

Deciding the Refugee Cap

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The number of refugees resettled in the US every year, also known as the refugee cap, is decided by the President. The United Nations works to resettle the most vulnerable 1% of refugees in safe countries, with more than half of that number annually coming to the United States.

Arguments for resettling fewer refugees:

1. **Cost to the public:** Refugees represent a significant upfront cost, which the US could instead invest in schooling, healthcare, or housing for citizens, which would likely pay dividends. However, the upfront cost of resettling refugees in the US is offset over time by their tax contributions.
2. **Crime:** Some Americans have concerns that refugees are susceptible to radicalization. However, the US has resettled more than 3 million refugees without a single terrorist attack. Refugees undergo a rigorous, years-long background check to ensure that no one with links to terrorist organizations or who has committed crimes are resettled in the US. There are also concerns that refugees might perpetrate other types of crimes. Of the 10 US cities who resettled the most refugees (2006-2015), 9 experienced a decrease in violent and property-related crime during that time which was more significant than the decrease in the rest of the country.
3. **Loss of “American culture”:** Some are concerned that immigration and changing demographics diminish “American culture” (i.e. ethnic whiteness, the English language, Christianity, and respect for Constitutional ideals). Although refugees make up about 5-10% of permanent immigrants to the US, they are often made the face of America’s demographic changes. For the last several decades, refugees have been primarily non-white and have not spoken English as their first language. However, a plurality of refugees in the US are Christian.

First 20 years in the US
Average cost: -\$107,365
Average taxes paid: +\$128,689
Net contribution: +\$21,324

Arguments for resettling more refugees:

1. **Maintaining population growth:** Immigration is essential to maintain economic growth in the US. The 2010 decade experienced the lowest population growth since the first recorded census in 1790, leading to projections of low economic growth in the coming decades. Immigration boosts America’s declining population and relieves the pressure on the labor force of supporting retirees.
2. **Urban rejuvenation:** Many cities in the Midwest and Great Lakes regions have experienced economic and population declines in the 20th century, and resettlement is a successful method of urban rejuvenation. Cities like Utica, NY and St. Louis, MO accepted thousands of refugees to stimulate the economy and reverse population decline. Declining industry and population have characterized the region and resettlement is a proven and effective countermeasure.
3. **Nation of immigrants:** Since the founding of the country, the United States has stood as a beacon of freedom and opportunity, and attracted people from around the world in search of a better life. While many countries define themselves in terms of a religion or ethnicity, the American national identity is often connected to the shared experience of immigration. Because of this, the US has traditionally set a goal of resettling 0.5% of the global refugee population annually, but the 2019 cap was set at just 0.1%—the lowest in US history. In addition, the American example leads other countries; the US can be a model for generous resettlement policies or provide justification for other countries to close their borders.