

Frequently Asked Questions about Refugees and Immigrants

What is an immigrant?

The official definition of an immigrant is a foreign-born individual who has been admitted to reside permanently in the United States as a Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR). Unofficially, the term immigrant is used to describe any foreign-born individual regardless of whether he/she is legally present in the U.S. or whether he/she intends to be in the U.S. temporarily.

What is an undocumented immigrant?

An undocumented immigrant is a person who is present in the United States without permission of the U. S. government. They may enter the U.S. illegally, by using false documents, or by staying beyond the expiration date of a temporary visa.

What is a refugee?

A refugee is a person who is “unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of origin because of past persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution, based on the person's race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”

What is the difference between a refugee and an immigrant?

An immigrant *voluntarily* leaves his/her country of origin to work, study, or live in the U.S. A refugee is a person in flight from a desperate situation. The key difference then, is that an immigrant *chooses* to leave his/her country of origin. A refugee, on the other hand, is compelled to seek asylum in another country.

What is an asylee?

An asylee, like a refugee, fears persecution based on race, religion, nationality, or political opinion, but has already entered the United States, and fearing persecution if he/she returns to the homeland, applies and is granted asylum.

What is an asylum-seeker?

An asylum-seeker is a person who has already entered the United States, but has not yet successfully completed the process to become an asylee.

How many refugees are there in the world?

According to the World Refugee Survey 2001, 14.5 million people are refugees and asylum seekers, unable or unwilling to return to their native country and in need of protection. Nearly two-thirds of the world's refugees are in the Near East and Africa. Large refugee populations today include Kurds, Burundians, Burmese, Afghans, and Sudanese. Women and children make up eighty percent of the world's refugee population.

How many refugees does the United States accept for resettlement?

Each year, the President, in consultation with Congress, determines the number of refugees to be admitted into the United States. The current total is approximately 85,000 (less than ½ of 1% of refugees worldwide). The total is divided regionally among Africa, East Asia, Europe, Latin America, the Near East and East Asia and the Former Soviet Union. To qualify for refugee resettlement in the United States, a person must come from a country or belong to a group designated as high-risk by the Department of State. Individuals must meet the definition of a refugee by proving that he or she has suffered past persecution or has a well-founded fear of persecution. Specially trained officers from the Department of Homeland Security conduct interviews around the world to identify individuals eligible for permanent resettlement in America. Eligible refugees then undergo thorough medical and security screenings before arriving in the United States.

How many refugees are resettled in Nebraska?

There are three agencies in Nebraska designated as refugee resettlement agencies. Lutheran Family Services has offices in Omaha and Lincoln; Southern Sudan Community Association in Omaha; and Catholic Charities in Lincoln. In FY2007, Lutheran Family Services resettled a total of 277 individuals in Omaha and Lincoln.

Why do refugees choose Nebraska?

Unless reuniting with a family member already in the U.S., most refugees are randomly assigned to a resettlement agency in the U.S. Efforts are made to develop communities of international populations, so many times large numbers of one population will be resettled in one city. For example, Omaha has one of the largest per capita Sudanese

populations. Nebraska has been selected as a prime resettlement location for many nationalities because of the low cost of living, low unemployment rate, affordable housing, and an existing international community that can provide language interpretation for certain populations. Once a refugee arrives in the U.S., he/she can travel or relocate wherever he/she chooses and Nebraska is often a state to which many refugees migrate after their initial resettlement in another state. Many refugees come to Nebraska to seek out new jobs or move closer to family and friends. In Lincoln, refugees come from the former Soviet Union, Vietnam, Iran, and Iraq. In Omaha, historically, LFS has resettled a majority of refugees from African countries including Sudan, Somalia, Liberia, Burundi, and the Congo. Recently, LFS in both Omaha and Lincoln has started to resettle refugees from the former Burma.

How long do refugees remain in the United States?

Refugees are entitled to refugee status for one year after arrival. After one year, refugees are eligible to become legal permanent residents. Five years after the date of their arrival in the United States, refugees may apply for their American citizenship. Each day, refugees make significant contributions to their new communities, as workers in American companies, students in our schools, and parents who want the best for their children.

How many immigrants are in Nebraska?

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Nebraska increased 165% in the number of foreign-born residents since 1990. The increase accounts for 30% of Omaha's population growth. Additionally, the 2005 U.S. Census reveals that although the State of Nebraska experienced an overall decline of more than 4,200 residents from 2000 to 2005, there was a simultaneous increase of nearly 28,000 foreign born residents.

Do immigrants pay taxes?

All immigrants pay taxes, whether income, property, sales, or other. As far as income tax payments go, sources vary in their accounts, but a range of studies find that immigrants pay between \$90 and \$140 billion a year in federal, state, and local taxes. Even undocumented immigrants pay income taxes, as evidenced by the Social Security Administration's "suspense file" (taxes that cannot be matched to workers' names and social security numbers), which grew \$20 billion between 1990 and 1998.

Do immigrants come here to take welfare?

Immigrants come to work and reunite with family members. Immigrant labor force participation is consistently higher than native-born, and immigrant workers make up a larger share of the U.S. labor force (12.4%) than they do the U.S. population (11.5%). Moreover, the ratio between immigrant use of public benefits and the amount of taxes they pay is consistently favorable to the U.S., unless the "study" was undertaken by an anti-immigrant group. In one estimate, immigrants earn about \$240 billion a year, pay about \$90 billion a year in taxes, and use about \$5 billion in public benefits. In another cut of the data, immigrant tax payments total \$20 to \$30 billion more than the amount of government services they use. Due to welfare reform, legal immigrants are severely restricted from accessing public benefits, and undocumented immigrants are even further precluded from anything other than emergency services. Anti-immigrant groups skew these figures by including programs used by U.S. citizen children of immigrants in their definition of immigrant welfare use, among other tactics.

Do immigrants take jobs and opportunity away from Americans?

The largest wave of immigration to the U.S. since the early 1900s coincided with our lowest national unemployment rate and fastest economic growth. Immigrant entrepreneurs create jobs for U.S. and foreign workers, and foreign-born students allow many U.S. graduate programs to keep their doors open. While there has been no comprehensive study done of immigrant-owned businesses, we have countless examples: in Silicon Valley, companies begun by Chinese and Indian immigrants generated more than \$19.5 billion in sales and nearly 73,000 jobs in 2000.

Sources: Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, Church World Service, International Rescue Committee, National Academy of Sciences, Cato Institute, Urban Institute, Social Security Administration, American Immigration Lawyers Association, Urban Institute, Brookings Institution, U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Homeland Security (Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services), and the National Immigration Forum.