

Some Helpful Definitions



Welcome the stranger.
Protect the refugee.

Refugee: A refugee is a person who has been forced to flee their home country due to persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group (e.g., members of the LGBTQ community). The persecution a refugee experiences may include harassment, threats, abduction or torture. A refugee is often afforded some sort of legal protection, either by their host country's government, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or both. In the United States, refugees are hand-selected by the U.S. government and are screened in advance. They are subject to background checks and security screenings by multiple U.S. agencies. Only after everything is approved are they brought to the U.S. to reside permanently.¹ The maximum number of refugees resettled in the U.S. in a given year, which is referred to as the ceiling for refugee admissions, is determined by the annual Presidential Determination. For more than a decade, the annual ceiling was set at 70,000, which includes both Syrian refugees and refugees from all other countries. Former President Obama's administration raised the ceiling to 85,000 for 2016 and to 110,000 for 2017. The Executive Order issued by the Trump administration on March 6, 2017 dropped this number to 50,000. In October 2018, the Trump administration announced that the Presidential Determination for fiscal year 2018 would be 45,000 – the lowest number ever set by any president since the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program was created in 1980.

Asylum seeker: An asylum seeker is a person who has fled persecution in their home country and is seeking safe haven in a different country, but has not yet received any legal recognition or status.² In several countries, including the U.S., asylum seekers are sometimes detained while waiting for their case to be heard.

Internally displaced person: An internally displaced person, or IDP, is a person who fled their home but has not crossed an international border to find sanctuary. Even if they fled for reasons similar to those driving refugees (armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations), IDPs legally remain under the protection of their own government – even though that government might be the cause of their flight.³

Migrant: A migrant is a person who chooses to move from their home for any variety of reasons, but not necessarily because of a direct threat of persecution or death. Migrant is an umbrella category that can include refugees but can also include people moving to improve their lives by finding work or education, those seeking family reunion and others.⁴

¹ Based on "Who is a refugee?" from <http://www.hias.org/FAQ/HIAS>.

² Based on "What is the difference between an asylum seeker, a refugee and an asylee?" from <http://www.hias.org/FAQ/HIAS>.

³ <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c146.html>.

⁴ Based on "'Refugee' or 'migrant' - Which is right?" from <http://www.unhcr.org/55df0e556.html>.