

REFUGEES THEN AND NOW



Welcome the stranger.
Protect the refugee.

In 1941, Anne Frank’s family applied to come to the United States, seeking refuge from political circumstances that quickly became dangerous for their family. That application was denied and their family was unable to escape. The only survivor was Anne’s father, Otto.

The international system of protections for refugees was established in 1951 as a direct result of the Holocaust. In that moment, the nations of the world vowed to make sure that never again would a persecuted group be turned away from refuge.

Today, there are more refugees worldwide than at any point in recorded history – even surpassing the number of refugees immediately following the Holocaust. As history repeats itself and our country again turns its back on refugees and asylum seekers, we must remember the fateful consequences of these policies.

U.S. Immigration Policy During the Holocaust¹

Prior to WWII, German Jews were encouraged to leave the country with severe limitations on their ability to freely work, access their financial assets, rent or own a home, and move about. As life became impossible, **thousands of Jews attempted to flee to other countries.**

But those Jews were not welcomed in most places: in 1939, economic concerns, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism resulted in 83% of Americans opposing admission of Jewish refugees fleeing the Holocaust. On June 6th, 1939, the M.S. St Louis was turned away from the United States with 937 Jewish refugees on board; some survived in other countries, but 254 of them – over a quarter – died in concentration camps.

- In the aftermath of World War II, Congress enacted the first refugee legislation, providing refuge to over 650,000 displaced Europeans.
- Since the U.S. resettlement program was formalized through the Refugee Act of 1980, the U.S. has resettled over 3 million refugees. With bipartisan support, the United States has been resettling refugees for decades and has been among the world’s leaders in refugee resettlement.

The Global Refugee and Asylum Crisis Today

There are over 70 million forcibly displaced people in the world, with nearly 26 million refugees worldwide.

Refugees come to the United States in two ways – through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and by applying for asylum upon arrival. 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. In the United States, refugees are hand-selected by the U.S. government and are screened thoroughly in advance.

¹ Drawn from <https://www.facinghistory.org/defying-nazis/america-and-holocaust>.

- 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 2019, the Trump administration set a refugee admissions goal of 30,000, the lowest in the history of the U.S. refugee resettlement program. In 2018, the administration set a refugee admissions goal of 45,000, but only 22,491 refugees were resettled. Compare this to 2017, when the refugee admissions ceiling was 110,000.
- There are **9 refugee resettlement agencies** in the United States: HIAS, Church World Service, Ethiopian Community Development Council, Episcopal Migration Ministries, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran Immigrant and Refugee Service, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants and World Relief. HIAS is the only Jewish agency among them. Any refugees resettled in the U.S. are resettled through one of these nine agencies.

It is legal to seek asylum, regardless of how an individual entered the U.S. and where they came from.

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. In several countries, including the U.S., asylum seekers are often detained while waiting for their case to be heard.

- New policies meant to deter people from coming to the United States are making it much harder for people to access their right to seek asylum and putting them in increased and prolonged danger. In January 2019, the Department of Homeland Security implemented a “Remain in Mexico” plan that would force some asylum seekers to wait in Mexico for their hearings in U.S. immigration court. Asylum seekers have severely limited access to legal counsel while in Mexico and are at risk of extortion, kidnapping, gang violence, and homelessness.
- In September 2019, the Supreme Court allowed the “third country transit asylum ban” to go into effect. This means that asylum seekers entering the United States through our Southern border are ineligible for asylum if they did not first seek asylum in Mexico or another country that they traveled through on their way to the U.S. This policy change is effectively stopping most asylum seekers from coming to the U.S.

Take Action

Educate yourself about the global refugee and asylum crisis.

Advocate on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers in the U.S. and throughout the world.

Volunteer with refugees and asylum seekers in your local community.

Donate to support this critical work.

HIAS, the world’s oldest, and only Jewish, refugee organization, rescues, resettles, and advocates for refugees so they can live in safety and with dignity. We work with refugees and asylum seekers in the United States and more than a dozen countries worldwide. We also organize and mobilize the Jewish community to respond to the global refugee crisis.