



Refugee Fact Sheet

Q. What does it mean to be a refugee?

To be a “refugee” means that you have fled your country. To seek refuge in another country is not a choice, but a last resort. Many refugees have lost their home, have seen family members or friends killed or tortured, and have no government to turn to for help. In many cases, refugees are fleeing oppressive government regimes. Under both international and U.S. law, a refugee is someone outside his or her own country who has suffered persecution or has a well-founded fear of persecution in that country based on: (1) race; (2) religion; (3) nationality; (4) membership in a particular social group and/or (5) political opinion. It is currently estimated that there are over 65 million forcibly displaced people in the world, including 21.3 million registered refugees, as determined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Most of those 21.3 million registered refugees will never be offered resettlement in a third country.

Q. What is the difference between a refugee and an asylee?

A refugee, as described above, is someone who has fled their country. However, the next step in the international system of refugee protection and resettlement is usually to register with the UNHCR. As an example, someone may flee from Syria to Jordan. From there they have the ability to register with the UNHCR who then facilitates their protection and, possible, third country resettlement if appropriate. Only a very small percent of vulnerable refugees are ever resettled to a third country. Most either remain in the country of first asylum OR eventually return to their country if and when conditions improve.

To be an asylee in international law usually means that you have requested asylum once inside another country or at the border (or other port-of-entry, like an airport). However, like refugees, asylees must still prove they have suffered persecution or have a well-founded fear of persecution due to (1) race; (2) religion; (3) nationality; (4) membership in a particular social group and/or (5) political opinion. In the United States, individuals apply for asylum once they are physically present in the U.S. or at our border. The process to be granted asylum in the U.S. can, in some cases, last years as the U.S. immigration court and asylum systems are backlogged with hundreds of thousands of cases.

Q. How does the resettlement process work in the U.S.?

Nationally, there are nine voluntary organizations, including Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) that coordinate refugee resettlement across the country. LIRS works with 28 local resettlement partners in 48 sites throughout the nation to actually do the work of helping resettle refugees in partnership with local communities. Congregations have played an integral role in the resettlement process, often helping to connect refugees with basic but essential services while also helping them integrate into their new surroundings.

Refugees often resettle in places where they can be near their families or friends, and where there are jobs, good schools and safe neighborhoods – not unlike the reasons why most of us choose to live where we do. LIRS’ Refugee Services seeks to prepare a place of welcome that creates opportunity and meets the particular needs of each refugee so that they can become contributing, self-reliant members of their new community.



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Through our network of partners, LIRS works closely with stakeholders at the federal, state, and local level to ensure we are actively engaging with the community so they can better understand, and engage with, the work we do every day.

Q. How do refugees support themselves - do they work?

All refugees who arrive in the U.S. are fully authorized to work, and they want to work once they arrive here, as quickly as possible! Most refugees arrive with many years of work experience, giving American companies access to well-trained workers who are committed to long-term employment. Some have professional training or experience in small business from their home country and almost all have skills that are transferable to a variety of work settings including healthcare, manufacturing, hospitality, and construction. LIRS works with partners around the country to ensure that refugees are being employed as quickly as possible, and can be employed in the long-term in fields that match their skills and background.

Q. What about refugees taking jobs and draining local economies?

On average, refugees are more likely to be entrepreneurial and enjoy higher rates of successful business ventures compared to other populations. They don't take jobs, they often create them. At the local level, refugees provide increased demand for goods and services through their new purchasing power and help in revitalizing communities that otherwise have a declining population and economic output. It is also worth noting that research has shown annual earnings growth among refugees living in the U.S. has often outpaced pay increases among other immigrant populations.

Q. Do refugees come here for a certain time limit?

No. If an individual is granted refugee status in the United States, they are not limited in how long they can remain here. In fact, if they are admitted as a refugee, by law they must apply for permanent residency one year after coming to the United States. After five years of legal permanent residence, they are eligible to apply for citizenship. Just like everyone, refugees sometimes move - for example, sometimes families will move cities or states to be closer to family, friends or a better job prospect.

Q. Can refugees apply for public assistance?

Just like anyone else in the U.S., refugees can apply for public benefits if they are eligible. However, LIRS works hard to select localities that have excellent opportunities for newly arriving refugees to achieve early employment and sustained economic independence without resorting to public assistance. A key part of this is working with the community and local stakeholders to find opportunities that fit the needs of the refugees and the communities in which they are resettled. Our partners around the country have employment counselors that help refugees find work so that they can support themselves.

Q: Are refugees dangerous?

By definition, refugees are the very ones fleeing danger, violence, oppression, and persecution. They aren't criminals. In fact, many of the conflicts that have caused the displacement crises we see around the world have had a disproportionate effect on women and children. Study after study has shown, that the cities that accept



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the largest amounts of refugees often see a decrease in crime – sometimes dramatically. The fact is, refugees, just like everyone, aren't perfect. But the overwhelming majority of refugees just want to live in peace, create a home, and contribute to their new community. Things that they didn't have before, but can now achieve because of the protection that the United States has offered them.

Q. Do refugees receive cultural orientation and information about customs and U.S. laws?

Yes! Refugees receive cultural orientation both before and after they come to the United States. At LIRS, our goal is to help refugees obtain the basic knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they need to become happy and contributing members of American society, fully integrated into their communities.

Q. Why should we allow refugees to come here?

We are a nation of immigrants and refugees. As people of faith, we are called to “welcome the stranger”. Helping refugees who have fled their homes and are displaced in refugee camps with little or no food, health care, shelter or protection is the right thing to do. Wouldn't we hope that someone would do the same for us if we were in their shoes?

While there is an immediate, short-term, cost to resettling refugees in the U.S., there is a long-term and life-long economic gain that refugees and their descendants bring. The majority of refugees open businesses, fill important jobs, become teachers, CEOs, and public officials. The overwhelming majority of refugees and asylum seekers in the U.S. are law-abiding, hard-working individuals and families who make valuable contributions to their communities by starting businesses, paying taxes, and by sharing their unique cultural gifts with America. Much of our continued success as a nation will rest on our ability to embrace those who come here seeking protection and better opportunities for themselves and their families. The U.S. is a global leader in programs that support immigration, refugee resettlement and asylee protection. Let us all continue to join forces in working to help improve these programs and maintain their integrity. Much of our continued success as a nation will rest on our ability to embrace those who come here seeking protection and better opportunities for themselves and their families.

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