

# Refugees and Asylees: 2019

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The United States provides protection to certain persons who have been persecuted or have a well-founded fear of persecution through two programs: a refugee program for persons outside the United States and their eligible relatives, and an asylum program for persons physically present or arriving in the United States and their eligible relatives.<sup>1</sup> The 2019 *Refugee and Asylees Annual Flow Report*, authored by the Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), presents information on persons admitted to the United States as refugees, those who applied for asylum in the United States, and those granted asylum in the United States in Fiscal Year (FY) 2019.<sup>2,3</sup>

A total of 29,916 persons were admitted to the United States as refugees during 2019.<sup>4</sup> The leading countries of nationality for refugees admitted during this period were the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Congo), Burma, and Ukraine. An additional 46,508 individuals were granted asylum during 2019,<sup>5</sup> including 27,643 individuals who were granted asylum affirmatively by DHS,<sup>6</sup> and 18,865 individuals who were granted asylum defensively by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). The leading countries of nationality for persons granted either affirmative or defensive asylum were the People's Republic of China (China), Venezuela, and El Salvador. Approximately 3,300 additional individuals received derivative asylum status while residing in the United States, and approximately 6,300 additional individuals were approved for derivative asylum abroad and were issued travel documents that allow their travel to the United States.

## DEFINING "REFUGEE" AND "ASYLUM" STATUS

To be eligible for refugee or asylum status, a principal applicant must meet the definition of a refugee set forth in section 101(a)(42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), which states in part that a refugee is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.<sup>7</sup> Applicants for refugee status are outside the United States, whereas applicants seeking asylum are either within the United States or arriving at a U.S. port of entry (POE).

To meet the INA's refugee definition, a person generally must be outside their country of nationality, unless the person has no nationality or is considered "stateless," in which case they must be outside of the country in which they "last habitually resided."<sup>8</sup>

The INA provides the President with the authority to designate countries whose nationals may be processed for refugee status within their respective countries (referred to as 'in-country processing'). In 2019, certain nationals of Eurasia and the Baltics were redesignated for in-country processing, as were qualified Iraqis with ties to the United States. In-country processing is also authorized for extraordinary individual protection cases for which resettlement consideration is requested by a U.S. Ambassador in any location.

<sup>1</sup> Additionally, U.S. law bars removing individuals to a country where their "life or freedom would be threatened... because of the alien's race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion." INA § 231(b)(3); 8 U.S.C. 1231(b)(3).

<sup>2</sup> In this report, a year refers to a fiscal year (October 1 to September 30).

<sup>3</sup> The 2019 *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* and other OIS reports contain additional context. Not all numbers reported are contained in this report's tables.

<sup>4</sup> Refugee data in this report may differ slightly from numbers reported by the Department of State (DOS). DOS refugee numbers include Amerasians (children born in Cambodia, Korea, Laos, Thailand, or Vietnam after December 31, 1950, and before October 22, 1982, and fathered by a U.S. citizen), whereas DHS reports Amerasians as lawful permanent residents.

<sup>5</sup> These asylum grants were based upon a principal asylum applicant's application, which may also include an accompanying spouse and unmarried children under 21 years of age. They do not include individuals who were approved for follow-to-join asylum status while residing in the United States or abroad.

<sup>6</sup> Affirmative asylum data for fiscal year 2019 were retrieved by OIS in February 2020. Data in this report may differ slightly from fiscal year-end 2019 numbers retrieved and reported at different times by DHS's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Asylum Division.

<sup>7</sup> Congress expanded this definition in the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, providing that persons who have been forced to abort a pregnancy or undergo involuntary sterilization or who have been persecuted for failure or refusal to undergo such a procedure or for other resistance to a coercive population control program shall be deemed to have been persecuted on account of political opinion.

<sup>8</sup> INA § 101(a)(42), 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(42).



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## REFUGEES

### History of U.S. Refugee Resettlement

The United States has a long history of refugee resettlement. The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 was passed to address the migration crisis in Europe resulting from World War II, wherein millions of people had been forcibly displaced from their home countries and could not return. By 1952, the United States had admitted over 400,000 displaced people under the Act. The United States extended its commitments to refugee resettlement through legislation including the Refugee Relief Act of 1953 and the Fair Share Refugee Act of 1960. The United States also used the Attorney General’s parole authority to bring large groups of persons into the country for humanitarian reasons, including over 38,000 Hungarian nationals beginning in 1956 and over a million Indochinese beginning in 1975.

Obligations of the United States under the 1967 United Nations Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (to which the United States acceded in 1968) generally prohibit the United States from returning a refugee to a country where their life or freedom would be threatened on account of a protected ground. The Refugee Act of 1980 amended the INA to bring U.S. law into greater accord with U.S. obligations under the Protocol, which specifies a geographically and politically neutral refugee definition. The Act also established formal refugee and asylum programs.

**Table 1.**

**Proposed and Actual Refugee Admissions by Regions: Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019**

Region	2017		2018		2019	
	Ceiling	Admissions	Ceiling	Admissions	Ceiling	Admissions
Total . . . . .	110,000	53,691	45,000	22,405	30,000	29,916
Africa . . . . .	35,000	20,232	19,000	10,459	11,000	16,366
East Asia . . . . .	12,000	5,148	5,000	3,582	4,000	4,946
Europe/Central Asia . . . . .	4,000	5,205	2,000	3,612	3,000	4,994
Latin America/Caribbean . . . . .	5,000	1,688	1,500	955	3,000	809
Near East/South Asia . . . . .	40,000	21,418	17,500	3,797	9,000	2,801
Unallocated Reserve . . . . .	14,000	-	-	-	-	-

- Represents zero.

Note: Ceiling and admission numbers reflect revisions made each fiscal year.

Source: U.S. Department of State.

### Refugee Admissions Ceiling

Under the INA, the President establishes an overall refugee admissions ceiling and regional allocations before the beginning of each fiscal year following “appropriate consultation” with Congress.<sup>9</sup> In 2019, the refugee ceiling was set at 30,000—its lowest level since the inception of the program in 1980.

The largest regional allocation in 2019 was for Africa with 11,000, followed by the Near East/South Asia with 9,000 (Table 1).

<sup>9</sup> In many cases, an unallocated reserve is also designated which can be used in any region if the need arises and only after notification to Congress.

### Refugee Eligibility Requirements

To qualify for refugee status, a principal applicant must: (1) be of special humanitarian concern to the United States; (2) meet the refugee definition as set forth in section 101(a)(42) of the INA; (3) be admissible under the INA (or be granted a waiver of inadmissibility); (4) not be firmly resettled in any foreign country; and (5) merit a favorable exercise of discretion. Derivative refugees need not meet all these eligibility requirements, but they must be admissible to the United States and demonstrate a relationship as the spouse or child of a principal refugee applicant or an admitted refugee. Any person who has ordered, incited, assisted, or otherwise participated in the persecution of another on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion is ineligible for refugee status, including as a derivative refugee.

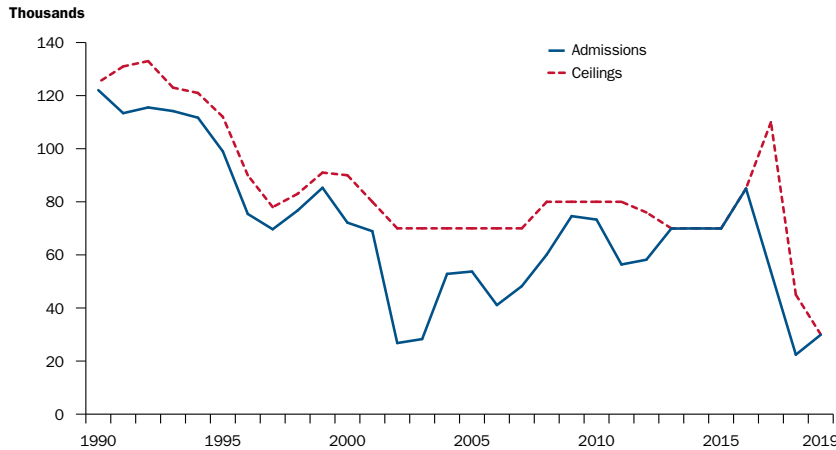
### Refugee Application Process

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) establishes processing priorities that identify individuals and groups who are of special humanitarian concern to the United States and who are eligible for refugee resettlement consideration. The priority categories are Priority 1 (P-1)—individuals referred by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), a U.S. Embassy, or certain non-governmental organizations (NGOs); Priority 2 (P-2)—groups of special humanitarian concern; and Priority 3 (P-3)—family reunification cases. Once principal refugee applicants are referred or granted access to USRAP under any of these priorities, they still must meet all other eligibility criteria. Upon referral, a Resettlement Support Center, working under a cooperative agreement with DOS, conducts pre-screening interviews with the applicants. A USCIS officer then interviews applicants and accompanying derivatives to determine eligibility for resettlement in the United States. Multiple security checks must be completed before an application for refugee classification is approved. Additionally, applicants must also undergo a medical exam.

Individuals who are approved for refugee classification are assigned to a resettlement agency (sponsor) that assists with housing, employment, and other services upon arrival. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) makes arrangements for the refugee’s travel to the United States. After arrival, refugees are authorized to work and may request documentation to travel outside the United States.

**Figure 1.**

**Refugee Admissions and Proposed Ceilings to the United States: Fiscal Years 1990 to 2019**



Source: U.S. Department of State.

**DATA**

All refugee data presented in this report are from the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS) of the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration of DOS.

**TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF REFUGEES**

Since the inception of the program in 1980, the United States has accepted more than 3.7 million refugees and asylees. In 2019, the United States admitted 29,916 refugees, a 34 percent increase from the 22,405 refugees admitted in the previous year. At a high level, the trend in refugee admissions has gone through three periods since reaching its peak under the current legal framework at 122,066 in 1990 (Figure 1).

The spouse and unmarried children under the age of 21 of a principal refugee may obtain refugee status as an accompanying derivative.<sup>10</sup> Accompanying derivatives may enter the United States with the principal refugee or within 4 months after the principal refugee’s admission.<sup>11</sup> A spouse or child who joins the principal refugee more than 4 months after admission to the United States is a follow-to-join derivative. Principal refugees may petition for follow-to-join benefits for their qualifying derivatives up to 2 years after the principal was granted refugee status; the principal and the derivative relative’s relationship must have existed at the time of the principal’s admission into the United States. Principal refugees must file Form I-730, *Refugee/Asylee Relative Petition*,<sup>12</sup> for each qualifying follow-to-join derivative family member, who may be located abroad or in the United States. These beneficiaries are not required to demonstrate an independent refugee claim. Once a principal’s I-730 has been approved for an individual located abroad, there are no time constraints placed upon that derivative relative’s travel to the United States, provided that (1) the principal’s status has not been revoked; (2) the relationship of the derivative to the principal is unchanged; and (3) in the case of a child, the child remains unmarried.

during the 1990s, as the refugee program’s focus shifted to more diverse populations across the world. Admissions reached a low point in 2002, due in part to security procedures and changes to admission requirements after September 11, 2001. Refugee admissions reached a post-2001 peak of 84,988 in 2016 under the Obama administration, the highest number in 17 years. More recently, the Trump administration reduced the refugee ceiling and implemented new refugee vetting and screening procedures, contributing to a decrease in admission since 2017 (Figure 1).

**Table 2.**

**Refugee Arrivals by Relationship to Principal Applicant and Case Priority: Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019**

Category of admission and case priority	2017		2018		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b>RELATIONSHIP TO PRINCIPAL APPLICANT</b>						
Total . . . . .	53,691	100.0	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0
Principal Applicant . . . . .	21,272	39.6	8,863	39.6	12,291	41.1
Dependents . . . . .	32,419	60.4	13,542	60.4	17,625	58.9
Spouse . . . . .	7,507	14.0	2,842	12.7	3,262	10.9
Child . . . . .	24,678	46.0	10,563	47.1	14,211	47.5
Siblings, parents, and other . . . . .	234	0.4	137	0.6	152	0.5
<b>CASE PRIORITY</b>						
Total . . . . .	53,691	100.0	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0
Priority 1 . . . . .	33,291	62.0	12,001	53.6	16,744	56.0
Priority 2 . . . . .	18,477	34.4	9,592	42.8	12,393	41.4
Priority 3 . . . . .	244	0.5	95	0.4	224	0.7
Follow-to-join beneficiaries . . . . .	1,679	3.1	717	3.2	555	1.9

Note: Numbers in the Principal Applicant category previously included siblings, parents, and other dependents, who are now reported as Dependents.  
Source: U.S. Department of State.

<sup>10</sup> Children may include those age 21 or over who are covered by provisions in the Child Status Protection Act, Pub. L. No. 107-208 (Aug. 6, 2002). A derivative child must remain unmarried until the time of admission to qualify.

<sup>11</sup> In practice, the vast majority of accompanying derivative refugees enter the United States with the principal refugee.

<sup>12</sup> The petition is used to file for relatives of refugees and asylees. The USRAP program handles only *refugee* follow-to-join petitions, which are counted within the annual refugee ceiling. Asylum follow-to-join petitions are processed by USCIS and are not counted in the annual admission ceilings.

## Category of Admission

In 2019, the majority of refugees were admitted under P-1 processing (56 percent)—individuals referred by the UNHCR, a U.S. Embassy, or certain NGOs—and P-2 processing (41 percent)—groups of special humanitarian concern (Table 2). P-3 processing (family reunification cases) constituted 0.7 percent of refugees admitted, and follow-to-join refugee beneficiaries made up 1.9 percent of refugees admitted. Principal refugees accounted for 12,291 (41 percent) of the 29,916 refugees admitted to the United States in 2019, while accompanying spouses and dependent children represented 11 and 48 percent, respectively.<sup>13</sup> Two percent of admissions (555 refugees) were follow-to-join beneficiaries.

## Country of Nationality

In 2019, the leading countries of nationality for individuals admitted as refugees were Congo (43 percent), Burma (16 percent), Ukraine (15 percent), Eritrea (5.9 percent), and Afghanistan (4.0 percent) (Table 3). These top five countries made up 85 percent of total refugee admissions in 2019, up from 41 percent in 2017 and 72 percent in 2018.

Table 3.

### Refugee Arrivals by Country of Nationality: Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019

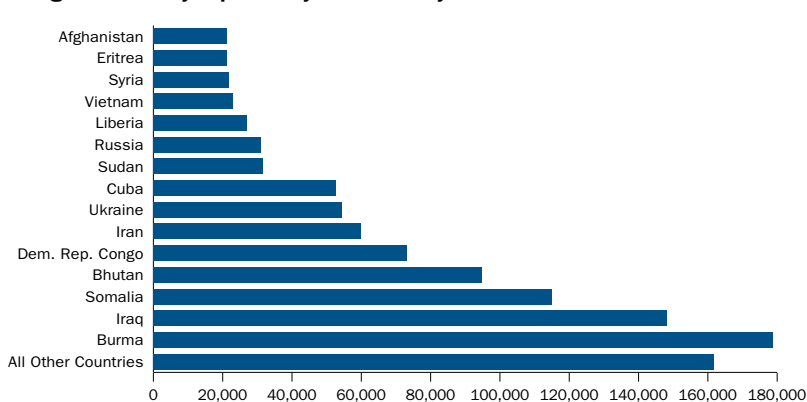
(Ranked by 2019 country of nationality)

Country of nationality	2017		2018		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	53,691	100.0	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0
Congo, Democratic Republic	9,377	17.5	7,878	35.2	12,958	43.3
Burma	5,078	9.5	3,555	15.9	4,932	16.5
Ukraine	4,264	7.9	2,635	11.8	4,451	14.9
Eritrea	1,917	3.6	1,269	5.7	1,757	5.9
Afghanistan	1,311	2.4	805	3.6	1,198	4.0
Syria	6,557	12.2	62	0.3	563	1.9
Iraq	6,886	12.8	140	0.6	465	1.6
Sudan	980	1.8	76	0.3	382	1.3
El Salvador	1,124	2.1	725	3.2	311	1.0
Colombia	233	0.4	128	0.6	298	1.0
All other countries, including unknown	15,964	29.7	5,132	22.9	2,601	8.7

Source: U.S. Department of State.

Figure 2.

### Refugee Arrivals by Top Country of Nationality: Fiscal Years 2000 to 2019



Source: U.S. Department of State.

Since the inception of the refugee program, the nationalities of refugees admitted to the United States have changed as U.S. policies evolved and new conflicts around the world arose. Since 2000 (the earliest year for which we have microdata), the United States has admitted just over 1.1 million refugees from around the world. Sixteen percent (178,663) have been from Burma, 13 percent (148,248) from Iraq, and 10 percent (114,949) from Somalia (Figure 2).

## Age, Sex, and Marital Status

More than three-quarters of refugees admitted to the United States in 2019 were under 35 years of age, and three out of seven were children under 18 years old (Table 4). Refugees tend to be relatively younger than the native-born population, with a median age of 21 years for those arriving in 2019, compared to a median age of 36 years for the native-born population.<sup>14</sup> Refugee median age varies widely by region and country of birth: refugees from Africa had the lowest median age of 18 years, while those from the Near East/South Asia had the highest median age of 26. Roughly an equal number of male and female refugees were admitted in 2019, and 26 percent of adults were married at arrival, compared to 31 percent in 2018.

## State of Initial Resettlement

In 2019, more than half of admitted refugees (53 percent) were resettled in the top ten resettling states (Table 5). Texas, Washington, and New York resettled the most refugees (8.1, 6.5, and 6.2 percent of admitted refugees, respectively), and Kentucky, Idaho, and Washington resettled the most refugees per capita, each resettling between 26 and 32 refugees per 100,000 population (Figure 3). Majorities of refugees resettling in Kentucky and Idaho were from Congo (74 percent each), while the majority of those settling in Washington were from Ukraine (71 percent).

## Lawful Permanent Residence and Naturalization of Refugees

One year after being admitted to the United States, refugees are statutorily required to apply for lawful permanent resident (LPR) status. Of those arriving as refugees between 2000 and 2017, 96 percent gained LPR status by the end of 2019.<sup>15</sup> Refugees granted LPR status may apply for naturalization 5 years

<sup>13</sup> Numbers in the Principal Applicant category previously included siblings, parents, and other dependents, who are now reported as Dependents. In addition, a small number of follow-to-join children are listed as principle applicants rather than children in WRAPS, and are therefore counted as principle applicants in OIS data.

<sup>14</sup> Calculated from the 2019 March Current Population Survey as downloaded from IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota, [www.ipums.org](http://www.ipums.org).

<sup>15</sup> Although the majority of refugees apply for LPR status 1 year after admission, due to operational and other factors, processing time can vary widely for those who apply.

**Table 4.**

**Refugee Arrivals by Age, Sex, and Marital Status: Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019**

Characteristic	2017		2018		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b>AGE</b>						
Total . . . . .	53,691	100.0	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0
0 to 17 years . .	22,884	42.6	9,722	43.4	12,909	43.2
18 to 24 years .	7,874	14.7	3,465	15.5	4,315	14.4
25 to 34 years .	9,570	17.8	3,862	17.2	5,819	19.5
35 to 44 years .	6,290	11.7	2,491	11.1	3,277	11.0
45 to 54 years .	3,663	6.8	1,493	6.7	1,726	5.8
55 to 64 years .	2,058	3.8	781	3.5	1,138	3.8
65 years and over . . . . .	1,352	2.5	591	2.6	732	2.4
<b>SEX</b>						
Total . . . . .	53,691	100.0	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0
Female . . . . .	26,979	50.2	11,099	49.5	14,651	49.0
Male . . . . .	26,712	49.8	11,306	50.5	15,265	51.0
<b>MARITAL STATUS</b>						
Total . . . . .	53,691	100.0	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0
Married <sup>1</sup> . . . . .	17,525	32.6	6,891	30.8	7,770	26.0
Single <sup>2</sup> . . . . .	33,241	61.9	14,405	64.3	20,828	69.6
Other <sup>3</sup> . . . . .	2,925	5.4	1,109	4.9	1,318	4.4

<sup>1</sup> Includes persons in common law marriage.  
<sup>2</sup> Includes persons who were engaged and not yet married.  
<sup>3</sup> Includes persons who were divorced, separated, widowed, or of unknown marital status.  
 Source: U.S. Department of State.

**Table 5.**

**Refugee Arrivals by State of Residence: Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019**  
 (Ranked by 2019 state of residence)

State of residence	2017		2018		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total . . . . .	53,691	100.0	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0
Texas . . . . .	4,765	8.9	1,669	7.4	2,433	8.1
Washington . . . . .	2,920	5.4	1,537	6.9	1,945	6.5
New York . . . . .	3,098	5.8	1,281	5.7	1,845	6.2
California . . . . .	5,160	9.6	1,362	6.1	1,841	6.2
Ohio . . . . .	2,867	5.3	1,408	6.3	1,426	4.8
Kentucky . . . . .	1,618	3.0	896	4.0	1,421	4.7
North Carolina . .	1,916	3.6	934	4.2	1,255	4.2
Arizona . . . . .	2,249	4.2	998	4.5	1,216	4.1
Georgia . . . . .	1,869	3.5	833	3.7	1,182	4.0
Michigan . . . . .	2,536	4.7	651	2.9	1,146	3.8
Other . . . . .	24,693	46.0	10,836	48.4	14,206	47.5

Source: U.S. Department of State.

**ASYLEES**

**Filing of Claims**

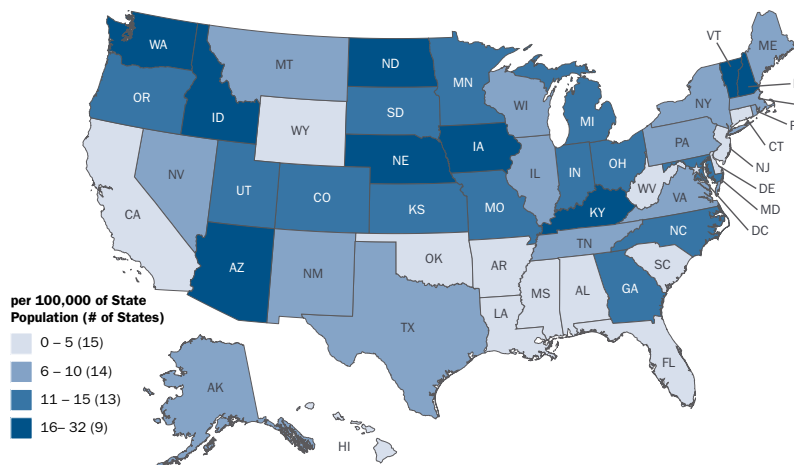
Generally, any foreign national physically present in the United States or arriving at a POE may seek asylum regardless of immigration status. Those seeking asylum must apply within 1 year from the date of last arrival or establish that an exception applies based on changed or

extraordinary circumstances.<sup>18</sup> Principal applicants obtain asylum in one of two ways: affirmatively through a USCIS asylum officer or defensively in removal proceedings before an immigration judge of DOJ’s Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR). An individual applies for asylum by filing Form I-589, *Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal*.

Spouses and unmarried children under the age of 21<sup>19</sup> who are listed on the principal’s asylum application but not included in the principal’s grant of asylum may obtain derivative asylum status. A principal asylee may petition for follow-to-join benefits for qualifying derivatives up to 2 years after he or she was granted asylum, as long as the relationship between the principal and their spouse and/or child existed on the date the principal was granted asylum.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 3.**

**Per Capita Refugee Resettlement by State of Residence: Fiscal Year 2019**



Source: U.S. Department of State and U.S. Census Bureau.

after their admission as refugees. Refugees have some of the highest naturalization rates of all immigrants: of the approximately 600,000 adults who obtained LPR status from 2000 to 2013 based on prior admission as a refugee, 49 percent naturalized within 5 years and 57 percent did so within 6 years.<sup>16</sup>

In comparison, the 10.8 million non-refugee adult immigrants who obtained LPR status from 2000 to 2013 had 5- and 6-year naturalization rates of 12 and 29 percent, respectively.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> The data were restricted to immigrants who were 18 years of age and older when LPR status was obtained. More recent cohorts, with less time spent in LPR status, tend to have lower cumulative naturalization rates.

<sup>17</sup> For more discussion of refugee naturalization see Mossaad N., Ferwerda J., Lawrence D., Weinstein J. M., Hainmueller J., *Determinants of refugee naturalization in the United States*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences U.S.A. 115, 9175–9180 (2018).

<sup>18</sup> Unaccompanied alien children are not subject to the 1-year filing requirement. INA § 208(a)(2)(E); 8 U.S.C. 1158(a)(2)(E).

<sup>19</sup> See reference to Child Status Protection Act, n. 11, *supra*.

<sup>20</sup> In practice, the vast majority of derivative asylum status beneficiaries receive follow-to-join benefits.

DHS and DOJ published a regulation on July 16, 2019 to add a new bar to eligibility for asylum for an alien who enters or attempts to enter the United States across the Southern Border, but who transited through a third country en route to the United States and did not apply for protection there. A total of 25,096 aliens were subject to the bar between July 16 and September 30, 2019, including 398 who were exempted from the bar because they were victims of severe trafficking or applied for protection in a third country. As of February 24, 2020, another 10,468 individuals subject to the asylum bar had established eligibility to apply for statutory withholding of removal or protection under the Convention Against Torture. In addition, the United States signed Asylum Cooperative Agreements (ACAs) in 2019 with Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. These agreements are intended to ensure migrants in need of protection have access to a full and fair procedure for determining a claim to asylum or equivalent temporary protection within the region, many times closer to their home countries. In general, ACAs allow DHS to transfer asylum claimants to a country other than the country of the alien's nationality, to one of these three countries to seek protection there. None of the ACAs, however, went into effect during FY 2019, so they are not covered in this report.

The principal asylee must file an I-730 for each qualifying family member, who may be located abroad or in the United States. Once an I-730 is approved for an individual located abroad, there are no time constraints placed upon the derivative relative's travel to the United States, as long as (1) the principal's status has not been revoked; (2) the relationship of the derivative to the principal is unchanged; and, (3) in the case of a child, the child remains unmarried.

### Adjudication of Claims

The USCIS Asylum Division adjudicates claims and may grant asylum directly through the affirmative asylum process. Asylum officers conduct interviews to determine asylum eligibility using an applicant's testimony, information on Form I-589, and any accompanying evidence provided by the applicant. The asylum applicant must meet the definition of a refugee, be credible considering the totality of the circumstances and all relevant factors, and not be barred from obtaining asylum. If the officer finds that the applicant satisfies the eligibility requirements, then the officer determines whether the application warrants a grant of asylum as a matter of discretion. Individuals may be barred for previously committing certain crimes, posing a national security threat, engaging in the persecution of others, or firmly resettling in another country before coming to the United States.

If applicants with a valid immigration status (e.g., a foreign student) fail to establish eligibility for asylum, USCIS denies the application, and the applicant remains in his or her valid status. If applicants are not in a valid status and are found ineligible for asylum, USCIS places these applicants in removal proceedings before an EOIR immigration judge, where the application is considered anew.

Individuals who have not previously filed for asylum may apply defensively after being placed in removal proceedings by immigration enforcement officials because they are illegally present, are in violation of their status, or were apprehended while attempting to illegally enter into the United States. Defensive applicants apply for asylum directly with EOIR. During the proceedings, an immigration judge may grant asylum or deny the asylum application and issue a removal order if the alien does not qualify for any other forms of relief. Defensive and affirmative applicants may appeal an EOIR denial to the Board of Immigration Appeals and, if unsuccessful there, may seek further review by a U.S. Court of Appeals, and finally the U.S. Supreme Court.

Follow-to-join asylum beneficiaries are not required to demonstrate a persecution claim because their status is derived from the principal asylee. Beneficiaries in the United States at the time of application are granted derivative asylum immediately upon the approval of their I-730 petitions. Beneficiaries abroad at the time of application are granted derivative asylum when admitted into the United States at a POE.

**Table 6a.**  
**Affirmative Asylum Cases Filed (USCIS) by Country of Nationality:**  
**Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019**  
(Ranked by 2019 country of nationality)

Country	2017		2018		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	139,917	100.0	106,128	100.0	96,952	100.0
Venezuela	27,576	19.7	28,426	26.8	25,210	26.0
Guatemala	12,185	8.7	10,192	9.6	9,684	10.0
China, People's Republic	16,810	12.0	8,181	7.7	9,640	9.9
El Salvador	11,941	8.5	9,140	8.6	5,951	6.1
Honduras	7,005	5.0	6,143	5.8	5,609	5.8
Mexico	11,931	8.5	6,618	6.2	4,588	4.7
Haiti	3,872	2.8	2,958	2.8	3,278	3.4
India	4,039	2.9	2,909	2.7	2,957	3.0
Colombia	2,659	1.9	2,571	2.4	2,897	3.0
Nigeria	2,238	1.6	3,325	3.1	2,760	2.8
All other countries, including unknown	39,661	28.3	25,665	24.2	24,378	25.1

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

## Lawful Permanent Residence and Citizenship

One year after being granted asylum, asylees are eligible to apply for LPR status along with qualifying family members who meet the eligibility criteria. Asylees may apply for naturalization 5 years after their final grant of asylum, provided they applied for and were granted LPR status.<sup>21</sup>

## DATA

The affirmative asylee data presented in this report were obtained from Global, a cloud-based platform of USCIS that has replaced the Refugees, Asylum, and Parole System (RAPS) Mainframe system for storing affirmative asylee data.<sup>22</sup>

Defensive asylee data were obtained from EOIR. Follow-to-join asylum derivative data for people residing outside the United States at the time of their admission were obtained from the Case and Activity Management for International Operations (CAMINO) system of USCIS and the Consular Consolidated Database (CCD) of DOS. These data reflect travel documents issued, not admissions. Follow-to-join data for people residing within the United States at the time of the approval of their I-730 petition were obtained from the USCIS Computer-Linked Application Information Management System (CLAIMS).

## TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ASYLEES

**Table 6b.**

### Defensive Asylum Cases Received (EOIR) by Country of Nationality: Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019

(Ranked by 2019 country of nationality)

Country	2017		2018		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	144,662	100.0	163,271	100.0	210,752	100.0
Guatemala	23,935	16.5	26,965	16.5	41,365	19.6
Honduras	21,269	14.7	22,014	13.5	31,649	15.0
Mexico	22,473	15.5	24,752	15.2	30,357	14.4
El Salvador	38,029	26.3	32,233	19.7	29,779	14.1
Venezuela	418	0.3	5,246	3.2	11,623	5.5
India	4,729	3.3	7,831	4.8	11,019	5.2
China, People's Republic	6,309	4.4	8,091	5.0	6,838	3.2
Cuba	584	0.4	1,154	0.7	5,491	2.6
Ecuador	4,000	2.8	4,019	2.5	4,431	2.1
Nicaragua	611	0.4	736	0.5	3,857	1.8
All other countries, including unknown	22,305	15.4	30,230	18.5	34,343	16.3

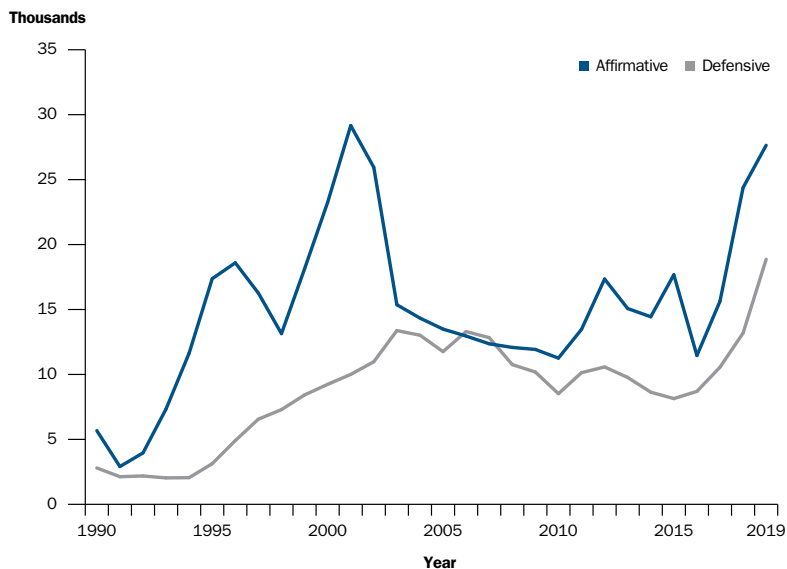
Source: U.S. Department of Justice.

## Asylum Filings

Affirmative asylum filings with USCIS decreased by 8.6 percent from 106,128 applications in 2018 to 96,952 in 2019.<sup>23</sup> Venezuelan applications made up 26 percent of total applications in 2019, despite dropping 11 percent from 2018, and Guatemalan applications made up 10 percent of total applications in 2019, despite dropping 5.0 percent from 2018. Applications from Chinese nationals increased 18 percent from 2018 to reach 9.9 percent of total applications in 2019, becoming the third highest nationality and surpassing El Salvadoran applications which simultaneously saw a 35 percent decrease. The next-highest numbers of applications in 2019 came from Honduran and Mexican nationals, despite decreases from 2018 of 8.7 percent and 31 percent, respectively (Table 6a). Unaccompanied children from Central America's Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) accounted for 92 percent of all unaccompanied child asylum applications in 2019 and made up the majority (52 percent) of affirmative asylum applications from these three countries.

**Figure 4.**

### Annual Grants of Affirmative and Defensive Asylum: Fiscal Years 1990 to 2019



Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Department of Justice.

<sup>21</sup> Asylees may count a maximum of 1 year of their time in asylum status toward the required 5 years of permanent residence for naturalization eligibility purposes.

<sup>22</sup> The migration from RAPS to Global caused slight changes in historical numbers.

<sup>23</sup> These include principal applicants only. There were an additional 51,746 dependents.

**Table 7.****Individuals Granted Asylum Affirmatively or Defensively by Country of Nationality:  
Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019**

(Ranked by 2019 country of nationality)

Country	2017		2018		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total . . . . .	26,199	100.0	37,567	100.0	46,508	100.0
China, People's Republic . . . . .	5,550	21.2	6,794	18.1	7,478	16.1
Venezuela . . . . .	550	2.1	5,849	15.6	6,821	14.7
El Salvador . . . . .	3,453	13.2	2,919	7.8	3,212	6.9
Guatemala . . . . .	2,948	11.3	2,322	6.2	2,591	5.6
India . . . . .	671	2.6	1,301	3.5	2,259	4.9
Egypt . . . . .	1,154	4.4	1,566	4.2	2,301	4.9
Honduras . . . . .	2,040	7.8	1,998	5.3	1,819	3.9
Turkey . . . . .	28	0.1	501	1.3	1,799	3.9
Mexico . . . . .	1,028	3.9	1,344	3.6	1,593	3.4
Russia . . . . .	347	1.3	883	2.4	1,408	3.0
All other countries, including unknown . . . . .	8,430	32.2	12,090	32.2	15,227	32.7

Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security and U.S. Department of Justice.

**Table 8.****Individuals Granted Asylum Affirmatively by Country of Nationality:  
Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019**

(Ranked by 2019 country of nationality)

Country	2017		2018		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total . . . . .	15,639	100.0	24,382	100.0	27,643	100.0
Venezuela . . . . .	482	3.1	5,726	23.5	6,320	22.9
China, People's Republic . . . . .	2,822	18.0	3,747	15.4	4,027	14.6
Egypt . . . . .	1,014	6.5	1,402	5.8	2,156	7.8
Turkey . . . . .	15	0.1	475	1.9	1,739	6.3
Russia . . . . .	288	1.8	765	3.1	1,109	4.0
Guatemala . . . . .	1,998	12.8	1,307	5.4	1,047	3.8
El Salvador . . . . .	2,112	13.5	1,148	4.7	897	3.2
Mexico . . . . .	477	3.1	717	2.9	791	2.9
Nigeria . . . . .	123	0.8	461	1.9	785	2.8
Honduras . . . . .	1,085	6.9	817	3.4	532	1.9
All other countries, including unknown . . . . .	5,223	33.4	7,817	32.1	8,240	29.8

Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

**Table 9.****Individuals Granted Asylum Defensively by Country of Nationality:  
Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019**

(Ranked by 2019 country of nationality)

Country	2017		2018		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total . . . . .	10,560	100.0	13,185	100.0	18,865	100.0
China, People's Republic . . . . .	2,728	25.8	3,047	23.1	3,451	18.3
El Salvador . . . . .	1,341	12.7	1,771	13.4	2,315	12.3
India . . . . .	457	4.3	951	7.2	1,921	10.2
Guatemala . . . . .	950	9.0	1,015	7.7	1,544	8.2
Honduras . . . . .	955	9.0	1,181	9.0	1,287	6.8
Mexico . . . . .	551	5.2	627	4.8	802	4.3
Cuba . . . . .	62	0.6	161	1.2	710	3.8
Cameroon . . . . .	219	2.1	312	2.4	657	3.5
Nepal . . . . .	290	2.7	469	3.6	603	3.2
Venezuela . . . . .	68	0.6	123	0.9	501	2.7
All other countries, including unknown . . . . .	2,939	27.8	3,528	26.8	5,074	26.9

Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice.

The total number of defensive asylum applications filed with EOIR increased for the fifth consecutive year, from 47,137 applications in 2014 to 210,752 in 2019.<sup>24</sup> Similar to last year, the largest numbers of applications lodged with the courts were from citizens of the Northern Triangle countries (102,793) and Mexico (30,357) (Table 6b). These four countries made up 63 percent of defensive asylum applications filed with EOIR.

**Asylum Grants**

The total number of persons granted asylum in the United States increased 24 percent from 37,567 in 2018 to 46,508 in 2019. USCIS granted asylum affirmatively to 27,643 people in 2019, an increase of 13 percent from 2018 and an increase of 77 percent from 2017; and EOIR immigration judges granted defensive asylum to 18,865 people in 2019, an increase of 43 percent from 2018 and an increase of 79 percent from 2017 (Figure 4).

**Country of Nationality**

The three leading countries of nationality of persons granted affirmative or defensive asylum in 2019 were China (16 percent), Venezuela (15 percent), and El Salvador (6.9 percent) (Table 7). Nationals of these countries accounted for 38 percent of all persons granted asylum, down from 41 percent in 2018. Of the top ten countries of nationality, only Honduras went down between 2018 and 2019, and Turkey and India experienced the greatest numerical and proportional increases, with 3.6 and 1.7 times the number of asylum grants as in 2018, respectively. Among the top ten countries of nationality, asylum grants for nationals of Central America's Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) and India have increasingly come from defensive

<sup>24</sup> EOIR has recently changed its methodology in reporting affirmative asylum cases appealed from USCIS. Instead of using the court application date as they do for defensive asylum cases, EOIR now reports on affirmative cases based on the date of the initial asylum application filing with USCIS. This change may result in a slight difference in historical numbers, and OIS has updated the data reported here and in the Yearbook of Immigration Statistics for 2015-2019.



cases rather than affirmative cases in the last few years, while Venezuelan asylum grants have remained mostly affirmative, and grants to Chinese nationals have remained fairly evenly split between defensive and affirmative.

The leading countries of nationality for persons granted affirmative asylum were Venezuela (23 percent), China (15 percent), Egypt (7.8 percent), and Turkey (6.3 percent) (Table 8). Fifty-two percent of those granted asylum affirmatively in 2019 were nationals of these countries.

The leading countries of nationality for persons granted defensive asylum were China (18 percent), El Salvador (12 percent), India (10 percent), and Guatemala (8.1 percent) (Table 9). Forty-nine percent of those granted asylum defensively in 2019 were nationals of these countries.

The leading countries of nationality for follow-to-join asylees authorized for travel to the United States in 2019 were China (23 percent), India (9.7 percent), Eritrea (8.9 percent), and Guatemala (5.3 percent) (Table 10). Nationals of these four countries accounted for almost half of all follow-to-join derivative relatives issued travel documents prior to their admission into the United States. Additionally, 3,343 individuals were approved for derivative asylum status while residing in the United States.

**Table 10.**  
**Follow-to-join Asylee Travel Documents Issued by Country of Nationality:**  
**Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019**  
(Ranked by 2019 country of nationality)

Country	2017		2018		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total . . . . .	6,915	100.0	6,076	100.0	6,270	100.0
China, People's Republic . . . . .	1,781	25.8	1,609	26.5	1,451	23.1
India . . . . .	508	7.3	521	8.6	607	9.7
Eritrea . . . . .	180	2.6	200	3.3	560	8.9
Guatemala . . . . .	337	4.9	365	6.0	331	5.3
Nepal . . . . .	524	7.6	466	7.7	277	4.4
Egypt . . . . .	188	2.7	133	2.2	226	3.6
Ethiopia . . . . .	316	4.6	284	4.7	191	3.0
El Salvador . . . . .	276	4.0	335	5.5	169	2.7
Pakistan . . . . .	183	2.6	135	2.2	142	2.3
Syria . . . . .	99	1.4	89	1.5	135	2.2
Cameroon . . . . .	267	3.9	173	2.8	134	2.1
All other countries, including unknown . . . . .	2,256	32.6	1,766	29.1	2,047	32.6

Source: U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

**Table 11.**  
**Individuals Granted Asylum Affirmatively by Age, Sex, and Marital Status:**  
**Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019**

Characteristic	2017		2018		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b>AGE</b>						
Total . . . . .	15,639	100.0	24,382	100.0	27,643	100.0
0 to 17 years . . . . .	4,905	31.4	5,704	23.4	6,119	22.1
18 to 24 years . . . . .	3,041	19.4	3,892	16.0	3,832	13.9
25 to 34 years . . . . .	3,381	21.6	6,351	26.0	7,073	25.6
35 to 44 years . . . . .	2,611	16.7	5,180	21.2	6,384	23.1
45 to 54 years . . . . .	1,192	7.6	2,291	9.4	2,920	10.6
55 to 64 years . . . . .	357	2.3	700	2.9	1,013	3.7
65 years and over . . . . .	152	1.0	264	1.1	302	1.1
<b>SEX</b>						
Total . . . . .	15,639	100.0	24,382	100.0	27,643	100.0
Female . . . . .	7,434	47.5	11,960	49.1	13,552	49.0
Male . . . . .	8,205	52.5	12,422	50.9	14,088	51.0
Unknown . . . . .	-	-	-	-	3	-
<b>MARITAL STATUS</b>						
Total . . . . .	15,639	100.0	24,382	100.0	27,643	100.0
Married . . . . .	5,169	33.1	9,715	39.8	11,800	42.7
Single . . . . .	9,914	63.4	13,569	55.7	14,442	52.2
Other* . . . . .	556	3.6	1,098	4.5	1,401	5.1

- Represents zero or rounds to zero.

\* Includes persons who were divorced, separated, widowed, or of unknown marital status.

Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

### Age, Sex, and Marital Status

In 2019, 63 percent of persons granted affirmative asylum were between the ages of 18 and 44 (Table 11). Like refugees, affirmative asylees are younger on average than the native-born U.S. population: the median age of persons granted affirmative asylum in 2019 was 30 years, compared to 36 for the native-born population. Fifty-one percent were male, and 55 percent of adults were married. Just under half (49 percent) of follow-to-join beneficiaries were under the age of 18. The median age of follow-to-join beneficiaries was 18 years (Table 12). Data on marital status are not available for this group.

### State of Residence

In 2019, the leading states of residence for individuals granted asylum affirmatively were California (34 percent), New Jersey (9.3 percent), and Florida (9.1 percent) (Table 13). More than half (52 percent) of individuals granted affirmative asylum in 2019 resided in these three states. Per capita, the leading areas include New Jersey and California, with approximately 29 and 24 recipients per 100,000 residents, respectively.

State of residence data are not available for defensive or follow-to-join asylees.

**Table 12.****Follow-to-join Asylee Travel Documents Issued by Age and Sex:  
Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019**

Characteristic	2017		2018		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
<b>AGE</b>						
Total . . . . .	6,915	100.0	6,076	100.0	6,270	100.0
0 to 17 years . . . . .	3,515	50.8	3,165	52.1	3,074	49.0
18 to 24 years . . . . .	1,394	20.2	1,132	18.6	1,211	19.3
25 to 34 years . . . . .	712	10.3	635	10.5	646	10.3
35 to 44 years . . . . .	711	10.3	603	9.9	673	10.7
45 to 54 years . . . . .	430	6.2	395	6.5	464	7.4
55 to 64 years . . . . .	133	1.9	132	2.2	171	2.7
65 years and over . . . . .	20	0.3	14	0.2	31	0.5
<b>SEX</b>						
Total . . . . .	6,915	100.0	6,076	100.0	6,270	100.0
Female . . . . .	3,701	53.5	3,339	55.0	3,323	53.0
Male . . . . .	3,151	45.6	2,731	44.9	2,916	46.5
Unknown . . . . .	63	0.9	6	0.1	31	0.5

Source: U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

**Table 13.****Individuals Granted Asylum Affirmatively by State of Residence:  
Fiscal Years 2017 to 2019**

(Ranked by 2019 state of residence)

State of residence	2017		2018		2019	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total . . . . .	15,639	100.0	24,382	100.0	27,643	100.0
California . . . . .	7,290	46.6	8,111	33.3	9,336	33.8
New Jersey . . . . .	764	4.9	1,342	5.5	2,568	9.3
Florida . . . . .	582	3.7	3,073	12.6	2,516	9.1
New York . . . . .	1,468	9.4	2,022	8.3	2,131	7.7
Texas . . . . .	595	3.8	1,582	6.5	1,802	6.5
Illinois . . . . .	384	2.5	890	3.7	1,468	5.3
Pennsylvania . . . . .	286	1.8	573	2.4	787	2.8
Ohio . . . . .	174	1.1	243	1.0	660	2.4
Indiana . . . . .	91	0.6	291	1.2	657	2.4
Washington . . . . .	324	2.1	396	1.6	484	1.8
Other . . . . .	3,681	23.5	5,859	24.0	5,234	18.9

Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

**Naturalization of Asylees**

Ninety percent of those granted affirmative asylum from 2009 to 2017 gained LPR status by the end of 2019. Similar to refugees, asylees have some of the highest naturalization rates of all immigrants. Of the almost 500,000 adults who obtained LPR status from 2000 to 2013 based on the prior grant of asylum (affirmative or defensive), 56 percent naturalized within 6 years.<sup>25</sup>

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Visit the Office of Immigration Statistics web page at <http://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics>.

<sup>25</sup> The data were restricted to individuals who were at least 18 years old when LPR status was obtained. More recent cohorts, with less time spent in LPR status, tend to have lower cumulative naturalization rates.