



HEARTLAND ALLIANCE

REFUGEES—FACT SHEET

A **refugee** is someone who—owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, or membership in a particular social group or political opinion—has fled their country to save their lives or preserve their freedom. They have no protection from their own state—indeed, it is often their own government that is threatening to persecute them.

REFUGEES ACROSS THE GLOBE

65 million people were displaced in 2015
21.3 million of those are designated refugees
10.9 million are refugee children

What is the distinction?

Refugee: people fleeing conflict, danger, or persecution who are defined and protected in international law, and must not be expelled or returned to situations where their life and freedom are at risk.

Immigrant: people who come to live permanently in a foreign country

Displaced: people who have been forced to leave their home &/or country because of war, danger, persecution, or natural disaster

Sources: UNHCR & Google Dictionary

Last year, Syria accounted for 4.9 million refugees around the globe, the largest share from a single country. Other unresolved crises and conflicts contributed to a rise in refugees, including those in Burundi, Iraq, Libya, Niger, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Yemen. Many refugees cannot return to their home countries because of continued war, conflict, and persecution. **The United Nations prioritizes the resettlement of the most vulnerable refugees. Refugees do not choose to be resettled, nor do they decide which country accepts them.**

The U.S. received 84,995 refugees in fiscal year 2016, up from the 70,000 resettled in the preceding years. Nearly half came from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (16,370), Syria (12,587) and Burma (Myanmar) (12,347). About 3 million refugees have been resettled to the U.S. since Congress passed the Refugee Act of 1980.

CONCERN: Wealthier nations are not fulfilling their humanitarian obligations. Developing nations hosted 86% of the world's refugees in 2015 and are bearing an unfair burden. The magnitude of displaced persons seeking safety could have potentially destabilizing effects on these nations.

Source: UNHCR Global Trends Report 2015

THE REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PROCESS: LENGTHY & STRINGENT

The United Nations determines whether an individual is designated a refugee, and assesses his/her vulnerability for determining resettlement prioritization.



Once approved for resettlement, refugees sell remaining possessions, and prepare for travel. They are subject to additional screening upon arrival in the U.S.



Refugees participate in English classes, employment placement programs, and receive case management to help them integrate. After 6 months, they must begin paying back resettlement airfare costs.



Those designated as refugees undergo a series of medical screenings, biometric data collections (like fingerprinting, retinal scanning, DNA sampling, etc.) and background checks with no fewer than 8 institutions. This process can take 18 months or more. Refugees do not have a choice of where they are resettled.



In the U.S., resettlement agencies help refugees with housing, furnishings, and food, paid for from the one-time sum of about \$1,000 each refugee is allocated. Work authorization is issued. The refugee has 90 days to become self-sufficient.



After 12 months, refugees are allowed to—and expected to—apply for a green card. After 5 years, he or she may apply for citizenship.



CHALLENGES FACED AFTER RESETTLEMENT IN THE U.S.

Economic insecurity: Most refugees leave their homes with little to nothing. Often people lack basic documentation such as birth certificates, passports, identification, or proof of educational credentials. This means they are starting over, from scratch, wherever they land. Initial rent, furnishings and food expenses are paid from a one-time sum of about \$1,000 each refugee is allocated. The refugee has 90 days to become self-sufficient.

Language barriers: Most refugees come to the U.S. with limited English-language competency. This makes school, work, transportation, and obtaining medical services difficult.

Employment barriers: Finding a job can be very challenging due to limited English proficiency, discrimination against refugees, and job barriers like the loss of documents regarding education and non-transferable credentials.

Manifestations of trauma: Refugees are vulnerable to ongoing physical and mental health issues stemming from trauma, including violence, loss, survivor guilt, and isolation. This trauma is often compounded by the lack of culturally competent behavioral health supports and exposure to new, sometimes triggering, challenges during integration.

Housing appropriateness: Refugees encounter a range of challenges in finding housing, from outright discrimination to a lack of credit history or an immediate job. These challenges are often exacerbated by local pressures, like an ever tightening rental market and a dearth of affordable housing near transportation.

Cultural expectations: Beginning life in a new country with different laws, systems, languages, customs, and cultural expectations is not easy. Systems for education, medical care, employment, and housing are entirely new. This is especially challenging for raising children in an unfamiliar culture that is often at odds with their own.

School performance: Children's education is significantly disrupted during their effort to seek safety. When they arrive in the U.S., they may be placed in grades where peers are far younger. Entering school in the U.S. is a major transition that involves learning a new language and adapting to new expectations, routines and culture. In addition, they may be suffering from trauma and may lack the support systems to get the help they need to best prepare them for school, college and a career.

ABOUT HEARTLAND ALLIANCE

We believe that everyone in society benefits when people who experience disparities in safety, health, housing, education, economic opportunity, and justice are able to exit poverty, heal from trauma, and achieve stability; secure their rights; and shape policies that respond to their needs.



Building on decades of experience, Heartland Alliance's goal is to meet the unique needs of each refugee as they establish their new lives in the U.S. This includes a focus on trauma-informed care and providing services along a continuum to meet their needs and promote long-term self-sufficiency.

**HEARTLAND
ALLIANCE**

Heartland Alliance | 208 South LaSalle Street | Suite 1300
Chicago, IL 60604 | 312.660.1300 | communications@heartlandalliance.org
heartlandalliance.org