



Institute for
Immigration Research

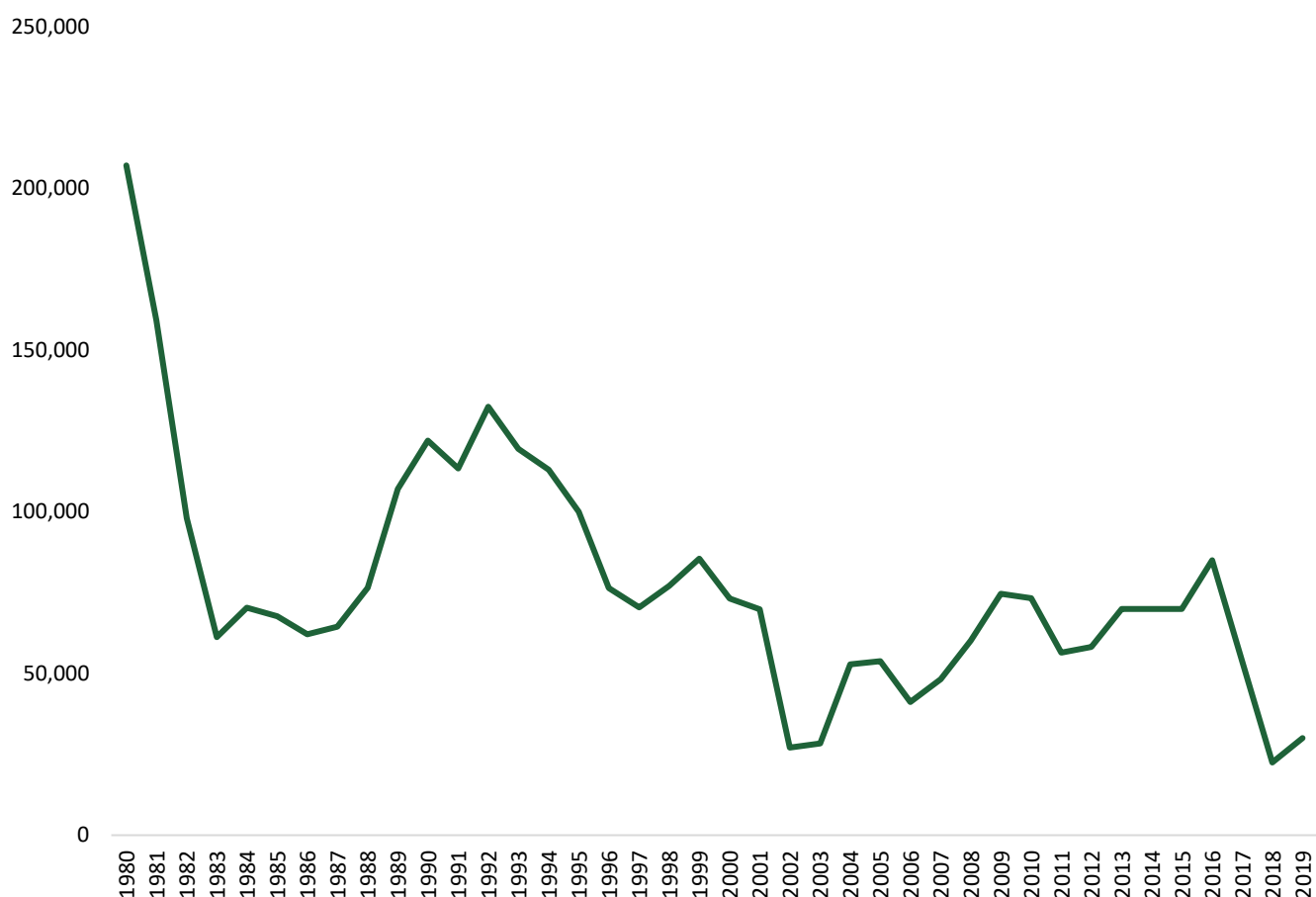
The World Refugee Population and Annual U.S. Refugee Admissions

By Eirini Giannaraki, Graduate Research Assistant

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The United States Refugee Act of 1980 mandates that the annual cap on refugee admissions is set by the president, in consultation with Congress. Figure 1 shows the annual refugee admissions since 1980. In FY 1980, 207,116 refugees were admitted to, and resettled in, the United States. In the following years, the admissions declined significantly, peaking again in the mid-1990s as a response to refugees coming from the former Soviet Union and the political tensions in the Balkan countries. Specifically, in FY 1993, 119,448 refugees were admitted to the United States. Since 2000, the refugee admissions hovered primarily in the 50,000 to 80,000 range with the exception of FY 2002 where the cap was set at 70,000 refugees but only 27,131 people were admitted due to the fact that the U.S. largely suspended admissions following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Figure 1: Annual Refugee Admissions, FY 1980-2019



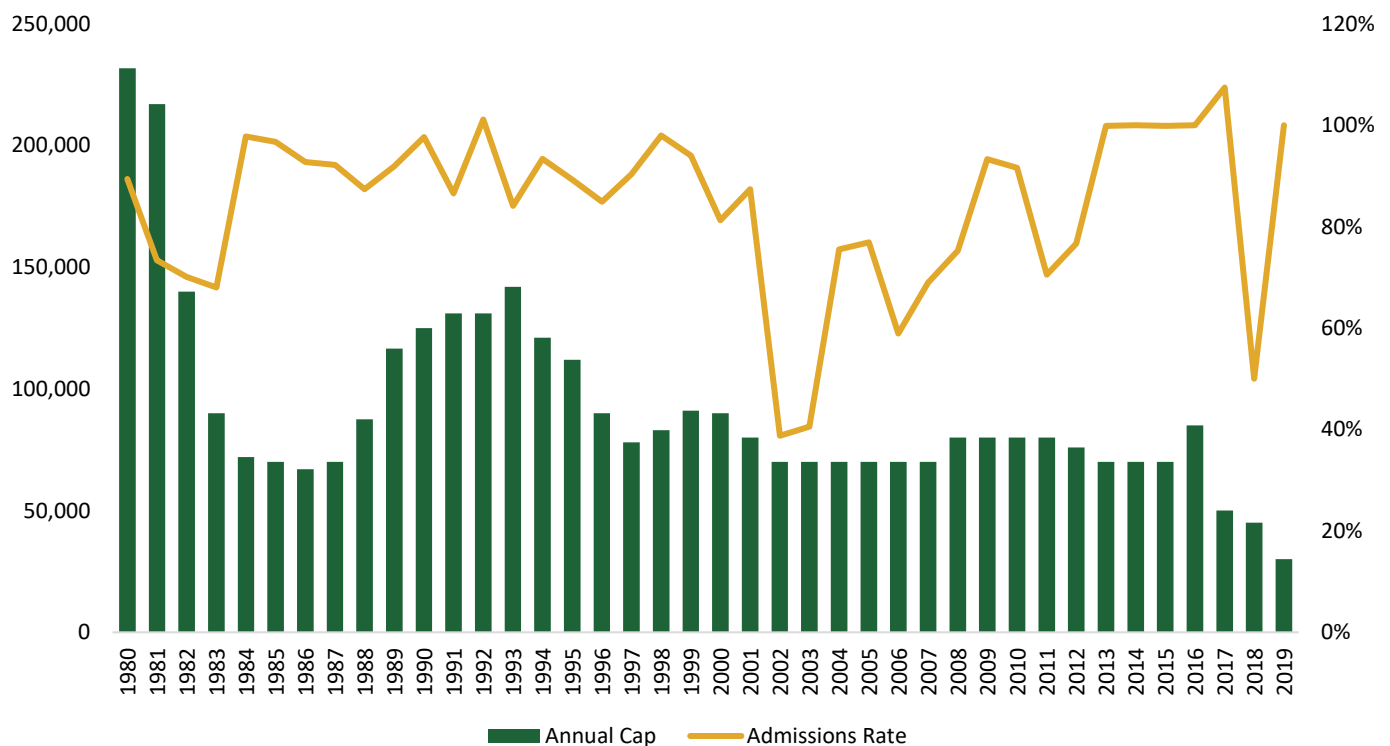
Source: Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Office of Admissions – Refugee Processing Center

Refugee admissions to the United States have dropped sharply in the last three years, with 30,000 refugees admitted during FY 2019. In FY 2016, 84,995 refugees were admitted in the United States. Since then, the number of refugee admissions has decreased by 65 percent. In FY 2017, 53,716 individuals were resettled in the United States, whereas in FY 2018 the total number of admissions was 22,491.

On November 1, 2019, the Trump administration released the Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for FY 2020 when the United States will admit up to 18,000 refugees – marking a historic low and threatening to further shrink the refugee resettlement program. In the first month of FY 2019, the U.S. received zero refugees, which had never happened in the thirty years that the resettlement program has existed.

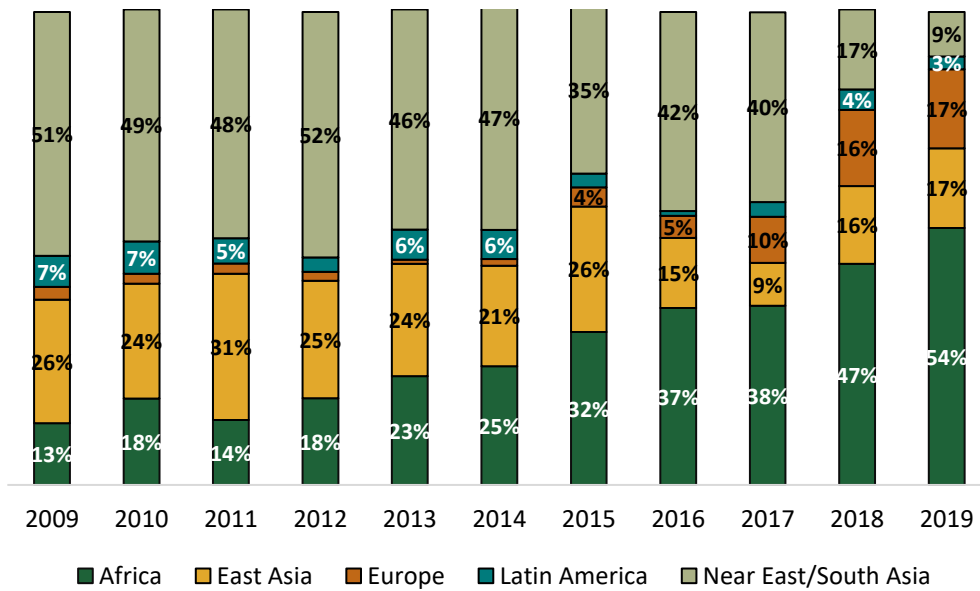
Figure 2 shows the annual refugee caps in relation to the refugee admissions rate for fiscal years 1980 through 2019. Overall, the United States filled the proposed cap in fiscal years 1984 (98 percent of the cap was met), 1985 (97 percent of the cap was met), 1988 (98 percent of the cap was met), 1990 (98 percent of the cap was met) but also in FY 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2019, 100 percent of the cap was met. In FY 2017, mostly due to the escalated global refugee crisis and the Syrian civil war, the number of refugee admissions exceeded the annual cap by seven percent, with 6,557 Syrian refugees being resettled in the United States. The only other time that the admissions exceeded the cap was in FY 1992 when 132,531 refugees were resettled in the country in comparison to the 131,000 admissions that the annual cap was set in. In this year, the largest proportion of refugees came from the former Soviet Union (61,397) and Asia (51,899). On the other hand, during FY 2002 and 2003 – right after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001- only 39 and 41 percent of the cap was met, respectively. In other words, in 2002, 27,131 refugees were resettled in the United States and 28,403 in 2003 with the cap being set on 70,000 for both years. Finally, FY 2018 was also a year when only half of the annual refugee cap was filled; 22,491 refugees were resettled and the cap was 45,000 admissions.

Figure 2: Refugee Caps and Admissions Rates FY 1980-2019



Source: Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Office of Admissions – Refugee Processing Center

Figure 3: Refugee Admissions by Region of Origin FY 2009 to 2019

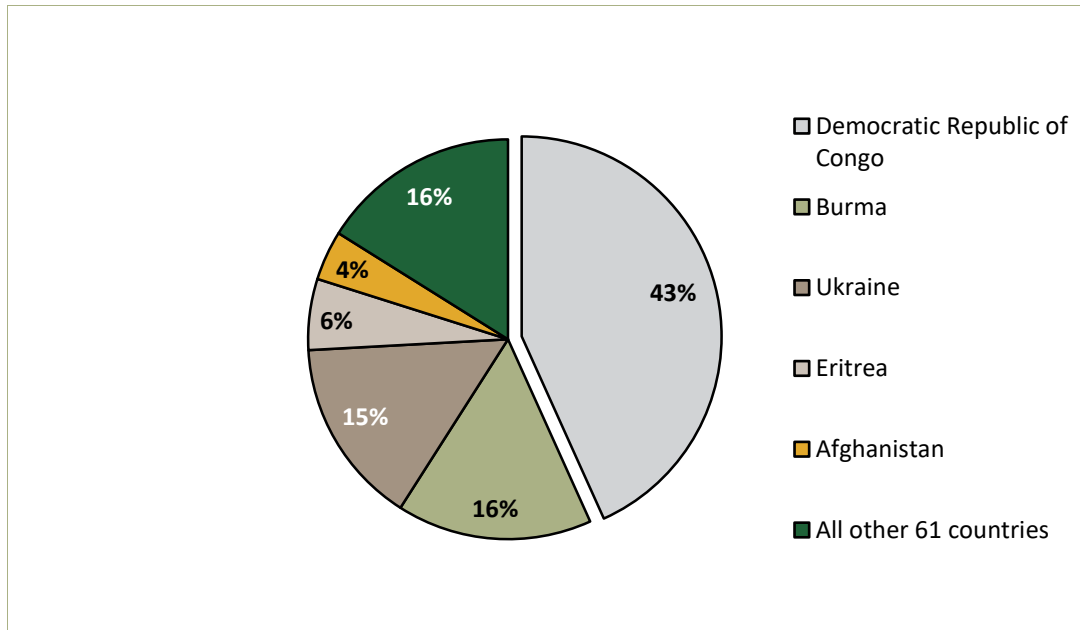


Source: Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Office of Admissions – Refugee Processing Center

Apart from the change in the volume of refugee admissions, there has also been a demographic change in the regions of the world from which resettled refugees come. From FY 2009 until 2014, refugees from war-torn countries in the Middle East and South Asia made up the largest shares of resettled refugees (Figure 3). However, in FY 2018, refugees from the Middle East and South Asia constituted only 14 percent of the total admissions, and in FY 2019, this number dropped to nine percent. At the same time, there has been a significant increase in the admissions of refugees from Europe such as Ukraine and Moldova. Furthermore, the share of refugees from Africa has also increased significantly since 2009. Specifically, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia and Eritrea are the major countries of birth of refugees from Africa.

As seen in Figure 4, in FY 2019, 49 percent of the refugees admitted were from the Democratic Republic of Congo (12,958 resettled individuals) and Eritrea (1,757 resettled individuals) in Africa. Sixteen percent were from Burma (4,932 resettled individuals), and 15 percent were from Ukraine (4,451 resettled individuals).

Figure 4: Top 5 Countries of Origin FY 2019

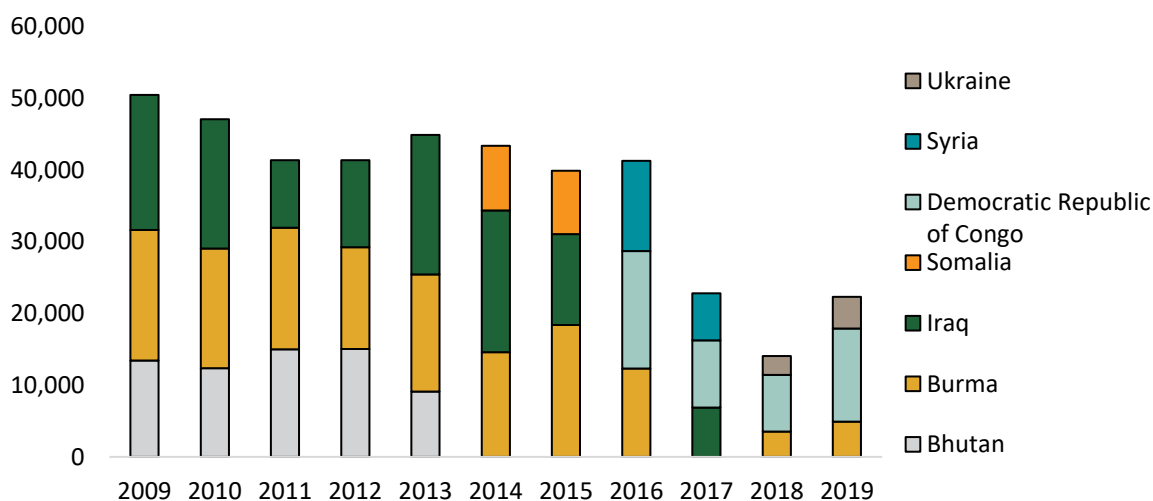


Source: Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Office of Admissions – Refugee Processing Center

Until FY 2019, the refugee resettlement program included regional ceilings; each year the admissions were allocated by region of nationality (Near East/South Asia, Latin America/Caribbean, Europe, East Asia, and Africa). However, for FY 2020, President Trump’s annual determination also included a different way to allocate the numbers. Specifically, 4,000 refugee slots will be reserved for Iraqis who worked with the United States military, 5,000 for people persecuted for their religion and 1,500 for people from Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras). The additional 7,500 slots are for those who are seeking family reunification or those whose application has already been approved for resettlement. Figure 4 shows the top five countries of origin for refugees who were resettled in the United States in FY 2019. Democratic Republic of Congo was the top country of origin.

Figure 5, shows the top three countries of origin of refugees who arrived between FY 2009 and 2019 and how these patterns have changed over time. Throughout this time period, the top three countries of origin account for at least 50 percent of total annual admissions. Specifically, between FY 2009 and FY 2013 refugees from Iraq, Burma, and Bhutan were the top three countries of origin and accounted for between 64 and 76 percent of the total admissions. In FY 2014 and 2015, refugees from Somalia, Iraq and Burma constituted 62 and 57 percent of total admissions, respectively. In FY 2016 and 2017, Burmese, Syrians and refugees from Congo accounted for 49 and 42 percent of the total refugee admissions, respectively. In FY 2018 and FY 2019, the vast majority of refugees were from Congo, Ukraine and Burma (63 percent and 74 percent, respectively).

Figure 5: Top 3 Countries of Origin FY 2009-2019

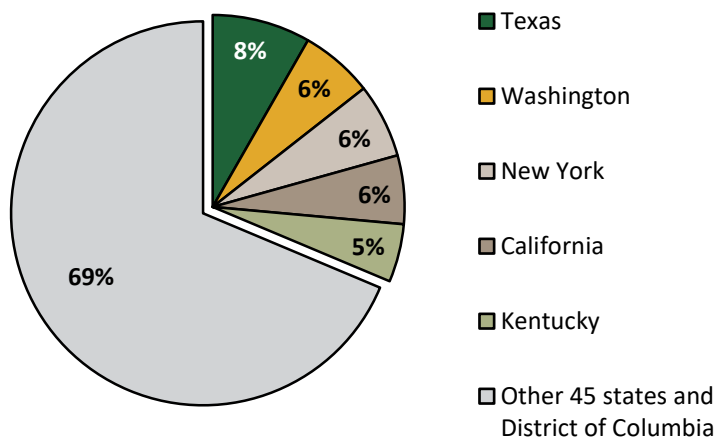


Source: Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Office of Admissions – Refugee Processing Center

Since FY 2016, the share of Iraqi refugees admitted to the United States has declined by 63 percent in comparison to 2009. One reason for the overall decline of refugee admissions and specifically for the large decrease in Iraqi, Somali, and Syrian refugees is the Presidential Proclamation that was signed by the Trump Administration in 2017. The Proclamation enacted a travel ban that excludes certain individuals from Iran, Libya, South Sudan, Yemen, Iraq, Chad, North Korea, Somalia, Syria and Venezuela. These countries were determined to be high-risk, and the associated extra screening measures have severely impacted the number of admitted refugees from those countries.¹ Specifically, refugees admitted from those countries fell from 43 percent of all refugee admissions in FY 2017 to three percent in FY 2018.²

In addition to the refugee program, Iraqi nationals are eligible to settle in the United States through the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV). SIV allows Iraqi and Afghani nationals who worked with the U.S. Armed Forces or the U.S. Department of State in Iraq or Afghanistan to enter the United States as legal permanent residents or to adjust their status to legal permanent resident while living in the US. However, since FY 2017, there has been a decrease in the number of individuals who arrive in the United States with SIV status. Specifically, in FY 2018, only 59 Iraqi nationals arrived with a Special Immigrant Visa in comparison to 233 for FY 2017.

Figure 6: Top 5 States of Refugee Resettlement FY 2019



Source: Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration Office of Admissions – Refugee Processing Center

Figure 6 shows the top five U.S. states where refugees resettled in FY 2019. Texas and Kentucky resettled the largest numbers of refugees in the last fiscal year; eight percent of them resettled in Texas, and 5 percent in Kentucky. However, for FY 2020, the Trump administration issued an Executive Order that potentially gives states and local governments the right to decide whether or not to participate in the refugee resettlement program.³ It remains to be seen how states and localities will react, and whether this provision will be challenged in the courts.

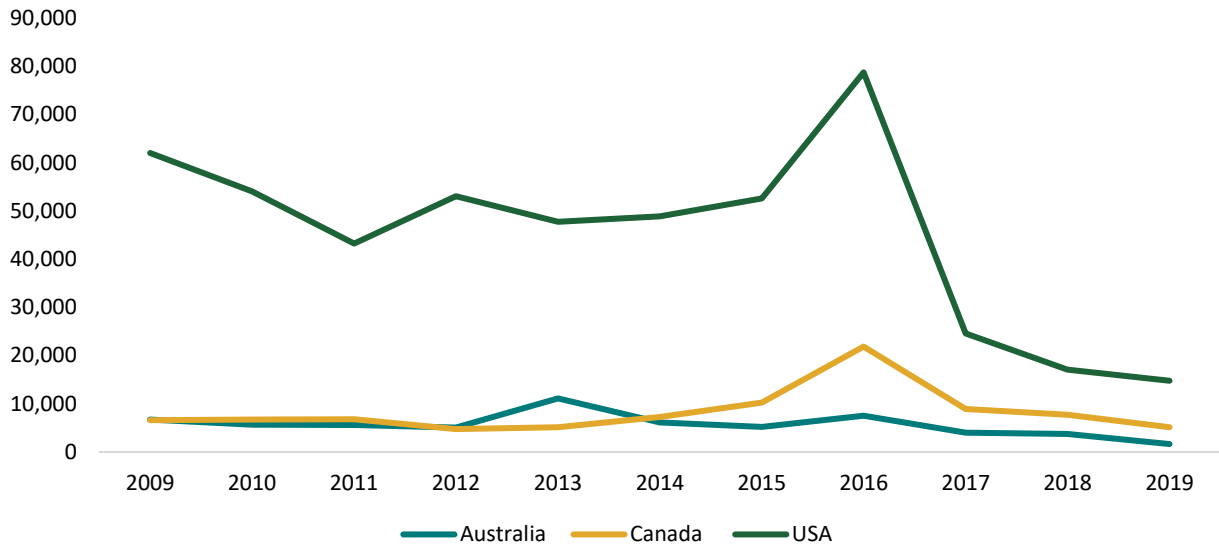
If the United States, and individual states and localities choose not to resettle refugees, it can affect refugees and the refugee resettlement program in several ways. First, it increases the number of refugees worldwide who have already waited and undergone rigorous screening procedures, and now must wait even longer.⁴ Furthermore, this decision can affect refugee families and their integration into the United States. Although this Executive Order does not impact secondary migration, new refugees may already have family members in certain states who could assist them as they enter into the labor force. Research has showed that social and family networks play a positive role in the better integration

of newcomers.⁵ Additionally, refugee resettlement organizations may have to shut down if states withdraw from the program. As of April 2019, around 100 offices have either closed entirely or suspended their refugee resettlement program, a third of offices nationwide.⁶ These organizations provide vital services to refugees such as English classes, work training and community building. Because they receive federal funding for each refugee they resettle, their revenues have declined substantially. Finally, the economy of states withdrawing from the resettlement program may also be affected as research shows that refugees contribute meaningfully to the economy.⁷ Specifically, refugees make particularly meaningful contributions to the economies of several large states. A recent report from the New American Economy found that in 18 U.S. states, including Minnesota, Michigan, and Georgia, refugees are likely to hold billions in spending power. According to the same report, in California alone, their spending power totals more than \$17.2 billion, while in Texas, the equivalent figure is more than \$4.6 billion.⁸

Refugee Resettlement from a Global Perspective

The decline of the U.S. refugee resettlement program is occurring at the same time that the number of displaced individuals in the world has increased dramatically. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are nearly 25.9 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18. The United States, Canada, and Australia, along with Nordic countries, participate in UNHCR's resettlement program. Historically, the United States has been the top country of refugee resettlement. Figure 7 shows the numbers of arriving refugees in the top three resettlement countries over the last ten years. Since 2016, there has been an overall decline in the number of refugee admissions in all three countries. While the United States still remains the top country in terms of the number of admitted refugees, this is not the case if we examine the refugee resettlement numbers per capita. The U.S. resettled about 70 refugees for every million of its own residents in 2018, lower than the rate in the other countries. Canada led the world on this measure by resettling 756 refugees per million residents following Australia (510), Sweden (493) and Norway (465).⁹

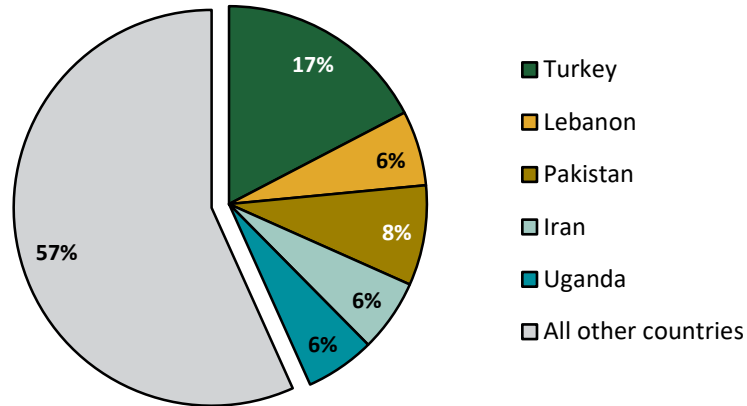
Figure 7: Refugees Resettled in the United States, Canada, and Australia 2009-2019



Source: UNHCR Resettlement Data Finder, online <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/resettlement-data.html>

Resettlement is an option for a very small portion of refugees, as the top three resettlement countries have resettled less than one percent of the total refugee population in 2016. So, where does the majority of refugees live? Globally, the vast majority of refugees live in camps or urban areas in countries neighboring to their home countries. Figure 8 shows the top five countries in which refugees live. At the end of 2016, Turkey hosted 17 percent of the world's total refugee population. Pakistan and Lebanon come next by hosting eight percent and six percent of the total refugee share, respectively. The UNHCR estimates there are a total of 273,000 refugees who have been resettled residing in the United States.

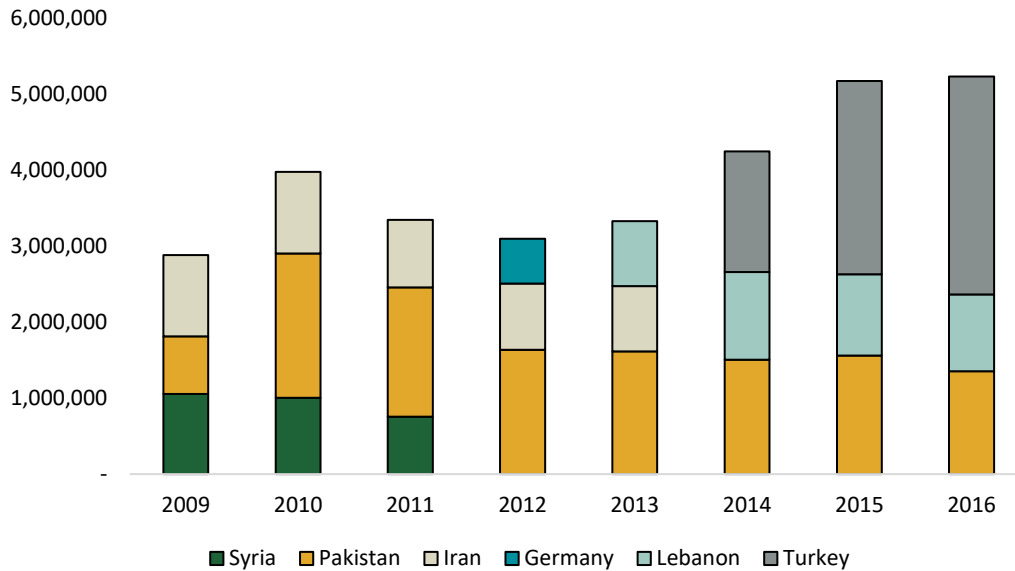
Figure 8: Top 5 Countries Hosting Refugees in 2016



Source: UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2016, Table 1

Figure 9 shows the top three countries hosting refugees between 2009 and 2016. Pakistan has been among the top three countries throughout these years hosting a rather stable number of refugees – between approximately 1,350,000 and 1,700,000 refugees. Iran was also among the top three countries until 2014 with an increasing number of refugees, peaking in 2010 (1,073,366). Syria was also among the top three countries of hosting refugees globally between 2009 and 2011. Finally, Lebanon showed a sharp increase in the numbers of refugees in 2013 and it still remains among the top three countries.

Figure 9: Top 3 Countries Hosting Refugees 2009-2016



Source: UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2016, Table 1

Refugees are part of United States' past, present and future

Many studies have examined refugee integration outcomes in the United States by analyzing refugees in relation to the native-born population and non-refugee-immigrant population. Overall, research has found that refugees integrate with time and contribute significantly to the economy and society.

On average, refugees' labor force participation rates rise to, or exceed, native-born rates. Specifically, between 2009 and 2011, refugee men were more likely to work than U.S.-born men (67 percent versus 62 percent). Their incomes rise substantially with length of U.S. residence, and their use of public benefits declines.¹⁰ Refugee women become increasingly integrated into the labor force over time as well.¹¹ For instance, refugee women who have been in the United States for more than 10 years have rates about as high as, or sometimes higher than, those of U.S.-born women. Furthermore, according to a recent report by the New American Economy, refugees are significantly more likely to become entrepreneurs in comparison to other immigrants. This study found that the United States was home to more than 180,000 refugee entrepreneurs in 2015.¹² That means that 13 percent of refugees were entrepreneurs in 2015, compared to 11 percent of non-refugee immigrants and nine percent of the U.S.-born population.¹³

Refugees' English language proficiency improves over time, and arriving refugee youth have strong educational attainment.¹⁴ Furthermore, refugees who have been in the United States longer generally own their own homes. According to Kallick and Mathema, 73 percent of Burmese refugees and 72 percent of Bosnian refugees who have been in the United States for more than 10 years live in homes they own themselves—higher than the rate for the native born (68 percent).¹⁵ Finally, according to the same study, Somali refugees, Burmese refugees, Hmong refugees and Bosnian refugees found that more than three-quarters who have been in the United States for more than 20 years have become naturalized citizens.¹⁶

Conclusion

The historically low U.S. refugee cap happens at a time when the world is witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. More people than ever around the world have been forced to leave their homes.

Unfortunately, recent changes to the U.S. refugee resettlement program have a wide range of implications, not only for refugees themselves who end up staying in precarious and dangerous situations, but also for the United States. Decreasing the refugee cap to 18,000 will have a major impact on the lives of refugees waiting to be resettled to their new homes. At the same time, this decrease could also impact the U.S. economy as there is strong evidence that refugees are vital members of U.S. society, contributing economically, socially and culturally. Finally, the local resettlement offices will be severely impacted as they may have to cut services, reduce personnel, or shut down. The United States has a long tradition on refugee resettlement. The United States' long tradition of refugee resettlement resulted in a system that functioned effectively and produced organizations and individuals with years of specialized knowledge regarding refugee integration and what it means to work with newcomers to create a new home.

Endnotes

¹ The White House. 2017. "Executive Order Protecting The Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into The United States." Retrieved November 21, 2019 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states-2/>).

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⁴ Fee, Molly and Rawan Arar. 2019. "What Happens When the United States Stops Taking in Refugees?" *Contexts*, 18(2):18-23.

⁵ Allen, Ryan. 2018. "Benefit or Burden? Social Capital, Gender, and the Economic Adaptation of Refugees." *International Migration Review* 43(2): 332-365.

⁶ Refugee Council USA. 2019. "RCUSA Responds to Trump Administration's EO Granting States & Cities the Ability to Bar Refugee Resettlement." Retrieved November 21, 2019 (<https://rcusa.org/resources/rcusa-responds-to-trump-administrations-eo-granting-states-amp-cities-the-ability-to-bar-refugee-resettlement/>).

⁷ New American Economy. 2017. From Struggle to Resilience; the economic impact of refugees in America. Retrieved November 21, 2019 (<https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/from-struggle-to-resilience-the-economic-impact-of-refugees-in-america/>).

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⁹ Radford, Jynnah., & Phillip Connor. 2019. Canada now leads the world in refugee resettlement, surpassing the U.S. Pew Research Center. Retrieved November 21, 2019 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/19/canada-now-leads-the-world-in-refugee-resettlement-surpassing-the-u-s/>).

¹⁰ Capps, Randy, Kathleen Newland, Susan Fratzke, Susanna Groves, Gregory Auclair, Michael Fix, and Margie McHugh. 2015. "The Integration Outcomes of U.S. Refugees; Successes and Challenges." Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute. Retrieved November 21, 2019 (<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/integration-outcomes-us-refugees-successes-and-challenges>).

¹¹ Kallick, David, D., & Silva Mathema. 2016. "Refugee Integration in the United States." Center for American Progress. Retrieved November 21, 2019 (<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2016/06/16/139551/refugee-integration-in-the-united-states/>).

¹² New American Economy. 2017. "From Struggle to Resilience; the economic impact of refugees in America." Retrieved November 21, 2019 (<https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/from-struggle-to-resilience-the-economic-impact-of-refugees-in-america/>).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kallick, David, D., & Silva Mathema. 2016. "Refugee Integration in the United States." Center for American Progress. Retrieved November 21, 2019 (<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2016/06/16/139551/refugee-integration-in-the-united-states/>).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.