination of referrals to avoid multiple claims. Resettlement identification timelines vary, ranging from the day of UNHCR registration to years later.

Participating Countries. Since 2019, on average, 24 countries have taken part annually in UNHCR’s global refugee resettlement program. The United States has led in UNHCR submissions (formally presenting a refugee case to a resettlement country for consideration). Reductions in refugee admissions among resettlement countries, stricter vetting criteria, and processing delays, as well as funding cuts to UNHCR and budget reductions in its resettlement program, contributed to a drop in 2025 submissions. UNHCR global funding fell by \$1.2 billion in calendar year (CY) 2025—a nearly 25% drop over 2024.

**UNHCR Resettlement Submissions
Calendar Year (CY) 2019-2025**

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
2025	23	35,000	11,500

Source: UNHCR Global Resettlement Fact Sheets, CY 2019-2024; UNHCR, Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2025, June 11, 2026.

Resettlement Country 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 places; refugee input (but the refugee cannot choose); and prior agreement with a resettlement country. Countries vary in their approach and priorities regarding resettlement, and whether the case involves an individual or a group. With most 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. UNHCR typically relies on resettlement countries to check submissions against their own security databases and intelligence information. UNHCR conducts RSD interviews to ensure refugee status eligibility and screens

for exclusion factors, such as the commission of crimes against humanity or serious nonpolitical crimes; it can withdraw an individual from the resettlement pool or even deny refugee status. Resettlement places are scarce; problematic cases are likely set aside unless the person is in imminent peril. Biometric data provides continuous identity verification of the individual who registered as a refugee through the resettlement process and helps minimize identity fraud and system abuse across different locations.

U.S. Policy and Congressional Role

The U.S. refugee admissions program is administered by the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and authorized by the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), which uses a definition of a *refugee* that conforms with that of the Refugee Convention. Historically, resettlement referrals from and in consultation with UNHCR and other entities (such as a U.S. embassy, U.S. government agency, or designated NGO) have helped inform the U.S. refugee admissions process. In addition, members of groups of U.S. “special humanitarian concern,” designated by the State Department 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 (EO 14163) to suspend the U.S. refugee program. During the ongoing 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 In Focus IF13277, *U.S. Refugee Admissions Program in FY2025 and FY2026*.

Historically, the United States has supported UNHCR and its global refugee resettlement program, engaged in U.S. humanitarian diplomacy, and led resettlement efforts with other countries. Congress complemented these actions through bipartisan support for annual humanitarian assistance appropriations. In the second Trump Administration, U.S. funding for UNHCR and global resettlement has decreased, amid broad cuts in FY2025 humanitarian funding and an indefinite suspension of traditional refugee admissions. The \$812 million U.S. contribution to UNHCR in CY2025 was half the annual average of the previous decade. Congress faces funding and oversight decisions, including whether to maintain, increase, restrict, or condition funds intended for refugee and resettlement assistance. It could consider the use of CPaths, such as the U.S. Welcome Corps (modeled after Canada’s Private Sponsorship of Refugees program, though refugee case processing activities are currently suspended). Broadly, Congress could examine the evolving U.S. approach to refugees and asylum seekers and ways to shape U.S. policy amid the potential shifts away from traditional humanitarian pathways and resettlement frameworks toward external mechanisms such as third-country agreements.

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.