



The Daily Dish

The United States as a Political Refuge

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Eakinomics: The United States as a Political Refuge

The United States has long been a beacon of freedom around the globe, and provides a sanctuary for those fleeing persecution. The U.S. refugee and asylum programs are the cornerstone of this expression of U.S. values: The United States is a [global leader](#) in refugee resettlement, having welcomed nearly [3.5 million refugees](#) over the past 40 years. In addition, the United States grants asylum to [20,000 to 25,000 individuals](#) each year. AAF's Jacqueline Varas and Kevin Lentz provide a valuable [summary and analysis](#) of the programs.

Individuals apply for refugee status outside of the United States, while they apply for asylum from within the United States. The Refugee Act of 1980 established the modern-day system for identifying, vetting, and accepting refugees and asylees. This legislation [established](#) a uniform method for admitting refugees and authorized federal funds for their resettlement and to promote their self-sufficiency. Per this act, asylum awardees are not capped, while the president dictates the number of refugee admissions. Each fiscal year, the president consults with Congress to set a ceiling for overall refugee admissions as well as limits on how many refugees may come to the United States from each region of the world.

To become a [refugee](#), an individual must be fleeing his or her country due to persecution or fear of persecution for religion, race, nationality, or membership in a social or political group. To be granted refugee status, applicants must be outside of the United States, meet the definition of refugee, and be of special humanitarian concern. To be granted asylum, applicants must also meet the definition of refugee and be of special humanitarian concern, but instead of applying from outside of the United States, they must apply either from inside the United States or at a port of entry. The application process for both refugees and asylees involves biometric screening, criminal checks, and vetting evidence of current or future persecution.

The Trump Administration is seeking to lower both the number of refugees (by lowering the cap) and asylees (by restricting eligibility) pursuing entry into the United States. In part because of the administration's measures, the number of refugees admitted to the United States dropped in 2018 to its lowest level since 1980 (see below). Note that the total refugees include the "principal" refugees, who have up to two years to petition for their eligible spouse and unmarried children to join them, as well as these "derivative refugees." In 2016, spouses and dependent children made up [63 percent](#) of total refugee admissions.

U.S. Refugee Admissions vs. Resettlement Ceilings

