

# Refugees and Asylees: 2016

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The United States provides refuge to certain persons who have been persecuted or have a well-founded fear of persecution through two programs: a refugee program for persons outside the United States and their eligible relatives, and an asylum program for persons in the United States and their eligible relatives. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) *Annual Flow Report* presents information on persons admitted to the United States as refugees or granted asylum in the United States in 2016.<sup>1</sup>

A total of 84,989 persons<sup>2</sup> were admitted to the United States as refugees during 2016. The leading countries of nationality for refugees admitted during this period were the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, and Burma. During 2016, 20,455 individuals were granted asylum,<sup>3</sup> including 11,729 individuals who were granted asylum affirmatively by DHS<sup>4</sup> and 8,726 individuals who were granted asylum defensively<sup>5</sup> by the Department of Justice (DOJ). The leading countries of nationality for persons granted either affirmative or defensive asylum were China, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Travel documents were issued to 5,490 individuals who were approved for derivative asylum, allowing their admission to the United States.

## DEFINING “REFUGEE” AND “ASYLUM” STATUS

To be eligible for refugee or asylum status, a principal applicant must meet the definition of a refugee set forth in section 101(a)(42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) which states, in part, that a

refugee is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality<sup>6</sup> because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.<sup>7</sup> Applicants for refugee status are outside the United States, whereas applicants seeking asylum are either in the United States or arriving at a U.S. port of entry (POE).

To meet the INA’s refugee definition, a person must be outside his or her country of nationality, unless the person has no nationality, in which case he or she must be outside of the country in which he or she “last habitually resided.”

The INA provides the President with the authority to designate countries whose nationals may be processed for refugee status within their respective countries (referred to as in-country processing). In 2016 certain nationals of Iraq, Cuba, Eurasia, and the Baltics were redesignated for in-country processing, as well as qualified children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras through the Central American Minors (CAM) program. In-country processing is also authorized for extraordinary individual protection cases for which resettlement consideration is requested by a U.S. Ambassador in any location.

<sup>1</sup> In this report, years refer to fiscal years (October 1 to September 30).

<sup>2</sup> Refugee data in this report may differ slightly from numbers reported by the U.S. Department of State (DOS). DOS refugee numbers include Amerasians (children born in Cambodia, Korea, Laos, Thailand, or Vietnam after December 31, 1950, and before October 22, 1982, and fathered by a U.S. citizen), whereas the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reports Amerasians as lawful permanent residents.

<sup>3</sup> These asylum grants were based upon a principal asylum beneficiary’s application, which may also include an accompanying spouse and unmarried children under 21 years of age. They do not, however, include individuals who were approved for follow-to-join asylum status while residing in the United States or abroad.

<sup>4</sup> Affirmative asylum data for fiscal year 2016 were retrieved by the DHS Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) in January 2017. Data in this report may differ slightly from fiscal year-end 2016 numbers retrieved and reported at different times by DHS’s U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Asylum Division.

<sup>5</sup> Defensive asylum data excludes individuals who were granted asylum on appeal. Per GAO recommendation CGD-98-164 page 26, beginning with the 2017 flow report in 2018, this annual flow report will begin reporting on remanded asylum cases after a successful appeal.

<sup>6</sup> Or, if an applicant is considered “stateless,” his or her country of last habitual residence.

<sup>7</sup> Congress expanded this definition in the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, providing that persons who have been forced to abort a pregnancy or undergo involuntary sterilization or who have been persecuted for failure or refusal to undergo such a procedure or for other resistance to a coercive population control program shall be deemed to have been persecuted on account of political opinion. The definition, as established in 1980, excludes those who have ordered, incited, assisted, or otherwise participated in the persecution of others.



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## REFUGEES

### History of U.S. Refugee Resettlement

The United States has a long history of refugee resettlement. The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 was passed to address the migration crisis in Europe resulting from World War II, wherein millions of people had been forcibly displaced from their home countries and could not return. By 1952, the United States had admitted over 400,000 displaced people under the Act. The United States then addressed refugee resettlement through legislation including the Refugee Relief Act of 1953 and the Fair Share Refugee Act of 1960. The United States also used the Attorney General's parole authority to bring large groups of persons into the country for humanitarian reasons, including waves of Hungarian nationals beginning in 1956 and hundreds of thousands of Indochinese parolees in the 1970s.

U.S. obligations under the 1967 United Nations Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (to which the United States acceded in 1968) generally prohibits the United States from returning a refugee to a country where his or her life or freedom would more likely than not be threatened on account of a statutorily protected ground. The Refugee Act of 1980 amended the INA to bring U.S. law into greater accord with U.S. obligations under the Protocol, which specifies a geographically and politically neutral refugee definition. The Act also established formal refugee and asylum programs.

### Refugee Admissions Ceiling

Under the Refugee Act, the President consults with Congress to establish an overall refugee admissions ceiling and regional allocations before the beginning of each fiscal year.<sup>8</sup> The refugee ceiling was set at 85,000 in FY 2016, a 21 percent increase from each of the previous three years, during which time nearly 100 percent of the annual allocations have been exhausted (see Figure 1). The largest regional allocations in 2016 were to the Near East/South Asia region and Africa, accommodating vulnerable Congolese, Iraqis, Somalis, and other refugees (see Table 1). These two regions are hosts to more than 12 and 4 million registered refugees respectively, and together they accounted for almost 80 percent of all refugee admissions to the United States.

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refers the majority of refugees referred for resettlement in the United States. While the numbers of refugees UNHCR refers each year vary, the number of refugees considered in need of resettlement is typically about eight percent of the global refugee population, which has been increasing over the last few years, reaching 21 million in 2016, the highest ever recorded.

Historically, the United States has been the world's top resettlement country. In calendar year 2015, UNHCR referred slightly over

<sup>8</sup> In many cases, an unallocated reserve is also designated which can be used in any region if the need arises and only after notification to Congress.

107,000 refugees to 30 countries for resettlement consideration. The United States sought to resettle 56,000, or 52 percent of these, as well as an additional 14,000 non-UNHCR referrals. In 2016, the United States resettled 61 percent of UNHCR referrals.

### Refugee Eligibility Requirements

To qualify for refugee status, a principal applicant must (1) be of special humanitarian concern to the United States; (2) meet the refugee definition as set forth in section 101(a)(42) of the INA; (3) be admissible under the INA (or be granted a waiver of inadmissibility); and (4) not be firmly resettled in any foreign country. Any person who ordered, incited, assisted, or otherwise participated in the persecution of another on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion is not eligible for refugee status.

Derivative refugees need not meet all these eligibility requirements, but they must be admissible to the United States and demonstrate a relationship as the spouse or child of an admitted refugee.

Figure 1.  
Refugee Admissions and Proposed Ceilings to the United States: 1990 to 2016

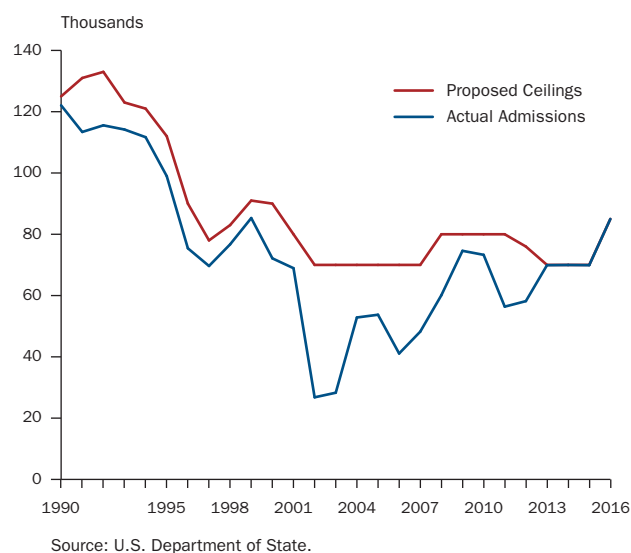


Table 1.

Proposed and Actual Refugee Admissions by Regions: 2014 to 2016<sup>1</sup>

Region	2016		2015		2014	
	Ceiling	Admissions	Ceiling	Admissions	Ceiling	Admissions
Total . . . . .	85,000	84,989	70,000	69,920	70,000	69,975
Africa . . . . .	25,000	31,625	17,000	22,472	15,000	17,476
East Asia . . . . .	13,000	12,512	13,000	18,456	14,000	14,772
Europe/Central Asia . . . . .	4,000	3,957	1,000	2,363	1,000	959
Latin America/Caribbean . . . . .	3,000	1,340	4,000	2,050	5,000	4,318
Near East/South Asia . . . . .	34,000	35,555	33,000	24,579	33,000	32,450
Unallocated Reserve . . . . .	6,000	-	2,000	-	2,000	-

<sup>1</sup> Ceiling numbers reflect revisions made each fiscal year.  
Source: U.S. Department of State.

Refugee Application Process

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) establishes processing priorities that identify individuals and groups who are of special humanitarian concern to the United States and who are eligible for refugee resettlement consideration. The priority categories are Priority 1 (P-1)—individuals referred by UNHCR, a U.S. Embassy, or certain non-governmental organizations; Priority 2 (P-2)—groups of special humanitarian concern; and Priority 3 (P-3)—family reunification cases. Once principal refugee applicants are referred or granted access to USRAP under any of these Priorities, they still must meet all other eligibility criteria. Upon referral, a Resettlement Support Center, working under a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of State (DOS), conducts pre-screening interviews with the applicants. A USCIS officer then interviews the applicants to determine eligibility and admissibility for resettlement in the United States. Multiple security checks must be completed before applications are approved. Upon approval, the refugee applicants must also undergo a medical exam.<sup>9</sup>

Individuals who successfully complete the application process are assigned to a resettlement agency (sponsor) that assists with housing, employment, and other services upon arrival. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) makes arrangements for the refugee’s travel to the United States. After arrival, refugees are authorized to work and may request documentation to travel outside the United States.

The spouse and unmarried children under the age of 21 of a principal refugee may obtain refugee status as an accompanying derivative.<sup>10</sup> Accompanying derivatives may enter the United States with the principal refugee or within four months after the principal refugee’s admission.<sup>11</sup> A spouse or child who joins the principal refugee more than four months after admission to the United States is a following-to-join derivative. Principal refugees may petition for following-to-join benefits for his or her qualifying derivatives up to two years after the principal was granted refugee status; the principal and the derivative relative’s relationship must have existed at the time of the principal’s admission into the United States. Principal refugees must file Form I-730, *Refugee/Asylee Relative Petition*,<sup>12</sup> for each qualifying derivative family member. Unlike P-3 applicants, these beneficiaries are not required to demonstrate an independent refugee claim. Once a principal’s I-730 has been approved, there are no time constraints placed upon that derivative relative’s travel to the United States, provided that (1) the principal’s status has not been revoked, (2) the

<sup>9</sup> The purpose of the medical examination is to identify individuals with inadmissible health-related conditions. For a list of health-related grounds for inadmissibility, please refer to <http://www.cdc.gov/immigrantrefugeehealth/exams/medical-examination.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Children may include those age 21 or over who are covered by provisions in the Child Status Protection Act, Pub. L. No. 107-208 (Aug. 6, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> In practice, the vast majority of accompanying derivative refugees enter the United States with the principal refugee.

<sup>12</sup> The petition is used to file for relatives of refugees and asylees. USRAP handles only refugee following-to-join petitions, which are counted within the annual refugee ceiling. Asylum following-to-join petitions are processed by USCIS and are not counted in the annual admission ceilings.

relationship of the derivative to the principal is unchanged, and (3) in the case of a child, the child remains unmarried.

DATA

All refugee data presented in this report are from the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS) of the DOS Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.

TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF REFUGEES

In 2016, the United States admitted 84,989 refugees, an increase of approximately 15,000 from each of the previous three years. Annual refugee arrivals declined during the 1990s, and the refugee program’s focus shifted to more diverse populations across the world. Admissions decreased to a low point in 2002, due in part to security procedures and admission requirement changes after September 11, 2001. Refugee arrivals subsequently increased and reached a post-2001 peak of 76,600 in 2009. After a brief decrease from 2009 to 2011, refugee admissions began to increase sharply again in 2012. The ceiling increased to 85,000 in 2016, including 10,000 refugees from Syria.

Category of Admission

In 2016, the majority of refugees were admitted under P-1 processing (64 percent)—individuals referred by the UNHCR, a U.S. Embassy, or certain NGOs—and P-2 processing (34 percent)—groups of special humanitarian concern (see Table 2). P-3 processing (family reunification cases) constituted 0.5 percent of refugees admitted due to a four-year moratorium. Principal refugees accounted for 31,564 (37 percent) of the 84,989 refugees admitted to the United States in 2016. Spouses and dependent children represented 15 and 48 percent, respectively, of refugee admissions. There were 1,582 following-to-join refugee beneficiaries (two percent of total refugee admissions).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Following-to-join beneficiaries data has been included in the 2011 flow report in response to a recommendation in GAO, CGD-98-164 page 26.

Table 2. Refugee Arrivals by Relationship to Principal Applicant and Case Priority: Fiscal Years 2014 to 2016

Category of admission and case priority	2016		2015		2014	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
RELATIONSHIP TO PRINCIPAL APPLICANT						
Total . . . . .	84,989	100.0	69,920	100.0	69,975	100.0
Principal Applicant . . . . .	31,564	37.1	28,400	40.6	30,477	43.6
Dependents . . . . .	53,425	62.9	41,520	59.4	39,498	56.4
Spouse . . . . .	12,525	14.7	10,792	15.4	11,379	16.3
Child . . . . .	40,900	48.1	30,728	43.9	28,119	40.2
CASE PRIORITY						
Total . . . . .	84,989	100.0	69,920	100.0	69,975	100.0
Priority 1 . . . . .	54,047	63.6	34,559	49.4	29,847	42.7
Priority 2 . . . . .	28,901	34.0	33,230	47.5	38,319	54.8
Priority 3 . . . . .	459	0.5	96	0.1	22	0.0
Following-to-join beneficiaries . . . . .	1,582	1.9	2,035	2.9	1,787	2.6

Source: U.S. Department of State.

## Country of Nationality

In 2016, the leading countries of nationality for individuals admitted as refugees were the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, Burma, Iraq, and Somalia (see Figure 2). These top five countries made up more than two-thirds (71 percent) of total refugee admissions. Other leading countries included Bhutan (seven percent) and Iran (four percent).<sup>14</sup>

Since 2010, the United States has admitted more than 200,000 refugees from the Near East/South Asia region, accounting for 45 percent of refugee admissions during this time period. Most have come from Iraq (100,700), Bhutan (70,700), and Iran (19,600). The region continues to be the leading source of refugees (42 percent in 2016). The second and third leading regions for refugee admission between 2010 and 2016 were Africa, with 25 percent of all admissions, and East Asia, with 23 percent. The number of refugees entering the United States from Africa has increased steadily each year since 2011, from under 8,000 in 2011 to over 31,000 in 2016. Most African refugees since 2010 have been from Somalia (47,400), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (37,000), and Eritrea (12,500).

## Age, Sex, and Marital Status

Over three quarters of refugees admitted to the United States in 2016 were under 35 years of age (see Table 3). Refugees tend to be relatively younger than the native-born population, with a median age of 20 years at arrival, compared to a median age of 36 years for the native-born population in 2016.<sup>15</sup> Refugees admitted in 2016 are younger than previous cohorts with median ages of 23 in 2015, 24 in 2014, and 25 in 2013. Refugee median age varies widely by region of birth: Africa leads with the lowest median age of 17 years, while Europe has the highest median age of 25. The median age of Congolese and Syrian refugees were 16 and 14 years, respectively. Overall, a slight majority of refugees were male (51 percent), and 60 percent of adults were married.

## State of Initial Resettlement

In 2016, 54 percent of admitted refugees were resettled in 10 states. The leading resettlement states were California and Texas (nine percent each) (see Figure 3). While 2016 saw an overall increase in refugee arrivals of 22 percent over 2015 arrivals, certain states experienced higher increases. The largest proportional increases were in Ohio (43 percent), Arizona (39 percent), and North Carolina (37 percent). Other states saw the highest numbers of refugee arrivals per capita. North Dakota,

Nebraska, and Idaho each saw more than 80 arrivals per 100,000 residents in 2016, while California received 21 and Texas received 31 per 100,000 residents (see Figure 4).

## Lawful Permanent Residence and Naturalization of Refugees

One year after being admitted to the United States, refugees are required by statute to apply for lawful permanent resident (LPR) status.<sup>16</sup> Of those arriving between 2000 and 2012, 95 percent gained LPR status by the end of 2016. Newer cohorts of refugees have generally gained LPR status in less time. Cohorts arriving between 2000 and 2007 had median times in refugee status of 28

<sup>16</sup> Although the majority of refugees apply for LPR status one year after admission, due to operational and other factors, processing time can vary widely for those who apply.

Figure 2.  
Refugee Arrivals by Top Country of Nationality: Fiscal Year 2016  
(Ranked by country of nationality)

### Dem. Rep. Congo

16,370 | 19.3%

### Syria

12,587 | 14.8%

### Burma

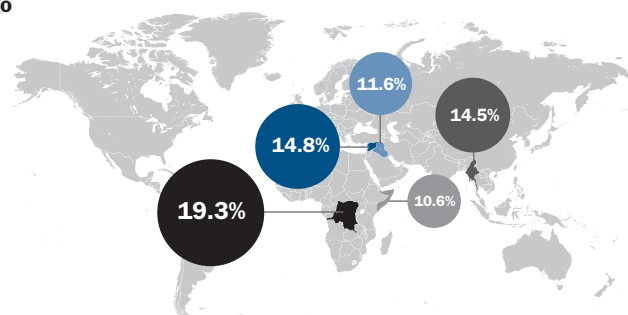
12,347 | 14.5%

### Iraq

9,880 | 11.6%

### Somalia

9,020 | 10.6%



Source: U.S. Department of State.

Table 3.

### Refugee Arrivals by Age, Sex, and Marital Status: Fiscal Years 2014 to 2016

Characteristic	2016		2015		2014	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
AGE						
Total	84,989	100.0	69,920	100.0	69,975	100.0
0 to 17 years	37,710	44.4	27,681	39.6	24,647	35.2
18 to 24 years	11,335	13.3	9,624	13.8	10,143	14.5
25 to 34 years	15,551	18.3	14,198	20.3	14,608	20.9
35 to 44 years	10,315	12.1	9,072	13.0	9,223	13.2
45 to 54 years	5,365	6.3	4,916	7.0	5,612	8.0
55 to 64 years	2,807	3.3	2,564	3.7	3,192	4.6
65 years and over	1,906	2.2	1,865	2.7	2,550	3.6
SEX						
Total	84,989	100.0	69,920	100.0	69,975	100.0
Female	41,728	49.1	33,335	47.7	33,208	47.5
Male	43,261	50.9	36,584	52.3	36,767	52.5
Unknown	-	-	1	0.0	-	-
MARITAL STATUS						
Total	84,989	100.0	69,920	100.0	69,975	100.0
Married <sup>1</sup>	28,242	33.2	25,063	35.8	26,168	37.4
Single <sup>2</sup>	52,506	61.8	41,105	58.8	39,739	56.8
Other <sup>3</sup>	4,241	5.0	3,752	5.4	4,068	5.8

- Represents zero.

<sup>1</sup> Includes persons in common law marriage.

<sup>2</sup> Includes persons who were engaged and not yet married.

<sup>3</sup> Includes persons who were divorced, separated, widowed, or of unknown marital status.

Source: U.S. Department of State.

<sup>14</sup> See Table 14: Refugee Arrivals by Region and Country of Nationality in the 2016 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics.

<sup>15</sup> Calculated from the March 2016 Current Population Survey public use microdata file from the U.S. Census Bureau.



months while cohorts arriving between 2008 and 2015 typically received LPR status in 18 months.

Refugees granted LPR status may apply for naturalization five years after their admission as a refugee. Of the adult refugees admitted in 2000 who have gained LPR status, 49 percent naturalized

within five years, 58 percent within six years, and 79 percent by the end of 2016 (within 15 years). For the 2005 cohort of adult refugees who obtained LPR status, 48 percent naturalized within five years, 57 percent within six years, and 70 percent by the end of 2016.<sup>17</sup>

## ASYLEES

### Filing of Claims

Generally, any foreign national present in the United States or arriving at a port of entry may seek asylum regardless of immigration status. Those seeking asylum must apply within one year from the date of last arrival or establish that an exception applies based on changed or extraordinary circumstances. Principal applicants obtain asylum in one of two ways: affirmatively through a USCIS asylum officer or defensively in removal proceedings before an immigration judge (IJ) of the DOJ Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR). An individual applies for asylum by filing Form I-589, *Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal*.

Spouses and unmarried children under the age of 21<sup>18</sup> who are listed on the principal's asylum application, but not included in the principal's grant of asylum, may obtain derivative asylum status. A principal asylee may petition for following-to-join benefits<sup>19</sup> for qualifying derivatives up to two years after he or she was granted asylum, as long as the relationship between principal spouse and/or child exists on the date the principal was granted asylum. The principal asylee must file a Form I-730 for each qualifying family member, who may be located abroad or in the United States. Once an I-730 is approved for an individual located abroad, there are no time constraints placed upon the

derivative relative's travel to the United States, as long as (1) the principal's status has not been revoked, (2) the relationship of the derivative to the principal is unchanged, and (3) in the case of a child, the child remains unmarried.

### Adjudication of Claims

The USCIS Asylum Division adjudicates claims and may grant asylum directly through the affirmative asylum process. During interviews, asylum officers determine if the applicant meets the definition of a refugee, is credible, is not barred from obtaining asylum, and warrants a grant of asylum as a matter of discretion. Individuals may be barred for previously committing certain crimes, posing a national security threat, engaging in the persecution of others, or firmly resettling in another country before coming to the United States.

<sup>17</sup> Data were obtained from matched refugee, LPR, and naturalization records from DHS administrative systems. The data were restricted to immigrants who were 18 years of age and older when LPR status was obtained. More recent cohorts, with less time spent in LPR status, tend to have lower cumulative naturalization rates.

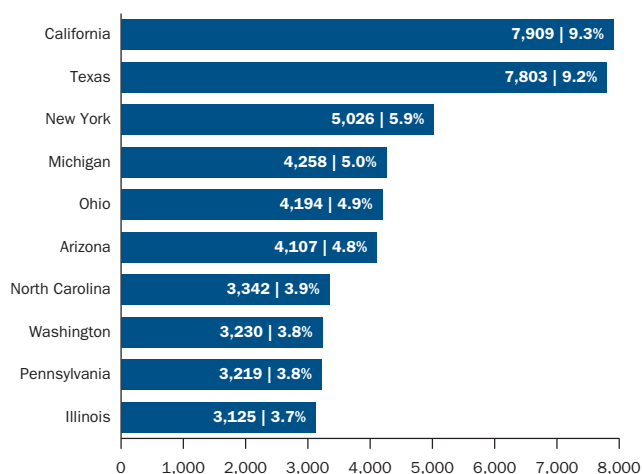
<sup>18</sup> See reference to Child Status Protection Act, n. 11, *supra*.

<sup>19</sup> In practice, the vast majority of derivative asylum status beneficiaries receive following-to-join benefits.

Figure 3.

#### Refugee Arrivals by Leading States of Residence: Fiscal Year 2016

(Ranked by 2016 state of residence)

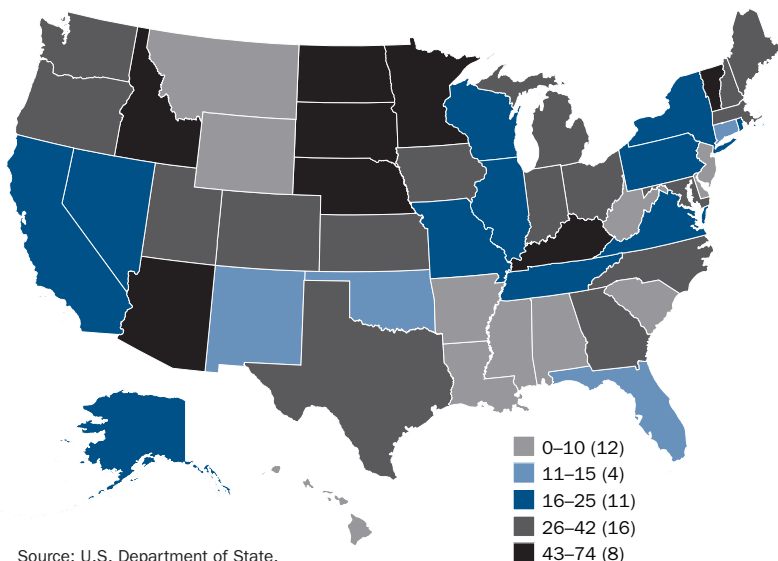


Source: U.S. Department of State.

Figure 4.

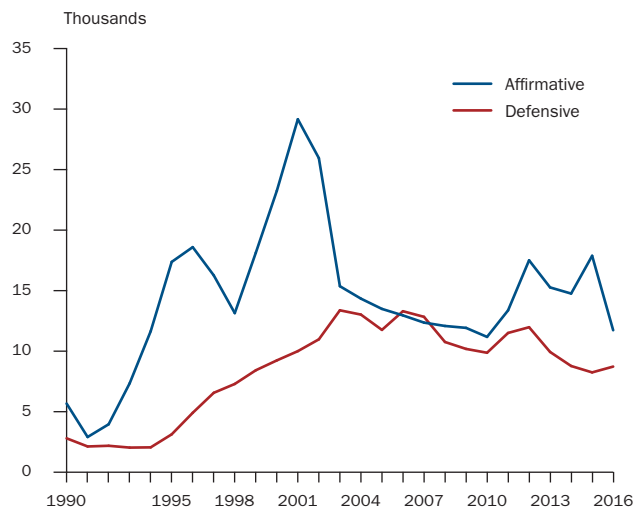
#### Per Capita Refugee Resettlement by State of Residence: Fiscal Year 2016

per 100,000 of State Population (# of States)



Source: U.S. Department of State.

Figure 5.

**Annual Flow of Affirmative and Defensive Asylees: 1990 to 2016**

Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: U.S. Department of State.

If applicants with a valid immigration status (e.g., a foreign student) fail to establish eligibility for asylum, USCIS denies the application, and the applicant remains in his or her valid status. If applicants are not in a valid status and are found ineligible for asylum, USCIS places these applicants in removal proceedings before an EOIR IJ, where the application is considered anew.

Individuals who have not previously filed for asylum may apply defensively after being placed in removal proceedings by immigration enforcement officials because they are undocumented, are in violation of their status when apprehended, or were apprehended while attempting entry into the United States without proper documentation. Defensive applicants file for asylum directly with EOIR. During the proceedings, an IJ may grant asylum or deny the asylum application and issue a removal order. Applicants may appeal a denial to the Board of Immigration Appeals and, if unsuccessful there, may seek further review by a U.S. Court of Appeals, and finally the Supreme Court.

Asylum following-to-join beneficiaries are not required to demonstrate a persecution claim because their status is derived from the principal asylee. Beneficiaries in the United States at the time of application are granted derivative asylum immediately upon the approval of their I-730 petitions. Beneficiaries abroad at the time of application are granted derivative asylum when admitted into the United States at a port of entry.

### Lawful Permanent Residence and Citizenship

One year after being granted asylum, asylees are eligible to apply for LPR status along with qualifying family members after

### Credible and Reasonable Fear and The Asylum System

The U.S. asylum system is facing a mounting backlog stemming from many factors including increases in global displacement and the expanded use of expedited removals. Adults and families with children apprehended or found inadmissible at the U.S. border who might be placed in expedited removal but express a fear of persecution or torture or an intention to seek asylum are referred for a credible fear (CF) screening with a USCIS asylum officer. If fear is found, individuals are subsequently referred to an Immigration Judge (IJ) for a full removal hearing where they may apply for asylum, or withholding of removal. The number of CF screenings referrals have risen each year from fewer than 5,100 in 2008 to close to 92,000 screenings in 2016 (Figure 8). In 2016, the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras led in CF case screenings (73 percent) followed by Mexico (eight percent) and India (four percent). A high proportion of individuals referred for a CF screening met the credible fear standard and were referred to an IJ. Positive screen-in rate for all individuals claiming screened for CF was 75 percent in 2016 and varied by country of origin and gender. Women had a higher positive screen-in rate than men (82 percent vs. 69 percent), while Mexican and Guatemalan nationals had lower positive screen-in rates (52 percent and 60 percent respectively) than nationals from El Salvador and Honduras (81 percent each).

Individuals who express a fear of persecution or torture or an intention to seek asylum but who have previously been removed or voluntarily returned or who have been convicted of an aggravated felony and are not lawful permanent residents receive a reasonable fear (RF) screening with an asylum officer. The standards for finding RF are more difficult than CF but if RF is met, a person may seek withholding or deferral of removal before an IJ. In 2016, approximately 9,400 RF screenings were conducted with a 32 percent positive screen-in rate.

meeting the eligibility criteria. Asylees may apply for naturalization five years after their final grant of asylum, provided they applied for and were granted LPR status.<sup>20</sup>

### DATA

The affirmative asylee data presented in this report were obtained from the Refugee, Asylum, and Parole System (RAPS) of USCIS. Defensive asylee data were obtained from EOIR. Following-to-join asylum derivative data for people residing outside the United States at the time of their admission were obtained from the Case and Activity Management for International Operations (CAMINO) system of USCIS and the DOS Consular Consolidated Database (CCD). These data reflect travel documents issued, not admissions. Following-to-join data for people residing within the United

<sup>20</sup> Asylees may count a maximum of one year of their time in asylum status toward the required five years of permanent residence for naturalization eligibility purposes.

States at the time of the approval of their I-730 petition were obtained from the Computer-Linked Application Information Management System (CLAIMS) of USCIS.

## TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ASYLEES

### Asylum Filings

An estimated 115,399 affirmative asylum applications<sup>21</sup> were filed with USCIS in 2016, 39 percent more than the year before and more than 100 percent increase since 2014. This is the seventh consecutive annual increase and the highest level since 1995, when applications reached close to 144,000. China remained the largest country of origin for affirmative asylum applications at 16,494, and saw a 19 percent increase in applications from 2015. Venezuela followed with 14,773 applications, a 161 percent increase from the previous year and a 19-fold increase in just four years.

The number of affirmative asylum applications by migrants from Central America's Northern Triangle Countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) has also risen dramatically in the past three years, from 7,723 to 25,801, a 234 percent increase. From the region, more individuals affirmatively sought asylum in 2014-2016 than in the preceeding 17 years combined.

The growing number of affirmative applications has been served by a shrinking number of dedicated adjudicators as a large number of USCIS asylum officers have been diverted from the affirmative interview process to conduct credible and reasonable fear screening interviews. As a result, and despite increased staffing within the USCIS Asylum Division, the number of pending affirmative applications climbed to almost 200,000 by the end of 2016, the highest number since 2004. More than half (53 percent) were filed in 2016 alone while another 44 percent were filed between 2013 and 2015. Thus, even as the number of affirmative asylum applications increased in 2016, the number of people granted asylum and the number of referrals to an IJ (i.e., denied asylum by USCIS) both declined. Cases granted affirmative asylum fell 34 percent in 2016 (see Table 4); while cases referred to EOIR by USCIS decreased 20 percent, from 20,429 in 2015 to 16,397 in 2016. China and Egypt, two of the top countries of origin for asylum recipients between 2014 and 2016, experienced the largest drop in affirmative grants; more than 60 percent. The number of persons authorized for travel from abroad to the United States as following-to-join derivatives also declined 23 percent, from 7,145 in 2015 to 5,490 in 2016.

Total defensive asylum applications before EOIR also increased to 65,218 in 2016, up from 45,770 applications in 2015. The largest

**Table 4.**

### Individuals Granted Asylum Affirmatively by Country of Nationality: Fiscal Years 2014 to 2016

(Ranked by 2016 country of nationality)

Country	2016		2015		2014	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total . . . . .	11,729	100.0	17,787	100.0	14,624	100.0
El Salvador . . . . .	1,404	12.0	1,860	10.5	183	1.3
China, People's Republic . . . . .	1,381	11.8	2,573	14.5	3,912	26.8
Guatemala . . . . .	1,317	11.2	1,700	9.6	311	2.1
Honduras . . . . .	885	7.5	1,099	6.2	89	0.6
Egypt . . . . .	690	5.9	1,513	8.5	2,580	17.6
Syria . . . . .	660	5.6	865	4.9	849	5.8
Iraq . . . . .	611	5.2	697	3.9	533	3.6
Mexico . . . . .	455	3.9	662	3.7	469	3.2
Iran . . . . .	381	3.2	639	3.6	572	3.9
Venezuela . . . . .	328	2.8	466	2.6	318	2.2
All other countries, including unknown . .	3,617	30.8	5,713	32.1	4,808	32.9

Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

numbers of applications lodged with the courts were from citizens of the Northern Triangle Countries (39,881), Mexico (12,831), and China (1,840). Asylum cases referred to EOIR by USCIS made up 21 percent of total EOIR asylum cases, with El Salvador and Guatemala leading the referrals (17 percent each of total referrals) followed by Mexico and China (11 percent each of total referrals). (For more USCIS EOIR referrals, see Supplemental Table: Asylum Workload by Top Nationalities: 2016.) Overall, the number of persons granted asylum defensively by an IJ or the EOIR Board of Immigration Appeals of EOIR increased by seven percent from 8,246 in 2015 to 8,726 in 2016; an additional 11,643 cases were denied asylum in 2016.

### Asylum Grants

#### Country of Nationality

In 2016, the three leading countries of nationality of persons granted either affirmative or defensive asylum were China, El Salvador, and Guatemala (see Figure 6). Nationals of these countries accounted for 42 percent of all persons granted asylum. The same countries were also the three leading countries of nationality for affirmative asylum grants (with El Salvador surpassing China) and accounted for 35 percent of all persons granted affirmative asylum (see Table 4). The leading countries of nationality for persons granted defensive asylum were China (38 percent), El Salvador (9.2 percent), Guatemala (7.7 percent), and Honduras (7.6 percent) (see Table 5). Fifty-nine percent of all defensive asylees in 2016 were nationals of these countries.

The leading countries of nationality for following-to-join asylees authorized for travel to the United States in 2016 were China (58 percent), Haiti (5.9 percent), and India (5.3 percent) (see Table 6). Nationals of these three countries accounted for 70 percent of all following-to-join derivative relatives issued travel documents prior to their admission into the United States.

<sup>21</sup> These include principal applicants only. There were an additional 52,468 dependents.

Figure 6.  
**Individuals Granted Asylum Affirmatively or Defensively by Country of Nationality:  
Fiscal Year 2016**  
(Ranked by country of nationality)

**People's Republic of China**

4,484 | 21.9%

**El Salvador**

2,157 | 10.5%

**Guatemala**

1,949 | 9.5%

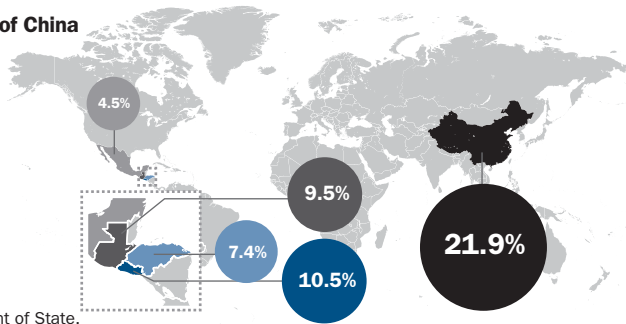
**Honduras**

1,505 | 7.4%

**Mexico**

919 | 4.5%

Source: U.S. Department of State.



## Age, Sex, and Marital Status

In 2016, 57 percent of persons granted affirmative asylum were between the ages of 18 and 44 (see Table 7). Like refugees, affirmative asylees are, on average, younger than the native-born U.S. population: the median age of persons granted affirmative asylum in 2016 was 25 years. Fifty-four percent were male, and 49 percent of adults were married.

In 2016, the median age of following-to-join beneficiaries was 18 years. More than half (51 percent) of following-to-join beneficiaries were female (see Table 8). Data on marital status are not available for this group.

## State of Residence

In 2016, the leading states of residence for individuals granted asylum affirmatively were California (44 percent) and New York (11 percent) (see Figure 7). More than half (55 percent) of individuals granted affirmative asylum resided in these two states. Per capita, the leading areas include the U.S. Virgin Islands, the District of Columbia, and California, with 23, 15, and 14 recipients per 100,000 residents, respectively.

State of residence data were not available for either defensive or follow-to-join asylees.

## Naturalization of Asylees

Over 90 percent of those granted affirmative asylum between 2000 and 2011 gained LPR status by the end of 2015. Of those adults granted affirmative asylum in 2000 who have gained LPR status, 55 percent naturalized within five years, 68 percent within six years, and 80 percent within ten years. For the 2005 cohort of adults granted affirmative asylum who have gained LPR status, 49 percent also naturalized within five years, 62 percent within six years, and 73 percent by the end of 2016.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Data were obtained from matched LPR and naturalization records from DHS administrative systems. The data were restricted to immigrants who were 18 years of age and older when LPR status was obtained. More recent cohorts, with less time spent in LPR status, tend to have lower cumulative naturalization rates. Immigrant cohorts are defined by the year in which asylum/LPR status was obtained.

Table 5.

### Individuals Granted Asylum Defensively by Country of Nationality: Fiscal Years 2014 to 2016

(Ranked by 2016 country of nationality)

Country	2016		2015		2014	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	8,726	106.6	8,184	100.0	8,672	100.0
China, People's Republic	3,103	37.9	3,610	44.1	3,975	45.8
El Salvador	753	9.2	305	3.7	182	2.1
Guatemala	632	7.7	373	4.6	174	2.0
Honduras	620	7.6	309	3.8	154	1.8
Mexico	464	5.7	204	2.5	120	1.4
India	309	3.8	299	3.7	370	4.3
Nepal	265	3.2	256	3.1	296	3.4
Ethiopia	181	2.2	248	3.0	315	3.6
Somalia	153	1.9	169	2.1	118	1.4
Eritrea	152	1.9	138	1.7	162	1.9
All other countries, including unknown	2,094	25.6	2,273	27.8	2,806	32.4

Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice.

Table 6.

### Follow-to-join Asylee Travel Documents Issued by Country of Nationality: Fiscal Years 2014 to 2016

(Ranked by 2016 country of nationality)

Country	2016		2015		2014	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	5,490	100	7,145	100	8,159	100
China, People's Republic	3,207	58.4	3,278	45.9	3,446	42.2
Haiti	326	5.9	381	5.3	552	6.8
India	290	5.3	287	4.0	219	2.7
Guatemala	230	4.2	204	2.9	171	2.1
El Salvador	138	2.5	108	1.5	105	1.3
Nepal	107	1.9	492	6.9	634	7.8
Gambia	106	1.9	98	1.4	85	1.0
Kenya	92	1.7	100	1.4	103	1.3
Kyrgyzstan	78	1.4	42	0.6	23	0.3
Syria	76	1.4	121	1.7	129	1.6
All other countries, including unknown	840	15.3	2,034	28.5	2,692	33.0

Source: U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Homeland Security.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit the Office of Immigration Statistics Web page at <http://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics>.

**Table 7.**

### Individuals Granted Asylum Affirmatively by Age, Sex, and Marital Status: Fiscal Years 2014 to 2016

	2016		2015		2014	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
AGE						
Total . . . . .	11,729	100.0	17,787	100.0	14,624	100.0
0 to 17 years . . . . .	3,713	31.7	5,262	29.6	2,684	18.4
18 to 24 years . . . . .	2,058	17.5	3,193	18.0	2,040	13.9
25 to 34 years . . . . .	2,730	23.3	4,467	25.1	4,726	32.3
35 to 44 years . . . . .	1,881	16.0	3,028	17.0	3,124	21.4
45 to 54 years . . . . .	882	7.5	1,224	6.9	1,346	9.2
55 to 64 years . . . . .	298	2.5	393	2.2	459	3.1
65 and over . . . . .	167	1.4	220	1.2	245	1.7
SEX						
Total . . . . .	11,729	100.0	17,787	100.0	14,624	100.0
Female . . . . .	5,438	46.4	8,424	47.4	7,149	48.9
Male . . . . .	6,291	53.6	9,363	52.6	7,475	51.1
MARITAL STATUS						
Total . . . . .	11,729	100.0	17,787	100.0	14,624	100.0
Single . . . . .	7,420	61.5	10,947	61.5	7,073	48.4
Married . . . . .	3,913	34.5	6,145	34.5	6,767	46.3
Other* . . . . .	396	3.9	695	3.9	784	5.4

\* Includes persons who were divorced, separated, widowed, or unknown marital status.

Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

**Table 8.**

### Follow-to-join Asylee Travel Documents Issued by Age and Sex: Fiscal Years 2014 to 2016

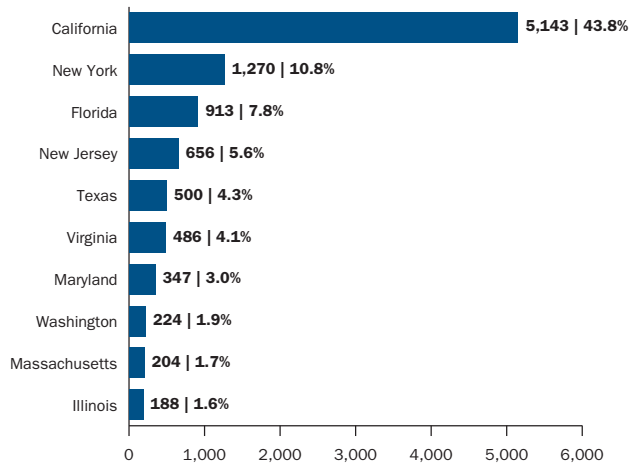
	2016		2015		2014	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
AGE						
Total . . . . .	5,490	100.0	7,145	100.0	8,159	100.0
0 to 17 years . . . . .	2,665	48.5	3,390	47.4	3,809	46.7
18 to 24 years . . . . .	974	17.7	1,279	17.9	1,554	19.0
25 to 34 years . . . . .	542	9.9	813	11.4	887	10.9
35 to 44 years . . . . .	710	12.9	905	12.7	1,044	12.8
45 to 54 years . . . . .	455	8.3	571	8.0	669	8.2
55 to 64 years . . . . .	126	2.3	165	2.3	177	2.2
65 and over . . . . .	18	0.3	22	0.3	19	0.2
SEX						
Total . . . . .	5,490	100.0	7,145	100.0	8,159	100.0
Female . . . . .	2,789	50.8	3,784	53.0	4,154	50.9
Male . . . . .	2,431	44.3	3,163	44.3	3,723	45.6
Unknown . . . . .	270	4.9	198	2.8	282	3.5

Source: U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Figure 7.

**Individuals Granted Asylum Affirmatively by State of Residence: Fiscal Year 2016**

(Ranked by 2016 state of residence)

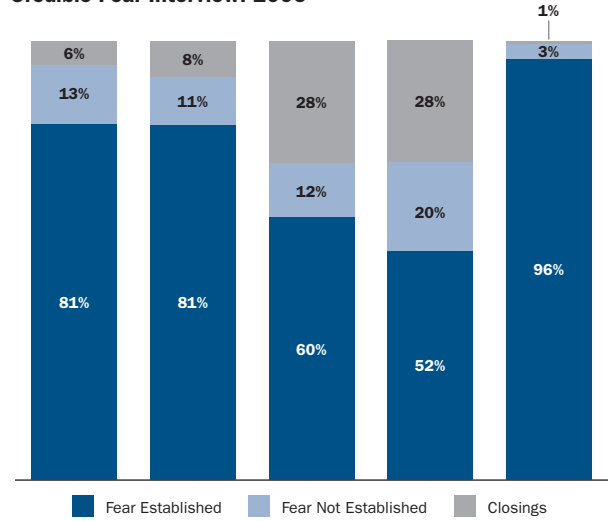


Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: U.S. Department of State.

Figure 9.

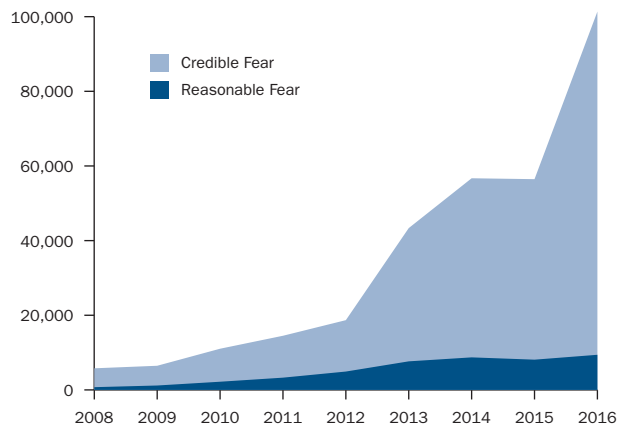
**Fear Established by Top Five Nationalities Referred for a Credible Fear Interview: 2006**



Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Figure 8.

**Credible and Reasonable Fear Screening Referrals: 2008 to 2016**



Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security.