



PARTNERSHIPS
FOR TRAUMA RECOVERY

Questions and Answers about Asylum Seekers

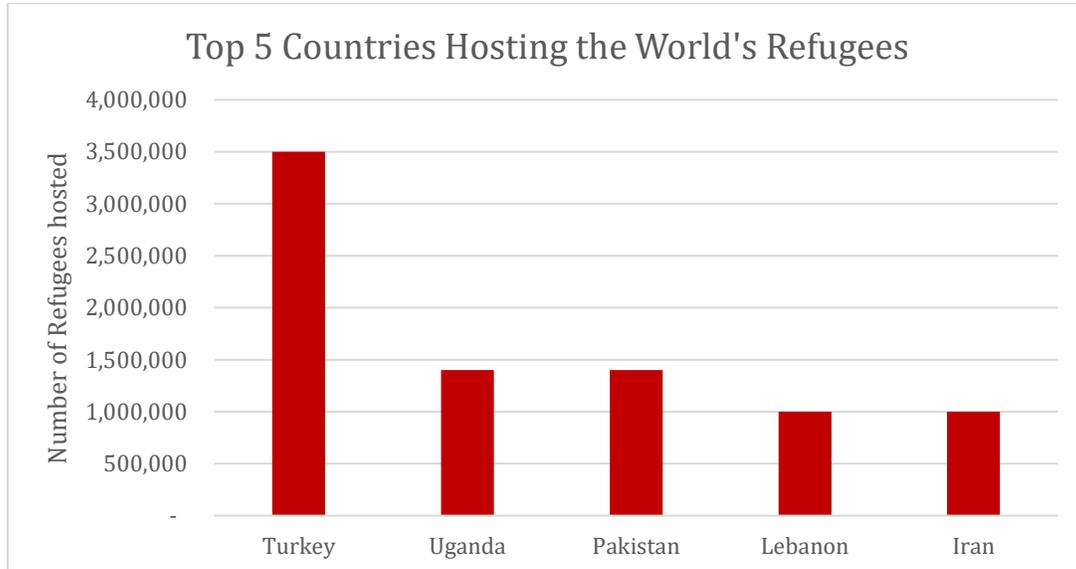
Many immigrants are trying to enter our borders. Why should the U.S. take in more refugees or asylum seekers? Shouldn't other countries do more?

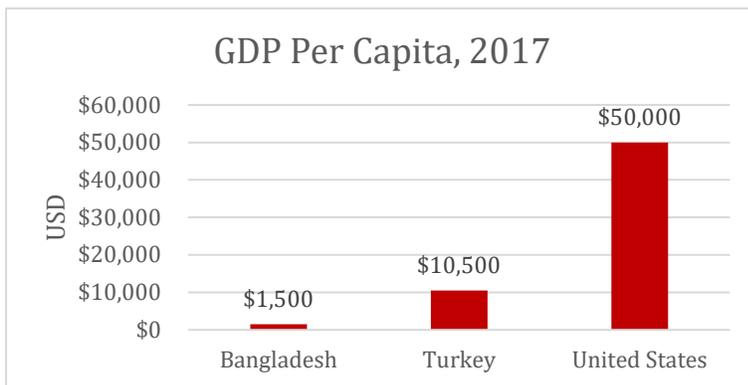
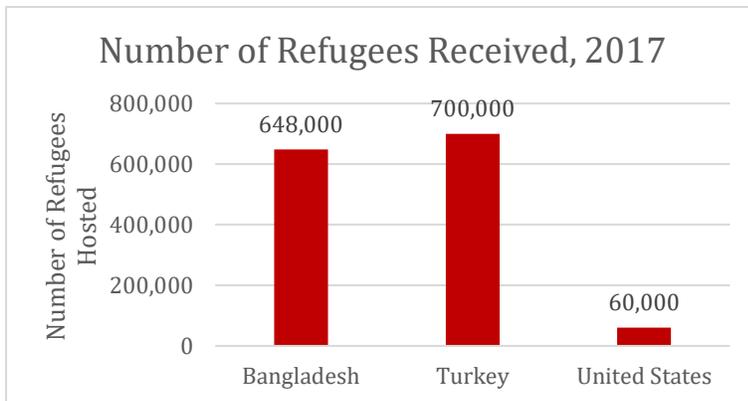
Of the [68.5 million people](#) in the world who have been forcibly displaced, **less than 1%** are formally resettled into the wealthiest countries such as the United States. This is because most of the countries from which people are fleeing war and violence are far from the U.S. and western Europe. **85% of the world's forcibly displaced people are in developing countries.**

Of the 68.5 million forcibly displaced people in the world...

- **40 million are internally displaced persons (IDPs)**, meaning that, they've been forced to flee their homes but remain within their country's borders.
- **25.4 million are refugees** who have fled their country of origin and are unable or unwilling to return because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.
- **3.1 million are asylum seekers** who have fled their home country, entered another country and are seeking international protection from violence by applying for refugee status in the new country.

The countries that host the highest number of refugees in the world are as follows:





A COMPARISON...

In 2017, 3.6 million refugees fled their countries.

Turkey received 20% of this total, or 700,000 refugees. Turkey is a country roughly the size of Texas. In comparison, the United States, a country with a GDP six times that of Turkey, resettled only 60,000 refugees, or 8% of the number received by Turkey.

Bangladesh received 18% of the world's refugees. In 2017, Bangladesh had a GDP per capita of \$1,500 versus the U.S., whose GDP per capita was \$50,000, or forty times as high.

In 2018, under the Trump administration, the U.S. reduced its refugee admissions to only 23,000.

These statistics show that the U.S. resettles a relatively small percentage of the world's forcibly displaced people and, given the size of our economy and our land, we can do more. But another reason we should welcome refugees is because, for centuries, many other immigrants have also come to this country with shared hopes of finding refuge and freedom. We have the capacity today to be a country that continues that tradition, and to enact policies that enshrine those values.

I support legal immigration. Are asylum seekers breaking the law?

No. Asylum seekers, just like refugees, are applying to stay in the U.S. because they cannot go home due to a well-founded fear of persecution. Their reasons for wanting to be here are the same as for refugees, but the legal means they use to apply to stay are different. Seeking asylum is a legal right that was first incorporated into international law in response to the massive displacement caused by World War II. With the Refugee Act of 1980, the U.S. created a permanent and systemic procedure for refugee admissions. Refugees or asylum seekers can be granted legal status to remain in the U.S. based on a "well-founded fear of persecution" if they fall into one of five protected groups: race, membership in a particular social group, political opinion, religion, or national origin.

Gaining refugee status from abroad typically takes years, with a rigorous and detailed screening process involving multiple U.S. agencies. All refugees are screened overseas through a vetting process that involves 9 U.S. government agencies, as well as UN organizations. The vetting process includes extensive interviews, reference checks, fingerprinting, and sometimes iris scans. Less than 1% of the world's refugees will be resettled in wealthy countries such as the U.S.

Meanwhile, the process of gaining U.S. immigration status while someone is still in their home country [isn't a reality for most people](#). Employment-based immigration requires that a U.S. company sponsor the candidate and prove that the candidate would fill a position for which the company cannot find a qualified U.S. employee. Family-based immigration is restricted to certain close relationships and quotas. And, contrary to some opinions, asylum seekers [cannot apply for asylum through U.S. embassies](#) in their home country. For asylum seekers, their only option is to arrive to a safe country, whether by air, sea or land, and request asylum at that country's borders.

You may have also heard that some asylum seekers are arriving between legal ports of entry. The reason for this is that the U.S. government has instituted a [variety of administrative barriers](#) to deter asylum seekers from requesting asylum at legal ports. Family separation and [keeping people in outdoor cages](#) are two examples of this. Another are violations of asylum law such as the recent turnbacks and the "Remain in Mexico" program which leave immigrants homeless at the border for weeks or even months. These policies intentionally limit the number of people who can cross the legal ports of entry, often leaving people seeking sanctuary from violence and persecution with little option but to find other ways to enter.

How do you know that immigrants at our borders are telling the truth?

Asylum seekers go through a rigorous process of making their case, and in 2018, only 35% were granted asylum, with [variability by region and by judge](#). For example, in Atlanta, 89% of asylum seekers are deported, versus 36% in San Francisco. Numerous barriers such as language and lack of legal representation pose challenges to those who seek justice in the immigration process. Undocumented immigrants seeking legal status do not have the same legal right to representation as U.S. residents. As you may have seen, [children as young as 3 years old](#) have had to represent themselves in court, an indication of the failure of our legal system to adequately support people who are most vulnerable

Post-traumatic stress is another challenge; when someone is living in fight, flight or freeze mode, it can be very difficult – even impossible – to share the details of their trauma history to complete strangers. The stress of this process is only compounded under the high stakes of these interviews. And yet, this is exactly what asylum seekers need to do apply for asylum. The requirements are no different for unaccompanied children. However, trauma can affect a person's memory and can cause intense fear and anxiety so that speaking about what happened in the past in a coherent manner can be nearly impossible. Ironically, the very reason for someone's escape from violence may be the thing that prevents them from winning their asylum case.

It's these factors - difficulty recounting traumatic experiences, language barriers, variance in court asylum grant rates, etc. - that cause 80% of Mexican and Central American asylum seekers to be denied asylum. Unfortunately, despite the fact that someone is telling the truth, these barriers are often the determining factors in the outcome of a case.

Why does PTR focus on providing mental health care? Aren't needs such as housing and job training a higher priority?

Healing trauma is **fundamental** to people's ability to get their basic needs met. First, many asylum seekers live in an anxiety provoking situation of not knowing whether they will be able to stay in the U.S. and rebuild their lives, or whether they will be sent back to their country of origin where they

may very likely [face their deaths](#). During this time, they may have access to legal representation for their case, but very often, may struggle to recount the details of their trauma or the threats they faced. Connecting with a mental health provider can help. For example, when someone is persecuted for their sexual orientation, they have often been silenced for many years - the very act of speaking about their sexual orientation can cause tremendous fear and panic. By working with a mental health provider, the asylum seeker can learn tools and be able to process their fears and pain, so they can more effectively share their story in court.

Even when a person has obtained refugee status, the impacts of unaddressed trauma can prevent them from effectively obtaining or maintaining a job, learning English, concentrating in school and effectively parenting their children. Because unaddressed trauma can cause severe anxiety, deep depression and post-traumatic stress, it can significantly affect a person's ability to succeed without support. For example, an asylum seeker may have a college or graduate degree, but being able to concentrate on even simple tasks may be difficult when living with flashbacks or intrusive memories of past trauma, or surviving on little sleep due to nightmares and anxiety.

Mental health care for forcibly displaced people is not only fundamental, but needs to be provided early. A 2015 study of torture survivors in northern California further found that—even when accounting for pre- and post-migration factors, including types of torture, immigration status, sociodemographic status, housing status and more—the most important factor associated with probable PTSD and depression was the length of time between arrival in the U.S. and the provision of clinical mental health services. When survivors received mental health care one year or more after resettlement, they were more likely to suffer from PTSD and depression than those who received care within the first year after arrival.

In addition to providing mental health care, PTR also works with over 30 legal, job training, medical, and other social service providers to meet a broad array of clients' needs. We recognize that these needs are also high priorities, and see mental health care as a fundamental component of a larger nexus of care, and one which can deepen and complement the impact of other types of services. Mental health care, combined with case management, can assist asylum seekers and refugees in building a solid new foundation in the wake of violence and persecution.

Are people really fleeing violence, or are they just interested in taking American jobs?

When people migrate to a new country, they give up connections to family, community and culture. A parent doesn't leave their child thousands of miles away unless it's a matter of survival. This could be fleeing violence or feeding one's children. Central Americans make a dangerous 2000-mile journey to the U.S. border, while people from other regions of the world, such as Africa or South Asia, can take months or years to get here, often ending up in [abusive human rights conditions](#) in privately controlled detention centers. People often leave their homes because leaving is key to survival, whether they are escaping [civil war](#), or [gang violence](#). Our [neighboring regions of Latin America and the Caribbean](#), which make up only 8% of the world's population, account for 38% of the world's murders due to a century of civil wars, military dictatorships and the ongoing impacts of guns, impunity and corruption.

But fleeing the violence is only the first step. Asylum seekers must then undergo [a complex, rigorous process](#) to prove their case within the U.S. legal system through either an affirmative or defensive asylum process. And because deportation is considered a civil, not a criminal proceeding, unlike defendants within the U.S. criminal justice system, immigrants in the defensive asylum process do

not have the right to an attorney. This severely reduces their chances of winning asylum due to a variety of barriers including language, cost of attorney representation and the complexities of the legal system. For those who have been detained, often in difficult-to-reach rural detention centers, access to legal representation is even more challenging. During this process - which can last from anywhere between 6 months to several years - asylum seekers exist in limbo, not knowing if they can move forward with rebuilding their lives in their new host country, or whether they will be sent back to their countries of origin, where they risk being targeted and killed by the very forces from which they fled.

And while we should welcome those who flee violence and oppression because we have the capacity to do so, refugees who are given the opportunity to resettle in the U.S. make enormous social and economic contributions. In 2015, businesses run by refugees generated [\\$4.6 billion in business income](#). While refugees receive short-term support upon arrival, their median household income more than triples in the decades after their first five years in the nation. In 2015, refugees also paid \$20.9 billion in taxes. For those who have been in the country at least 25 years, the median household income is \$67,000 – more than \$14,000 above the median household income for the general U.S. population. In other words, refugees and other newcomers are often creating new jobs and new growth that wouldn't have otherwise existed.

Why should we take care of people from other countries when we have our own problems here?

We live in an increasingly interconnected world, in which national security is encompassing of a broad array of strategies, in addition to those focused on military-based defense. The immigration flows that we are seeing today in the U.S. and around the world are the downstream effects of policies which have caused widespread destabilization. The violence and poverty that exists in our neighboring countries has a variety of roots, including those connected to past U.S. intervention. Often, rather than supporting stable democracies, the U.S. has [undermined democracy and economic development](#) in Central America and elsewhere. It is time to start connecting the dots between security, foreign policy, and immigration.

No matter how big a wall we build, if we fail to address the factors that push people to migrate – and if people are literally fleeing for their lives – people will continue to need to escape. To create a safer world, we should be supporting peace and economic development in our neighboring countries and supporting the courageous community activists who risk their lives every single day to [challenge gangs and violence](#) on the ground. Today, we have an opportunity to alter the course of U.S. immigration policy towards compassion and longer-term thinking. To do so, we need to take a look at our past and current foreign policy and ensure that we correct the mistakes of our past, so we don't make them again.



Healing the psychosocial impacts of human rights abuses for a more peaceful tomorrow

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