



Refugees: 2023

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Immigration

The United States provides protection to certain persons outside the United States, along with their eligible relatives, who have been persecuted or have a well-founded fear of persecution.¹ The 2023 *Refugees Annual Flow Report*, authored by the Office of Homeland Security Statistics (OHSS), presents information on persons admitted to the United States as refugees in Fiscal Year 2023.²

SUMMARY

A total of 60,050 persons were admitted to the United States as refugees during 2023, including 21,760 as principal refugees and 38,290 as derivative accompanying refugees.³ The leading countries of nationality for refugees admitted during this period were the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, and Afghanistan. An additional 20 individuals received derivative refugee status while residing in the United States based on a relative's refugee grant. In addition, 690 individuals abroad were approved as follow-to-join refugees and admitted to the United States.

DEFINING "REFUGEE" STATUS

To be eligible for refugee status, a principal applicant must, among other requirements, meet the definition of a refugee set forth in Section 101(a)(42) of INA, 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(42), which states in part that a refugee is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of nationality (or country of last habitual residence, if stateless) 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.⁴ Applicants for refugee status are outside the United States, whereas people seeking relief for similar reasons from within the United States or when arriving at a U.S. port of entry (POE) may apply for asylum status.⁵

The INA also generally requires that a person must be outside their country of nationality or, if stateless, country of last habitual residence to qualify as a refugee. However, the INA grants the President authority to designate countries for "in-country processing," allowing people to be processed for refugee status within their own countries.

¹ See Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) § 207, 8 U.S.C. § 1157.

² This report was prepared by OHSS, which replaced the Office of Immigration Statistics in September 2023. Led by the DHS Statistical Official, OHSS' mission is to foster transparency and data-driven homeland security decision-making by analyzing and disseminating timely, objective DHS data and statistics. This report includes OHSS' analysis of relevant statutes, policy, and processes to provide background and context for DHS statistical data. DHS Component statistical officials have reviewed this report for accuracy. In this report, "years" refer to fiscal years, which run from October 1 to September 30. Fiscal Year 2023 ran from October 1, 2022 to September 30, 2023. The 2023 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics and other OHSS reports contain additional context and are available at <https://ohss.dhs.gov/topics/immigration/yearbook>. Not all numbers cited in this report are contained in this report's tables. To protect privacy, table cells and numbers in this report are rounded to the nearest ten. The totals may not sum due to rounding.

³ Derivative refugees are eligible dependents (spouses and unmarried children under 21 years of age) of the principal refugee who either accompany the principal refugee or are petitioned for by the principal as follow-to-join derivatives. The terms derivative and dependent are therefore used interchangeably in this report. 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 these Amerasians as lawful permanent residents.

⁴ 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.

⁵ See Asylees: 2023 at <https://ohss.dhs.gov/topics/immigration/refugees-and-asylees/rfa-annual-flow-report>.

REFUGEE ADMISSIONS CEILING

Under the INA, the President establishes an overall refugee admissions ceiling and has typically set regional allocations before the beginning of each fiscal year following “appropriate consultation” with Congress.⁶ This ceiling has fluctuated widely in recent years, from a low of 15,000 for FY 2021—the lowest level since the inception of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) in 1980—to 125,000 in FY 2022, the highest level since 1993.⁷

On September 27, 2022, President Biden issued the Memorandum for the Secretary of State on Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2023 (PD 2022-25). This memorandum continued a

refugee ceiling of 125,000 for 2023 (Table 1). PD 2022-25 also designated for in country processing eligible persons from Cuba, Eurasia, the Baltics, Iraq, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, continuing the same list of countries that were designated for FY 2022, as well as in special circumstances persons identified by a U.S. Embassy in any location.

Notably, refugee admissions did not reach 50 percent of their designated ceilings for any of fiscal years 2021 to 2023. NGOs have attributed the slow rebound in refugee admissions from lower levels in 2018-2020 to a variety of factors, including longstanding impacts from funding cuts, program pauses, and increased vetting during the Trump administration.⁸

Table 1.

Proposed and Actual Refugee Admissions by Region of Chargeability: Fiscal Years 2021 to 2023

Region	2021		2022		2023	
	Ceiling	Admissions	Ceiling	Admissions	Ceiling	Admissions
Total	62,500	11,450	125,000	25,520	125,000	60,050
Africa	22,000	6,250	40,000	11,390	40,000	24,510
East Asia	6,000	780	15,000	2,220	15,000	6,260
Europe/Central Asia	4,000	980	10,000	2,350	15,000	2,770
Latin America/Caribbean	5,000	400	15,000	2,490	15,000	6,320
Near East/South Asia	13,000	3,050	35,000	7,080	35,000	20,200
Unallocated Reserve	12,500	0	10,000	0	5,000	0

Notes: To protect privacy, table cells are rounded to the nearest ten. The totals may not sum due to rounding. Ceiling and admission numbers reflect revisions made each year. Initially in 2021, refugee admissions ceilings were based on Admission Category and not by Region/Country of Chargeability. The April 16, 2021 Presidential Memorandum revised the 2021 limits based on Region/Country of Chargeability, and a subsequent May 3, 2021 Emergency Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2021 revised the overall allocation to 62,500. Based on the terms of a settlement in *Doe et al. v. Trump et al.*, No. 17-0178 (W.D. Wash.), certain refugee applicants that arrive in 2020 and any future years are counted toward the 2018 refugee admissions ceiling. In 2021, the number of such applicants was 40, in 2022 the number was 50, and in 2023 the number was 40. Data are as of February 28, 2024.

Source: Office of Homeland Security Statistics analysis of DOS data.

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 bona fide 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

⁶ 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.

⁷ See *Refugees and Asylees: 2022* for detailed discussion.

⁸ Refugee Council USA. *Where are the Refugees?* 2019. <https://rcusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/RCUSA-Report-1.pdf>.

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 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 One (P-1) category includes individuals referred by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a U.S. Embassy, or certain non-governmental organizations (NGOs); Priority Two (P-2) includes groups of special humanitarian concern; and Priority Three (P-3) includes family reunification cases. Once principal refugee applicants are referred or granted access to the USRAP under any of these priorities, they still must meet all other eligibility criteria, including meriting a favorable exercise of discretion. 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 dependents to determine eligibility for resettlement in the United States. Multiple security checks must be completed before a Form I-590, *Registration for Classification as Refugee*, is approved, and applicants must 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 arranges 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.

The spouse and unmarried children under the age of 21 of a principal refugee may obtain refugee status as accompanying or follow-to-join derivatives.⁹ Accompanying derivatives may enter the United States with the principal refugee or within four months after the principal refugee's admission.¹⁰ A spouse or child who joins the principal refugee more than four months after admission to the United States is a follow-to-join derivative. Follow-to-join derivatives may also be located inside the United States. Principal refugees may petition for follow-to-join benefits for their qualifying derivatives within two years of the refugee's admission to the United States. The principal and the derivative refugee relative's relationship must have existed at the time of the principal's admission into the United States, at the time of filing for follow-to-join benefits, at the time of the derivative's interview, and at the time of the relative's subsequent approval. Principal refugees must file Form I-730, *Refugee/Asylee Relative Petition*,¹¹ for each qualifying follow-to-join derivative family member. These beneficiaries are not required to demonstrate an independent refugee claim. Once a principal's Form 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 continues to exist; and (3) in the case of a child, the child is unmarried at the time of admission.

TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF REFUGEES

In 2023, the United States admitted 60,050 refugees, more than the total refugees admitted in 2021 and 2022 combined.

Since the inception of USRAP in 1980, the United States has accepted more than 3 million refugees. Since reaching peak refugee admissions (122,070)

⁹ Children may include those age 21 or over who are covered by the Child Status Protection Act, Pub. L. No. 107-208 (Aug. 6, 2002). See INA §§ 207(c)(2)(B), 208(b)(3)(B); 8 U.S.C. §§ 1157(c)(2)(B), 1158(b)(3)(B). A derivative child must be unmarried when the principal refugee is admitted to the United States, when the principal refugee files Form I-730, when the child is interviewed, and at the time of the child's subsequent admission.

¹⁰ In practice, most accompanying derivative refugees enter the United States with the principal refugee.

¹¹ This petition is used to file for relatives of both refugees and asylees. Refugee follow-to-join admissions are counted within the annual refugee ceiling. Asylum follow-to-join admissions are not counted in the annual admission ceilings.

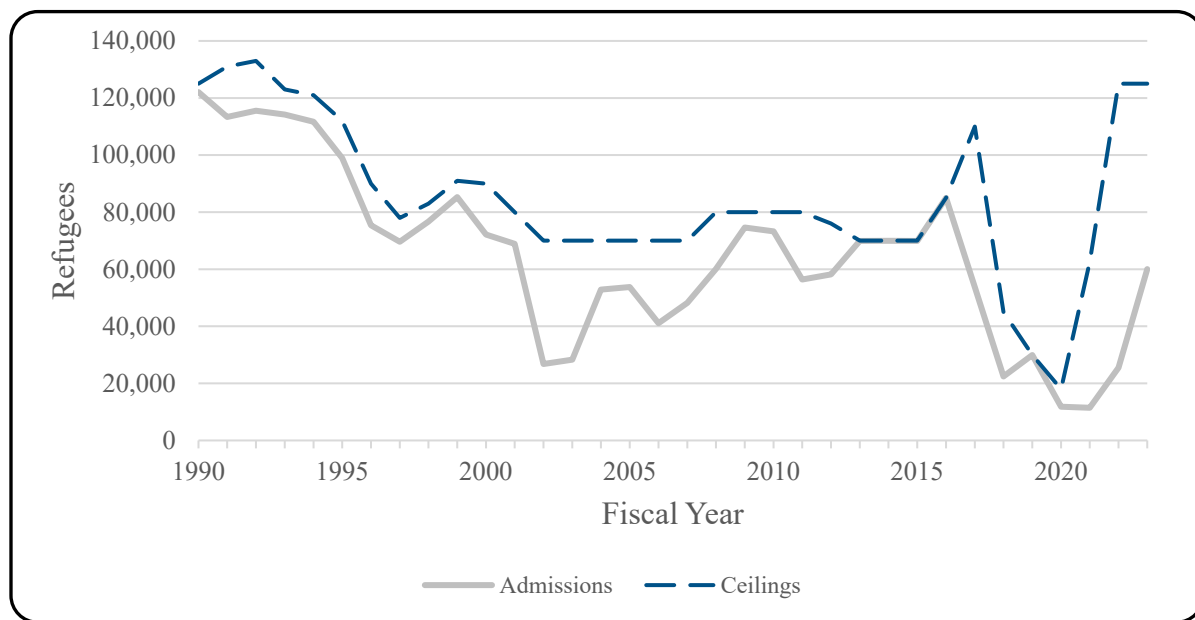
in 1990 under the current legal framework, refugee admissions have gone through three general trends

(Figure 1). Since 1990, refugee admissions are approximately 65,000 admissions per year on average. Admissions generally declined during the 1990s, as the refugee program’s focus shifted to more diverse populations across the world. Admissions reached a prior low point of 26,790 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 84,990 in 2016 under the Obama administration, the highest number in 17 years. Immediately afterwards, the Trump administration reduced the refugee ceiling during each of its four years and implemented new refugee vetting and screening procedures, contributing to a decrease in admissions for 2017 to 2021, with 2020 and 2021 making up the lowest levels of refugee admissions in U.S. history (11,840 and 11,450 respectively). Refugee admissions in 2023 reflect movement back to the average trend of refugee admissions since 1990.

Figure 1

Refugee Admissions and Proposed Ceilings to the United States: Fiscal Years 1990 to 2023



Note: Data for fiscal years 2021-2023 as of February 28, 2024.

Source: Office of Homeland Security Statistics analysis of DOS data.

Category of Admission

In 2023, most refugees were admitted under P-1 processing (individuals referred by the UNHCR, a U.S. Embassy, or certain NGOs) (75 percent) and P-2 processing (groups of special humanitarian concern) (24 percent) (Table 2). P-3 processing (family

reunification cases) constituted 0.4 percent of refugees admitted and follow-to-join refugee beneficiaries made up 1.0 percent of refugees admitted. Principal refugees accounted for 21,760 (36 percent) of the 60,050 refugees admitted to the United States in 2023, while accompanying spouses and children represented 13 and 51 percent, respectively.

Table 2.**Refugee Arrivals by Relationship to Principal Applicant and Case Priority: Fiscal Years 2021 to 2023**

Category of admission and case priority	2021		2022		2023	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
RELATIONSHIP TO PRINCIPAL APPLICANT						
Total	11,450	100.0	25,520	100.0	60,050	100.0
Principal applicant	4,560	39.8	9,010	35.3	21,760	36.2
Dependents	6,900	60.3	16,510	64.7	38,290	63.8
Spouse	1,360	11.9	3,270	12.8	7,750	12.9
Child	5,490	47.9	13,140	51.5	30,360	50.6
Siblings, parents, and other	40	0.3	100	0.4	180	0.3
CASE PRIORITY						
Total	11,450	100.0	25,520	100.0	60,050	100.0
Priority 1	7,060	61.7	17,640	69.1	44,840	74.7
Priority 2	3,930	34.3	7,270	28.5	14,280	23.8
Priority 3	60	0.5	100	0.4	250	0.4
Follow-to-join beneficiaries	400	3.5	510	2.0	690	1.1

Notes: To protect privacy, table cells are rounded to the nearest ten. The totals may not sum due to rounding. Numbers in the principal applicant category previously included siblings, parents, and other dependents, who are now reported as dependents. Data are as of February 28, 2024.

Source: Office of Homeland Security Statistics analysis of DOS data.

Country of Nationality

In 2023, the leading countries of nationality for individuals admitted as refugees were the Democratic Republic of the Congo (30 percent), Syria (18 percent), Afghanistan (11 percent), and Burma (10 percent) (Table 3). These four countries made up 69 percent of total refugee admissions in 2023.

Since the inception of the refugee program, the nationalities of refugees admitted to the United States have changed as policies evolved and new conflicts arose around the world. Over the last ten years, the United States has admitted just over half a million refugees (509,670 people). Of these, 21 percent have been from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 16 percent have been from Burma, 12 percent from Iraq, 8.8 percent from Syria, and 8.1 percent from Somalia.

Table 3.

Refugee Arrivals by Country of Nationality: Fiscal Years 2021 to 2023

(Ranked by 2023 Country of Nationality)

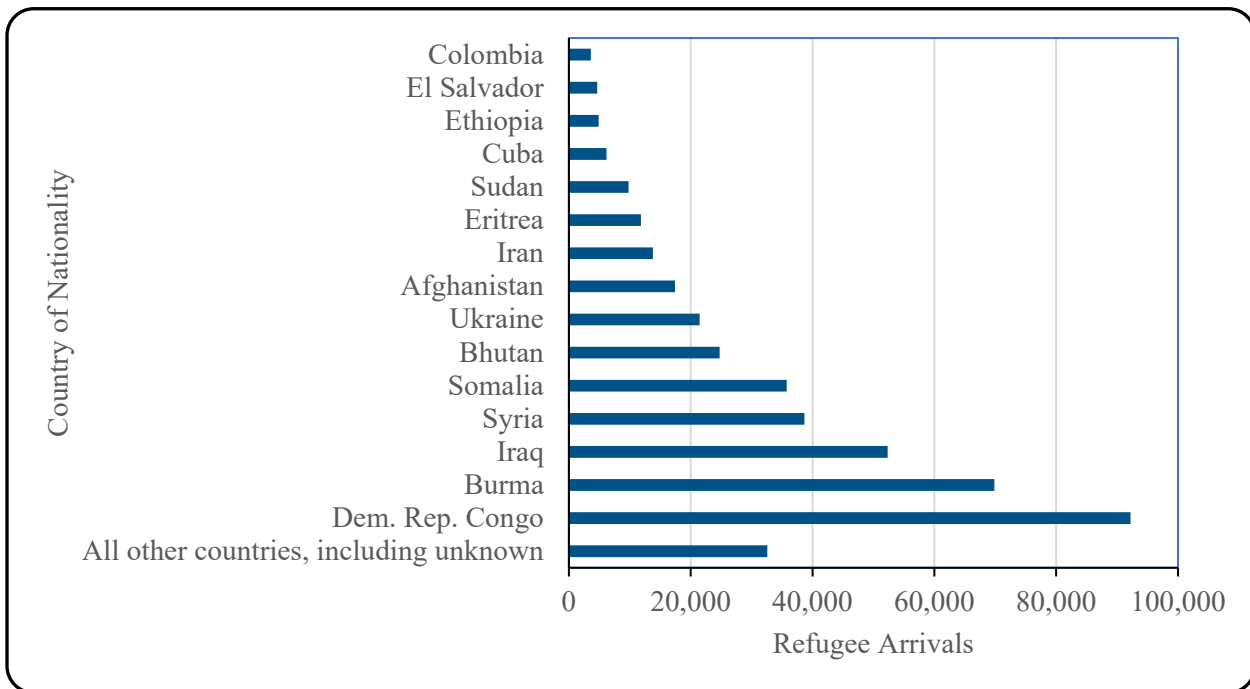
Country of Nationality	2021		2022		2023	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	11,450	100.0	25,520	100.0	60,050	100.0
Congo, Democratic Republic	4,880	42.6	7,740	30.3	18,080	30.1
Syria	1,260	11.0	4,560	17.9	10,780	18.0
Afghanistan	870	7.6	1,620	6.3	6,590	11.0
Burma	770	6.7	2,140	8.4	6,130	10.2
Guatemala	60	0.5	1,080	4.2	1,760	2.9
Sudan	510	4.5	1,670	6.5	1,630	2.7
Somalia	200	1.7	490	1.9	1,410	2.3
Venezuela	0	0.0	160	0.6	1,370	2.3
Ukraine	800	7.0	1,590	6.2	1,340	2.2
Iraq	500	4.4	500	2.0	1,220	2.0
All other countries, including unknown	1,610	14.1	3,970	15.6	9,750	16.2

Note: To protect privacy, table cells are rounded to the nearest ten. The totals may not sum due to rounding. Data are as of February 28, 2024.

Source: Office of Homeland Security Statistics analysis of DOS data.

Figure 2.

Refugee Arrivals by Top Country of Nationality: Sum of Totals: Fiscal Years 2014 to 2023



Note: Data are as of February 28, 2024

Source: Office of Homeland Security Statistics analysis of DOS data.

Age, Sex, and Marital Status

Seventy-five percent of total refugees admitted to the United States in 2023 were under 35 years of age, and 45 percent of the total were children under 18 years of age (Table 4). Refugees tend to be relatively younger than the native-born population, with a median age of 20 for those arriving in 2023, compared to 39 years of age¹² for the whole U.S. population.¹³ Refugee median age varied by sex in

2023: female refugees had a higher median age (21) than male refugees (19). However, in 2023, refugee median age had considerable variation by region and country of birth: refugees from Africa and Near East/South Asia had the lowest median ages of 19 and 20, respectively, while those from Europe and Central Asia had the highest median age of 25. Slightly more male than female refugees were admitted in 2023. Among adult arrivals in 2023, 54 percent were married, the same proportion as in 2022.

Table 4.

Refugee Arrivals by Age, Sex, and Marital Status: Fiscal Years 2021 to 2023

Characteristic	2021		2022		2023	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
AGE						
Total	11,450	100.0	25,520	100.0	60,050	100.0
0 to 17 years	4,530	39.6	11,270	44.2	27,210	45.3
18 to 24 years	1,640	14.3	3,480	13.6	8,120	13.5
25 to 34 years	2,190	19.1	4,180	16.4	9,930	16.5
35 to 44 years	1,470	12.8	3,310	13.0	7,810	13.0
45 to 54 years	830	7.2	1,940	7.6	4,020	6.7
55 to 64 years	490	4.3	850	3.3	1,900	3.2
65 years and over	300	2.6	500	2.0	1,070	1.8
SEX						
Total	11,450	100.0	25,520	100.0	60,050	100.0
Female	5,490	47.9	12,700	49.8	29,800	49.6
Male	5,970	52.1	12,820	50.2	30,260	50.4
MARITAL STATUS						
Total	11,450	100.0	25,520	100.0	60,050	100.0
Married ¹	3,320	29.0	7,750	30.4	17,690	29.5
Single ²	7,670	67.0	16,950	66.4	40,310	67.1
Other ³	470	4.1	830	3.3	2,050	3.4

¹ Includes persons in common law marriage and persons who are separated.

² Includes persons who were engaged and not yet married.

³ Includes persons who were divorced, widowed, or of unknown marital status.

Notes: To protect privacy, table cells are rounded to the nearest ten. The totals may not sum due to rounding. Data are as of February 28, 2024.

Source: Office of Homeland Security Statistics analysis of DOS data.

¹² Median age U.S. population estimate from U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), ACS 1-Year Estimates Subject Tables, Table S0101, 2022.

¹³ The U.S. population is defined as only those within the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. U.S. Census Bureau. Understanding and Using American Community Survey Data: What All Data Users Need to Know, March 2020.

State of Initial Resettlement

In 2023, half of admitted refugees (50 percent) were resettled within ten states (Table 5). Texas, New York, and California resettled

the most refugees (8.4, 6.4, and 6.1 percent of admitted refugees, respectively), while Kentucky and Vermont resettled the most refugees per capita, resettling 56 and 49 refugees per 100,000 population in 2023, respectively (Figure 3).¹⁴

Table 5.
Refugee Arrivals by State of Residence: Fiscal Years 2021 to 2023

(Ranked by 2023 State of Residence)

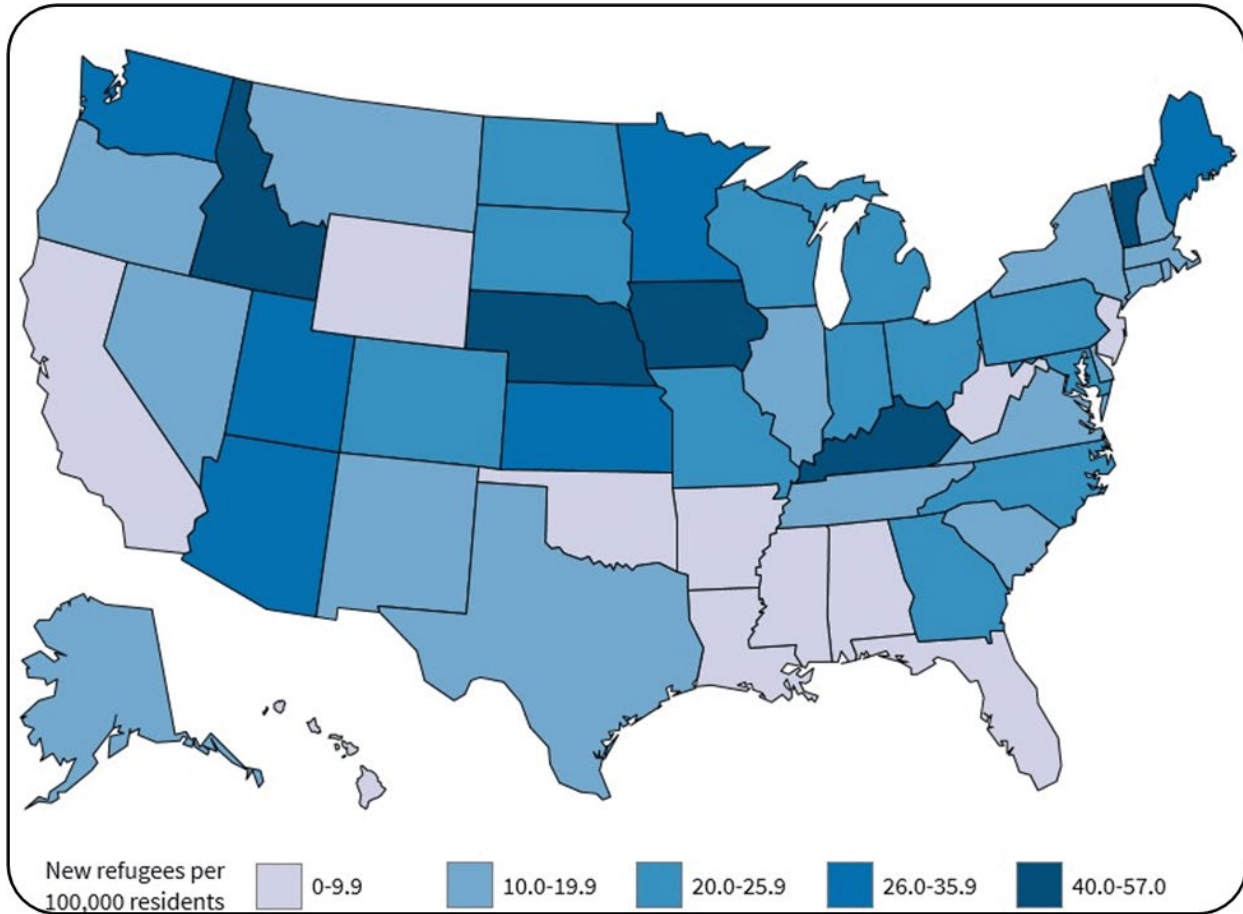
State of Residence	2021		2022		2023	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	11,450	100.0	25,520	100.0	60,050	100.0
Texas	930	8.1	2,110	8.3	5,050	8.4
New York	710	6.2	1,400	5.5	3,850	6.4
California	990	8.6	2,180	8.5	3,670	6.1
Pennsylvania	400	3.5	1,100	4.3	2,770	4.6
North Carolina	500	4.4	1,150	4.5	2,610	4.3
Arizona	420	3.7	1,030	4.0	2,610	4.3
Kentucky	670	5.9	1,300	5.1	2,520	4.2
Ohio	450	3.9	1,130	4.4	2,500	4.2
Michigan	530	4.6	1,140	4.5	2,450	4.1
Washington	480	4.2	1,240	4.9	2,440	4.1
Other	5,370	46.9	11,730	46.0	29,600	49.3

Notes: To protect privacy, table cells are rounded to the nearest ten. The totals may not sum due to rounding. Data are as of February 28, 2024.
Source: Office of Homeland Security Statistics analysis of DOS data.

¹⁴ State population estimates for per capita calculations from U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for the United States, Regions, States, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2022 (NST-EST2022-POP).

Figure 3

Per Capita Refugee Resettlement by State of Residence: Fiscal Year 2023



Note: Refugee Data are as of February 28, 2024.

Source: Office of Homeland Security Statistics analysis of DOS and U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division data. December 2023. Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for the United States, Regions, States, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2023 (NST-EST2023-POP). <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2020s-state-total.html>

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 the approximately 752,000 adult refugees arriving between 2000 and 2021, 97 percent gained LPR status by the end of 2023.¹⁵ These rates were similar across sex and age groups. More recently, of the approximately 130,000 adults arriving as refugees between 2016 and 2021, 92 percent gained LPR status by the end of 2023, and these rates varied slightly by world region. For

example, among adult refugees who arrived between 2016 and 2021, only 89 percent of those from Africa and Latin America/Caribbean gained LPR status by the end of 2023, compared to 94 percent of those from East Asia.¹⁶

When granted LPR status, a refugee’s “resident since” date is rolled back to the individual’s date of admission as a refugee. Refugees who have become LPRs may apply for naturalization five years after their “resident since” date. Refugees have some of the highest naturalization rates of all immigrants. Of the approximately 770,000 adults who obtained LPR

¹⁵ Here, 2021 is used as an end year due to it being one year of waiting to be eligible for LPR status plus one additional year to file paperwork and undergo processing before the end of the current 2023 data; in other words, allowing a full two years for refugees to gain green card status. The data were restricted to individuals who were at least 18 years of age when LPR status was obtained, indicating a choice to adjust status was made.

¹⁶ This rate by world region is not available for those arriving prior to 2016. Here, 2021 is used as an end year due to it being one year of waiting to be eligible for LPR status plus one additional year to file paperwork and undergo processing before the end of the current 2023 data.

status from 2000 to 2017 based on prior admission as a refugee, 58 percent naturalized within six years.¹⁷ These naturalization rates varied slightly across sex: 60 percent of female refugees naturalized within six years of obtaining LPR status compared to 56 percent of males. The naturalization rate varied considerably by age group, with a six-year naturalization rate of 59 percent for those refugees who gained LPR status between ages 18 and 34, 52 percent for those who gained LPR status between ages 35 and 54, and 69 percent for those who became LPRs at 55 years of age or older.

DATA

All data presented in this report are from the DOS Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration refugee case management system. Follow-to-join refugee data is pulled from USCIS Computer-Linked Application Information Management System (CLAIMS) and Case and Activity Management for International Operations (CAMINO) system.

For more information, visit the Office of Homeland Security Statistics web page at <https://ohss.dhs.gov>.

¹⁷ Here 2017 is used as the end year to account for five years of waiting to be eligible for naturalization plus one additional year to file paperwork and undergo processing before the end of the current 2023 data; in other words, allowing a full six years for refugees to naturalize. The data were restricted to individuals who were at least 18 years of age when LPR status was obtained, indicating a choice to adjust status was made.

