

The Refugee Resettlement Cap.... A Checkered History

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On May 3, 2021, President Biden increased the Refugee Resettlement “Cap” (the maximum number of refugees that might legally enter the US during the fiscal year) to 62,500 from the historic low of 15,000 set for 2021 by the prior administration. Despite Biden’s campaign promise to allow much more liberal immigration, he initially left the 2021 Cap at 15,000. Public outcry and Congressional pressure prompted the increase to 62,500.

The United States is a country founded, settled and developed by immigrants; a haven for the poor and dispossessed. Yet, the unfortunate truth is that for most of its history, America’s borders have been closed to those labeled as undesirable, unfit, or unlikely to be easily assimilated: Chinese at the end of the 19th Century; Irish, Italians, other Catholics, and “Southern Europeans” in the early 20th Century; Jews and “Eastern Europeans,” many of whom would perish in the Holocaust, in the years prior to and during World War II. It was after that war that the U.S. adopted the U.N. Refugee Protocol, accepting some of the millions of displaced persons from camps in Europe.

The U.S. Refugee Act of 1980 established the Cap. It allowed acceptance of up to 240,000 immigrants in its first years of enactment. Preference was given to Vietnamese, Cubans, and Eastern Europeans fleeing Communist countries, while Haitians, Spanish-speakers from Central and South America, and Caribbean Islanders were denied easy access. Sharp reductions in the Cap occurred progressively through the end of the 20th Century, however. In the 21st Century, until 2016, the Cap was set at 80,000, with an emphasis on accepting refugees from the Middle East (Syria and Iraq), and subsequently from Afghanistan. During the Trump administration, however, the Cap was further reduced. Coupled with travel bans focused on primarily Muslim countries, the most recent Cap reductions resulted in an almost total restriction of legal immigration, with particularly adverse impact on those from the countries in which the U.S. has been at war since 2011.

As a result of these 2017 - 2020 Cap reductions, the U.S. is on target to accept fewer than 10,000 refugees this year. This is less than one-tenth of the number of potential refugees who have already been vetted and approved for immigration. In addition, the announced withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan by this September has created another large group of potential refugees who are at great risk and in desperate need of U.S. support. It is estimated that there are more than 18,000 SIV-eligible individuals (plus their families). Together these groups far exceed the proposed “Cap” of 62,500, which itself is far below the 125,000 promised by the President during his election campaign.

You can help raise the Cap issue by contacting your Congressional Representative and urging her/him to support H.R. 2237 [The GRACE \(Guaranteed Refugee Admission Ceiling Enhancement\) Act](#). This bill sets 125,000 as the minimum number of refugees to be admitted each fiscal year; and enables the President to set a higher target number if it is justified by humanitarian concerns or is deemed to be in the national interest. HIAS also has information about what [action](#) you can take to encourage adoption of the GRACE Act.

You can get involved with other actions by working through any of the three major refugee resettlement agencies. To get involved contact:

- [International Rescue Committee](https://www.rescue.org/take-action) (rescue.org/take-action)

- [HIAS](https://www.hias.org/what/us-policies) (HIAS.org/what/us-policies)
- [Catholic Charities](https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org) (catholiccharitiesusa.org)