

The U.S. has admitted more than three million refugees since the 1970s.

Refugees Tend to Start Out In Poverty, Catch Up Quickly

BY KONRAD PUTZIER AND MAX RUST

The Trump administration is intensifying its crackdown on refugees, tightening rules for people seeking permission to live in the U.S. on humanitarian grounds.

The move shines a spotlight on the three million U.S. residents who arrived as refugees, often putting down roots and rising up the economic ladder.

Refugees commonly start out in poverty when they arrive in the U.S., but catch up quickly, according to studies of U.S. Census Bureau data. They have high rates of entrepreneurship and over time produce more in tax revenues than they receive in government benefits, a number of studies of census data show. *Note*

The story isn't all positive: Refugees—who are typically fleeing war, violence or persecution—are less proficient in English than other immigrants and a minority of them remain poor years after arriving in the U.S.

President Trump directed his ire at Afghan refugees after an immigrant from Afghanistan became the suspect in the shooting of two National Guard members. He railed against Somalis in Minnesota, pointing to a sprawling fraud case that involved dozens in the Somali community there.

Still, "refugees are one of the cleanest and clearest immigrant economic success stories," said Giovanni Peri, a professor of economics at the University of California, Davis. *Note*

The typical refugee initially consumes more in government benefits than they pay in taxes, but that flips after eight years in the country, according to a 2017 study by economists at University of Notre Dame. The study found that refugees pay \$21,000 more in taxes than they receive in benefits during their first 20 years in the U.S. *Note*

A separate study from the Health and Human Services Department found that refugees, people granted asylum and their immediate family members cost the federal government, states and municipalities \$723.4 billion from 2005 to 2019 through benefits like Medicare, food stamps and Supplemental Security Income. But they also paid \$739.4 billion in taxes during that period.

The U.S. has admitted more than three million refugees since the 1970s, a fraction of the estimated 52 million immigrants living in the country. *Note*

In the 1970s and '80s, the most common origin countries for refugees were the Soviet Union and Vietnam. In the mid-1990s, Bosnia- Herzegovina surged to the top. Over the past decade, most new refugees arrived from the Middle East and Africa, with the Democratic Republic of Congo topping the list by a wide margin.

People apply for refugee status abroad and are vetted before they arrive in the U.S. Asylum seekers typically apply for protection once they are already in the U.S. Between 1990 and 2022, the U.S. admitted more than 2.1 million refugees and granted asylum to another 800,000 people. Private charities like Catholic Charities USA often help refugees find work and housing.

In January, the Trump ad--ministration indefinitely sus --pended the U.S. refugee program, although it has since admitted a small number of refugees including white South Africans, and earlier this month it shortened work permits for asylum seekers and refugees from five years to 18 months. Trump also said he doesn't want Somali immigrants—many of whom arrived as refugees—in the country, calling them "garbage."

Refugees tend to start out with lower incomes than other immigrants and native-born Americans. But refugees in the country for 10 years or longer had a median household income on par with the general U.S. population, according to the HHS study. Poverty rates also converge. Among all refugees who have been in the country for 6 to 15 years, 45.9% spoke English very well or exclusively as of 2019, according to the American Immigration Council, compared with 50.4% of other kinds of immigrants.

Refugees compete with native-born Americans for employment, but also create new jobs by opening businesses. In Clarkston, Ga., a city with a large refugee population, immigrants have opened coffee shops, skin-care businesses and Nepalese grocery stores, among other ventures, said Erin Igleheart, director of the startup accelerator program Start:ME. About 45% of the small businesses the program supports in the Clarkston area are run by immigrants from over 40 countries, she said.

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Tuesday, 12/16/2025 Page A002

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