



FACT SHEET: REFUGEES AND U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY

The executive order titled “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States” intended to ban entry of foreign nationals to the US in three different ways. It placed a temporary hold on entry of all kinds from seven countries previously identified by the Obama administration as “countries of concern,” placed an indefinite hold on entry of Syrian nationals, and placed a temporary hold on the entry of foreign nationals with refugee visas. This fact sheet focuses on the third group: refugees. It provides an overview of the US refugee admittance process and the current research on the threat posed to US national security by refugees.

Overview: US refugee definitions and vetting process

1. In order to receive refugee status, an individual must prove that he or she faces a direct threat of harm in their home country. US law defines a refugee as someone unable or unwilling to return to their home country 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.”¹ Anyone receiving a refugee visa to the United States has demonstrated to the government that he or she is not in search of other opportunities, but is fleeing direct harm. The UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, identifies refugee resettlement cases prior to the US vetting process. In line with US law detailed above, the UNHCR only provides resettlement to refugees who have, “a long-term need for international protection,” which includes refugees with legal and physical protection needs, survivors of violence and torture, medical needs, women and girls at-risk, family reunification, children and adolescents, and the elderly.
2. Refugee vetting is currently one of the most restrictive ways by which to receive a visa to enter the United States. After the UNHCR submits refugee resettlement cases to the US government, the vetting process for refugees takes between 18 and 24 months, and involves eight US government agencies, six different security databases, five background checks, two interagency security reviews, a sequence of three separate in-person interviews, interviews with family members or related individuals who know the applicant, and four biometric security checks.²

Historical impact of refugees on US national security

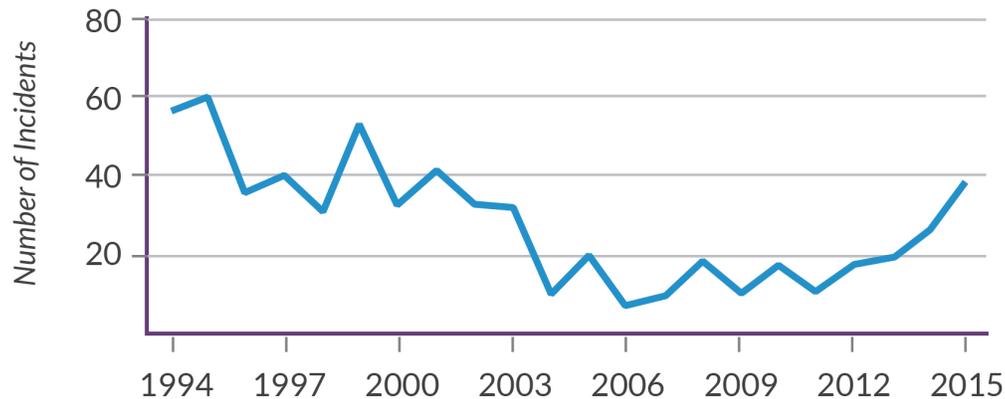
3. From 1975 to 2015, 20 people in the United States on refugee visas were arrested for charges related to terrorism. These 20 foreign nationals were associated with three deaths.³ This represents 7.7 percent of all foreign nationals arrested for charges related to terrorism.
4. In the same time period, the US admitted 3,252,493 people through the US Refugee Admittance Program.⁴ This means that the rate of refugees arrested for terrorism-related offenses is .00061%: less than two-thirds of one-one-thousandth of one percent of refugees.
5. From 2000 to 2015, refugees with origins in countries included in the ban have topped the list of US refugee intake, while terrorist attacks have been declining. Data from the US Department of Homeland Security⁵ shows that for every year since 2000, with the exception of 2003, Somalia, Iran, or Iraq have been in the top three countries of origin for refugees seeking resettlement in the US. This same period of time shows a decline in domestic terrorism from its high points in the 1970s and 1990s, according to the Global Terrorism Database (see next page).⁶ Terrorist attacks showed an increase

Photos: A community center in Amman serving Jordan-based refugees; U.S. Department of State on Flickr. Kosovo refugees; UN Photo/R LeMoyné. Syrian Kurdish refugees entering Turkey; EC/ECHO on Flickr.

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after 2012, but this is not attributable to refugees or to nationals from the countries included in the ban. Sixteen percent of the incidents from 2012 to 2015 were committed by domestic terrorists against Muslim-owned businesses and Islamic religious centers.⁷ Of the domestic terrorism events that involved foreign-born assailants, for example the Boston Marathon bombing and the shooting in San Bernardino, the assailants did not enter the country on a refugee visa and were not nationals of the countries included on the ban list.

U.S. DOMESTIC TERRORISM RATE 1994-2015



Source: Global Terrorism Database

6. The research on the economic impact of refugee resettlement in the United States is variable, but the consensus shows the net impact is positive. Colombia University professor Jeffrey Sachs has argued that refugees are a net positive on the economy of the US, but that this does come through their addition to the labor pool in the United States, potentially resulting in competition for jobs.⁸ This is consistent with academic research showing that refugee influxes in the United States have shown significant contributions to economies where they settled, but only after a relatively long period of integration.⁹ Research by the Americas Society/Council of the Americas and the Fiscal Policy Institute shows that immigrants, including refugees, make up 16 percent of the labor force, but 18 percent of business owners, and 28 percent of main street business owners; including 61 percent of gas station owners, 58 percent of dry cleaners, 53 percent of grocery store owners, 45 percent of nail salon owners, 43 percent of liquor store owners, 38 percent of restaurant owners, and 32 percent of both jewelry and clothing store owners in the United States as a whole. Foreign-born main street business owners accounted, “for all of the growth in main street businesses in 31 of the country’s 50 largest metropolitan areas.”¹⁰

1. US Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), section 101(a)(42).
2. US Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, <https://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/admissions/index.htm>
3. <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/terrorism-immigration-risk-analysis#full>
4. US Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, Office of Admissions - Refugee Processing Center. <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>
5. <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/refugees-asylees>
6. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism. Global Terrorism Database. <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>
7. “National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START).”
8. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/making-sense/whats-the-economic-impact-of-refugees-in-america/>
9. Parsons, C. & Vezina, P. (2016). Migrant Networks and Trade: The Vietnamese Boat People as a Natural Experiment. IZA Discussion Paper No. 10112
10. Americas Society/Council of The Americas and Fiscal Policy Institute, “Bringing Vitality to Main Street: How Immigrant Small Businesses Help Local Economies Grow,” 7.