

Why Learn About Refugees?

Today over 60 million people on the face of the globe have been forced to leave their homes. Yet too many other people know little or nothing about who these refugees are, where they came from, where they are, or why they have fled. In fact, most Americans cannot distinguish between refugees and migrants, even among people who enter their own communities to create new lives.

Migrant: Broad term for a person who moves to a foreign country for a certain length of time, for a variety of reasons, in order to improve their lives. They are fundamentally different from refugees and are treated very differently under international law.

Refugee: A person with a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion who is outside his/her country of nationality and is unable or unwilling, because of that fear, to return.

Since the colonial period the United States has been a place of refuge for people fleeing persecution, and in the past the United States admitted more refugees than any other nation. Today, however, the United States does not even rank among the top 6 largest refugee hosting countries. Turkey currently hosts the most refugees with 1.75 million, followed by Pakistan (1.51 million), Lebanon (1.19 million), Iran (982 thousand), Ethiopia (660 thousand), and Jordan (654 thousand). The United States government rejects many requests for asylum here. All refugees are not equal before U.S. law, and complex political and social factors determine who is granted safe haven in the United States and who is excluded. (Statistics are constantly updated by UNHCR)

The heartfelt wish of almost all refugees, however, is not to settle in the United States or any other country but to go back to their own homes. People usually flee across the border into the nearest neighboring nation and wait, often for years, for conditions to improve so they can safely return home. Most of the world's refugees are from poor countries too distant from the United States to make travel here even a possibility. Furthermore, differences of climate, culture, language, and custom make resettlement in the United States far from desirable for many refugees.

No one wants to become a refugee. Refugees are people uprooted by events so terrible that they must flee to survive. Except in cases of natural disaster, most people would never choose to give up everything and everyone they know to live among strangers if their human rights were being respected. Thus an essential way to address refugee problems is to address the forces that violate people's rights: armed conflict, economic and social injustice, and political persecution. In the final analysis, the basic solution to the refugee problem lies in achieving greater respect for human rights in all nations.