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Fact Sheet

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Ten Facts about U.S. Refugee Resettlement

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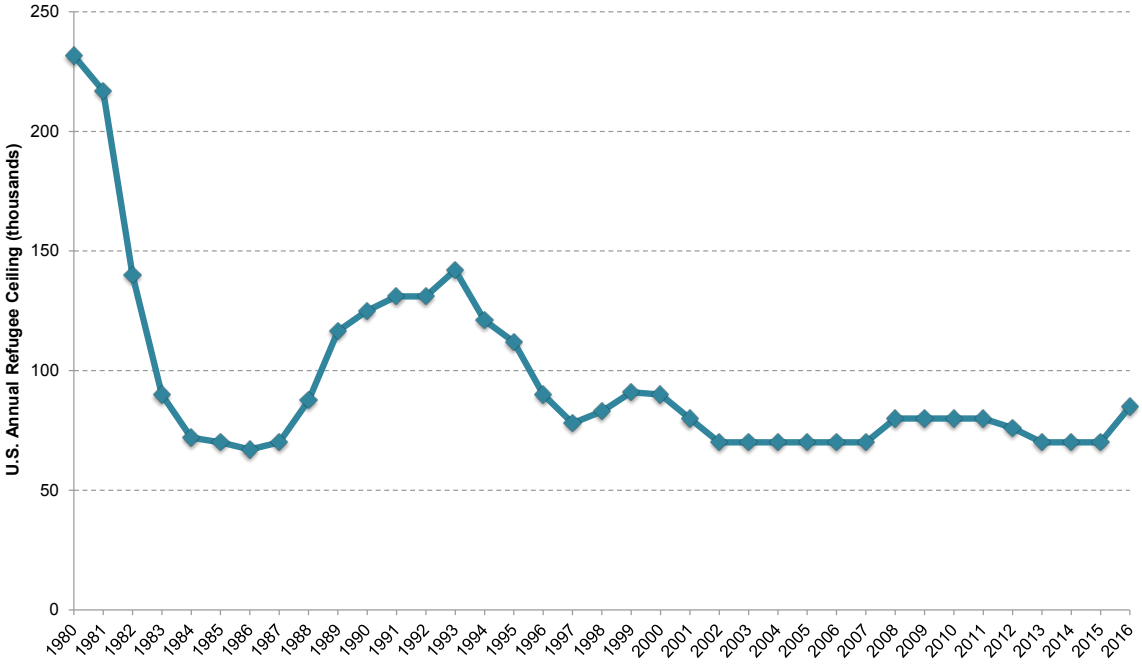
IMMIGRATION FACTS

As Europe struggles to absorb huge flows of asylum seekers and migrants from Syria, Iraq, Eritrea, and elsewhere, there are calls for the United States, which runs the largest official resettlement program in the world, to welcome more Syrian refugees. Responding to these calls, the Obama administration has announced its intention to raise the annual ceiling on U.S. refugee admissions to 85,000 for the fiscal year that began October 1 and to 100,000 the following year, up from 70,000 for the year that ended September 30. Within that 85,000 cap, the administration has committed to resettle at least 10,000 Syrian refugees this fiscal year[1]—a substantial increase from the approximately 2,000 Syrian refugees resettled in the United States since civil war broke out in 2011.[2]

The proposed U.S. refugee ceiling of 85,000 is quite modest when compared to up to 800,000 migrants projected to seek asylum in Germany by the end of 2015.[3] And the number of refugees worldwide is at a record high, with millions from Syria alone now housed in makeshift camps and other, often tenuous arrangements in neighboring Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. The U.S. refugee ceiling has at times been much higher, for instance 231,700 in 1980 and 142,000 in 1993.[4]

Figure 1. U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceiling, FY 1980 - 2016



Source: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration.

How many refugees should the United States take? How many can the country afford to resettle? How well will new groups of refugees—particularly from Syria—integrate? What are the risks—security or otherwise—of taking in more refugees from unstable regions such as the Middle East? These questions touch off intense policy discussions about the future of U.S. refugee resettlement policy and the capacity of the United States to help respond to Europe's refugee crisis.

As policymakers address these questions, it is worth reviewing some basic facts about refugee resettlement in the United States that have often been overlooked in current debates. These facts are drawn from recent Migration Policy Institute (MPI) research, analysis of U.S. government policies, and other sources.

Question: Are Refugees Mostly Working or Unemployed?

Fact: The U.S. refugee resettlement system emphasizes self-sufficiency through employment, and most refugees are employed. In fact, refugee men are employed at a higher rate than their U.S.-born peers, with two-thirds of refugee men employed during the 2009-11 period, compared to 60 percent of U.S.-born men. More than half of refugee women were employed during the same period—the same rate as U.S.-born women.[5] The high employment of refugees increases their tax payments and other economic contributions, while decreasing their dependency on public assistance and services over the long run.

Question: Do Refugees Depend on Public Benefits?

Fact: Although many refugees initially depend on public benefits, most quickly become self-sufficient. Unlike most other groups of immigrants, refugees are immediately eligible for public benefits such as cash welfare, food assistance, and health insurance coverage. During their first five years in the United States, refugees are more likely than other immigrants and the U.S. born to receive public benefits. But benefits usage declines with length of residence, and after ten years, most of this gap closes. During the 2009-11 period, less than one-quarter of refugee households with at least a decade of U.S. experience received food stamps, compared to 11 percent for the U.S. born; and only 3 percent of refugee households received cash welfare benefits, compared to 2 percent for the U.S. born.[6] Fewer than 15 percent of refugee adults had public health insurance coverage after a decade in the United States, compared to 11 percent of U.S.-born adults.[7]

Question: Do Refugees Improve Their Economic Position After They Are Resettled?

Fact: Refugees' incomes rise over time, almost reaching parity with the U.S. born. Refugees generally arrive with very limited resources; many arrive penniless. Over time, however, they find jobs, advance economically, and become self-sufficient. The median household income for recent refugees—those arriving within the past five years—was just 42 percent of the median for U.S.-born population in the 2009-11 period.[8] But for those who had arrived 10-20 years earlier, their median income was 87 percent of that for the U.S. born. Rising income and falling public benefit dependency demonstrate the increasing self-sufficiency of refugees and their increasingly positive fiscal contributions over time.

Question: Is the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program a Conduit for Terrorists?

Fact: Refugees are intensively vetted for security threats before being resettled in the United States. The U.S. government thoroughly screens refugees' backgrounds—an intensive process involving the Departments of Homeland Security and State, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and national intelligence agencies. It takes 18 to 24

months for the checks for proposed refugees to the United States to be conducted (compared to four months in Canada).[9] Of the 784,000 refugees resettled in the United States since September 11, 2001, three have been arrested for planning terrorist activities—two of whom were planning attacks outside the country.[10]

Question: Does the Federal Government Absorb the Full Costs of Settling Refugees? Are Costs Rising Rapidly?

Fact: Although the federal government funds refugee resettlement assistance, funding has been limited, and the program is a public-private partnership by design. As a result, private agencies, NGOs, and community organizations offer substantial support for refugees. Aside from the costs of public benefits, the Office of Refugee Resettlement spends approximately $600 million annually on refugees, and another $350 million is spent by the State Department Reception and Placement (R&P) program.[11] These budgets have not increased sufficiently in recent years to account for inflation or for increased resettlement needs. Private resettlement agencies and other community institutions step up to fill gaps in assistance. One study by a resettlement agency suggested that federal funding under the R&P program covered just 39 percent of initial resettlement costs, with the rest borne by the agency and its community partners in the form of other funding, volunteer labor, and in-kind contributions.[12]

Question: Do Refugees Come to the United States with Low Levels of Education?

Fact: Refugees are more likely to have a high school degree than other immigrants, and just as likely as the U.S. born to have graduated from college. Seventy-five percent of refugee adults in the 2009-11 period had at least a high school education—above the 68 percent rate for other immigrants but below the 89 percent rate for U.S.-born adults.[13] Twenty-eight percent of refugee adults had at least a four-year college degree, roughly equivalent to the 29 percent of U.S.-born adults and 27 percent of other immigrants with degrees.

Question: Do Refugees Embrace Their New Country?

Fact: Refugees are on a fast track for permanent residency and citizenship, and a large majority becomes citizens. One year after arrival, refugees are required to apply for legal permanent residence; five years later, they become eligible to naturalize. As a result, a relatively high share of legal permanent residents entering as refugees were naturalized citizens during the 2009-13 period: 59 percent versus 44 percent for all other immigrants.[14] Vietnamese refugees who came as refugees were more likely to naturalize than those who did not come as refugees (88 percent versus 63 percent), a pattern that holds after controlling for length of U.S. residence.[15]

Question: Do All Refugee Populations Fare Well in the United States?

Fact: Outcomes vary substantially among refugees depending on their origins and other characteristics. While the process for refugee resettlement is largely standardized, self-sufficiency outcomes for both recent and longer-term refugees vary. Some longer-term groups such as Iranians, Russians, and Vietnamese have educational attainment and incomes on a par with or even exceeding the U.S. average. Other long-term refugee groups such as Cubans lag somewhat on these indicators. Fewer than 60 percent of Afghani, Bhutanese, Burmese, Hmong, Liberian, and Somali refugees arriving during 2004-13 were literate in their native languages at arrival.[16] More than 60 percent of all refugees from Bhutan, Burma, Iraq, Liberia, and Somalia residing in the United States during 2009-11 had incomes below twice the federal poverty level.[17] Whether or not their incomes rise and benefits use will fall over time remains to be seen.

Question: What Is the Likely Integration Picture for Syrian Refugees?

Fact: Syrian immigrants already in the

United States are relatively well educated and prosperous. In 2014, 39 percent of Syrian immigrants (ages 25 and older) were college graduates, compared to 29 percent and 30 percent of the overall foreign- and U.S.-born populations.[18] The median income of households headed by a Syrian immigrant was $52,000, slightly higher than all foreign-born households ($49,000) but lower than U.S.-born households ($55,000).[19] Recent Syrian immigrants—those arriving in the United States since 2012—had even higher educational attainment.[20] Of course, the socio-economic status of Syrian refugees may differ from the larger Syrian immigrant population, but data specific to Syrian refugees are not yet available.

Question: Is the United States Likely to Experience Flows of Would-Be Asylum Seekers Similar to Europe?

Fact: Due to its geographic location, the United States is unlikely to experience large flows of asylum seekers or other migrants from Syria or elsewhere in Africa or the Middle East. Because asylum seekers from these regions have no easy land or sea route to the United States, they must generally seek admission through official resettlement channels. Only those from Latin America and the Caribbean can reach the United States by land or over a short distance by sea. The recent wave of Central American adults, unaccompanied children, and intact families seeking asylum amounts to a fraction of the population arriving in Europe.

In sum, the evidence suggests that the U.S. resettlement program, despite its funding limitations and reduced intake from earlier periods, successfully resettles substantial numbers of refugees every year.

During their initial resettlement period, refugees depend on federal assistance and equal, if not larger, private community support. Though they start out by and large poor and dependent on public assistance, within five to ten years most refugees achieve self-sufficiency and near economic parity with the U.S.-born population. Still, some refugee groups are more successful than others, and several of the most recently resettled groups begin with substantial income and education disadvantages.

Where will the new refugee flows proposed by the Obama administration fit into this picture? Syrian refugees, if they fit the pattern for Syrian immigrants already in the United States, are likely to have relatively high educational attainment that will promote their integration and self-sufficiency. The U.S. labor market is currently strong, with an unemployment rate near 5 percent—which bodes well for initial employment of new refugees. At the same time, federal resources for refugee resettlement are limited, and any significant additions must be appropriated by Congress. Thus, there are limits as to how many refugees can be successfully resettled in the United States under current conditions. These limits may be tested by proposed increases in ceilings on annual admissions. But the tests facing the United States pale in comparison with those faced by European countries such as Germany that must resettle hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers in the coming months.

In sum, the evidence suggests that the U.S. resettlement program, despite its funding limitations and reduced intake from earlier periods, successfully resettles substantial numbers of refugees every year.

Endnotes

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15 Ibid.

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