Refugee Capacity in Context: A History of Recent Resettlement Numbers in the US

Introduction

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Notable Years

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1992
While the first two years of the new program saw extremely high numbers of refugees admitted – primarily to address the backlog of claims – the overall levels of those approved for resettlement gradually declined until the 1990s. Between 1990 and 1994 the highest numbers of refugees since the inception of the modern program were authorized, with 1993 as the third highest in admissions since 1980 and 1981. The rise was primarily in response to the upheavals in Eastern and Central Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union and in particular the wars in the Balkans after the breakup of Yugoslavia.

1980
The Refugee Resettlement Act was passed in the final months of the Carter administration, establishing a standardized program for resettlement. The Refugee Act provided the legal basis and framework for today’s US Refugee Admissions Program, a public-private-partnership between resettlement agencies and the federal government. Under this system, the office of the President in consultation with Congress sets targets for the maximum number of refugees who can be accepted during any fiscal year and what regions they will be admitted from.

2001
Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 all forms of US immigration came under extra scrutiny. The refugee resettlement program was frozen for two months, and new measures were taken to heighten security and increase the vetting process for refugees entering the country. It is important to recognize that the actual numbers authorized during this year was well in line with annual averages (approximately 70,000). However, less than 30,000 refugees were actually admitted to the US following the attacks.

2017
The Obama administration planned a ceiling of 110,000 refugees authorized for admission—largely in response to the Syrian refugee crisis—which would have been the highest since 1996. However, under Executive Order 13780, the Trump administration reduced the capacity down to 50,000, the lowest sanctioned admissions in the history of the program—until the present fiscal year when even fewer were authorized for entry.
Refugee Act of 1980

In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, Cambodians and other Southeast Asians were accepted into the country through direct presidential action between 1975 and 1979 (Miyares, 1998; Hein, 2006). Recognizing the need for a more standardized system instead of the ad-hoc manner in which refugee resettlement had functioned since the end of WWII — especially since the US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975 — Congress unanimously passed the Refugee Act of 1980, with President Carter signing it into law in early 1980. Between 1975-1979, an ad-hoc Refugee Task Force worked to try and assist the hundreds of thousands attempting to flee Southeast Asia and this legislation was designed to regularize resettlement (Pho, Gerson and Cowan, 2007). The Act amended the Immigration and Nationality Act and the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, and expanded asylum to all those fleeing their homes under ‘a well-founded fear and persecution’ as standardized by the 1951 UN Geneva Convention (Bettis and Loescher, 2011). The system developed as a result of this legislation – the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) – was a public-private partnership, with the federal government primarily responsible for choosing and vetting prospective refugees and its partner resettlement agencies – a collection of faith-based, ethnic, and humanitarian organizations — tasked with helping newcomers make the transition to life in the US (Mott, 2010). The large-scale resettlements of this period up to and including 1980 reflected what has arguably always been as central to US refugee policy as any humanitarian motive — geopolitical considerations (Haines, 2010).

Number of Refugees Admitted (FY80-83)

(Migration Policy Institute, 2017)

By President Reagan’s second year of setting the annual ceiling (fiscal year 1983), admissions were already down to roughly 30% of what they were for 1980.

1970s-80s

The US Refugee Admissions Program and Historical Refugee Capacity

Shifting Motives

This is not to say that there were no altruistic motives behind US resettlement during this period. The protection of human rights and responding to atrocities overseas strongly influenced public opinion in support of resettlement. Yet one might argue that a humanitarian agenda motivating refugee policy in the US was primarily driven by private actors — faith groups and ethnic communities — rather than by the US government, whose main goals were pursuing foreign policy objectives of destabilizing its international rivals and not antagonizing various allies and client states (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014). This focus on US foreign policy interests became increasingly clear during the Reagan administration as the scope of who the US would allow — and in what numbers — began to narrow (RPC, 2018). Indeed, even though the number of refugees worldwide grew by nearly 400% between 1975 and 1985, the US’s annual ceiling steadily decreased until 1986, when it was capped at 67,000 (RPC, 2018). For the Reagan administration, third party resettlement to the US was not the ultimate goal in addressing displacement overseas. Instead, it repeatedly argued that resettlement was the least desirable option, and instead advocated for repatriation in the home country and resettlement within the sending region as the better courses of action (Bloemraad, 2006).

Of those who were granted refugee status in the US, admissions heavily favored those fleeing Communist countries, such as Cuba, the Soviet Union and other countries of the Soviet bloc. At the same time, many forced migrants within the US regional sphere of influence – such as those from US-allied regimes in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras and other conflicts in Central and South America — had little chance of being granted status in the US, and were instead labeled as economic migrants rather than as refugees or asylees. President Reagan also launched the so-called Private Sector Initiative during his second term, which brought a limited number of refugees (primarily Soviet Jews and Cubans) through private sponsorship — a total of approximately 16,000 during the eight years of the program (Bloemraad, 2006).
1990s
The US Refugee Admissions Program and Historical Refugee Capacity

The Balkan Wars
Several decades of the Cold War-stalemate had led to relatively little population movement in Europe, but the collapse of the Soviet Union caused massive upheavals throughout the region. The Lautenberg Amendment of 1989 admitted Jews from the former Soviet Union without their having to demonstrate specific persecution (Bruno, 2015). This law was later expanded to apply to other religious minorities worldwide and altogether contributed to the resettlement of hundreds of thousands. Additionally, the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent Balkan Wars resulted in a tremendous exodus of refugees from the area, with over 2.5 million people displaced in the region, the largest displacement in Europe at the time since WWII (Kandel, 2014).

US as a Global Leader
This led to significant third-party resettlement in other countries, including the US, which was to eventually resettle tens of thousands of refugees from the region. In 1993, the US approved the acceptance of 142,000 refugees – the highest number since the program’s first two years, even though the actual number admitted ended up being slightly higher in 1992 (RPC, 2018). Towards the end of the 1990s, a second spike in resettlement approvals occurred, due to the conflict in Serbia over the struggle for independence in Kosovo. By the end of the decade, Balkan region refugees comprised the largest groups admitted into the US, with admissions for African refugees also rising in response to the Rwandan genocide and other regional African conflicts (RPC, 2018).

Comparing the 80s & 90s
During this period, the US increased its position as a global leader in third-party resettlement, certainly in absolute numbers if not in terms of per capita acceptance of refugees. In the 1980s, annual admission ceilings averaged 116,170—this includes 1980-81 when the ceilings were greater than 200,000—while they averaged 110,400 throughout the 1990s. The actual number of refugees who were resettled in the US was slightly higher in the 1990s—1,009,885—compared to the 1980s—974,006 (RPC, 2018). However, while those admitted during the 1980s were clearly related to US foreign policy objectives and conflicts overseas, during the 1990s the US increasingly became a key player in the global refugee regime and addressing international conflicts in which it did not have as direct or as obvious a stake, in both short-term and protracted situations. This role became especially important as the number of displaced persons worldwide grew due to a number of conflicts as well as expanding definitions for protection throughout the 1990s.
Early 2000s & the Effects of 9/11

The shift in the US’s role and its direct relation to (some) refugee-producing conflicts meant that as the waves of displacement from the Balkans, former Soviet Union, and Southeast Asia began to wind down, the US resettlement program correspondingly began approving fewer refugees. This did not mean that there were fewer refugees in the world – as mentioned above there, continued to be many conflicts and expanding recognition of conditions for flight worldwide as the 2000s dawned (Betts and Loescher, 2011) – but rather than resettling large groups from just one or two countries, in the early 2000s, the USRAP began to adjust its scope by dividing the refugee intake amongst many smaller and more diverse cases. Refugees from nearly eighty countries were being resettled in the US, some in large numbers and others in much smaller groups, with resettlement capacity dropping from an average of 90,000 individuals a year in 1990 to 80,000 in 2000, and actual resettlements averaging closer to 70,000 per year in both decades (RPC, 2018). This led to a much more diverse refugee population and often considerable challenges in stretching resources across multiple locations and trying to address significantly different contexts—including languages, reasons for flight, security screenings, and integration capacities—for the various groups of refugees (Committee on Foreign Relations, 2010; GAO, 2012). By the beginning of 2001, African refugees surpassed Europeans as the largest forced migrant group being resettled in the US (RPC, 2018).

The combination of shifting priorities and the challenge of resettling newer (and more diverse) groups meant that the number of admissions had slowed by the early 2000s, but the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 resulted in wholesale changes to the program – and indeed immigration itself – across the US and much of the western world. Heightened screenings and the suspension of many visa programs—including a two-month freeze in the refugee resettlement program—meant a significant reduction in newcomers. Domestic fears that terrorist groups or dangerous individuals might exploit the USRAP to enter the US led to a close and lengthy review of vetting resulted in additional measures taken to heighten the security of the program and ensure the overall thoroughness of the admissions process. As a result, instead of the nearly 70,000 spaces for refugees originally allocated in 2002, just over 27,000 individuals were actually allowed into the country, the lowest on record since the passing of the Refugee Act of 1980 (RPC, 2018). The effects of 9/11 were felt around the world as global refugee acceptance numbers in third countries also fell sharply. Between 2001-2003, the USRAP was characterized by low resettlement numbers, reflecting these changes to the admissions process. Additionally, global instability in multiple regions meant that planned interviews were often put on hold and vetting of applicants in many places slowed significantly. By 2004, however, new screening mechanisms and the focus on different groups meant that admissions began to recover as they rose to above 50,000 for 2004-2005. As former US State Department official Arthur E Dewey, Assistant Secretary for Population, Refugees, and Migration stated in 2003, “9/11 may have given us reason to be more vigilant about those who may threaten us, but it has not diminished our commitment to aiding and protecting the world’s most vulnerable people” (Dewey, 2003).

Moving Forward

The USRAP slowly increased admissions over the next few years; by 2009 the number of refugees approved for resettlement reached 70,000 again for the first time since 2000 (RPC, 2018). The annual ceiling never fell below 70,000 during the Obama administration, and each of the final four years saw admissions within 100 persons of the ceiling. Admissions dipped in FY2011 and 2012, but asylum figures for those years were slightly higher than usual (RPC, 2018).

Between FY2012-FY2014 the USRAP was approving close to 75,000 refugees each year for admission to the US. In response to the Syrian civil war and resulting migration crisis – especially in the huge increase in asylum seekers from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe and other parts of the world – the Obama administration raised the annual ceiling in FY2016 to 85,000 (Presidential Determination 2016) and, unlike previous years, the actual number of refugees who arrived in the US came close to matching those approved. For FY2017, the Obama administration planned on an even greater expansion, with an approval ceiling of 110,000 refugees – somewhat closer to the numbers in the USRAP’s peak periods during the early 1980s and mid 1990s and the highest in over twenty years (Presidential Determination 2017). For the Obama administration, this was a question of both need – by 2015 there were over 45 million refugees and displaced persons worldwide – and of the US having the capacity to absorb more refugees. Others, however, did not agree with this assessment.
A National Debate

Refugee resettlement, which has always represented a fairly small part of the overall immigration landscape in the US, became especially politicized due to a number of reasons. European anxieties regarding an influx of migrants, growing Islamophobia and mass terrorist attacks carried out by Islamic extremists across the globe – often blamed on refugees and asylum seekers but carried out for the most part by native-born or immigrant (but not refugee) individuals and groups – led to a significant backlash against refugees worldwide. In the US, multiple state governors and a smaller number of cities announced in November 2015 (following the mass attacks in Paris) that they would no longer support refugee resettlement in their areas. The issue became a central feature of the Republican presidential primaries in 2015-2016, with eventual winning candidate Donald Trump taking a lead role in advocating against refugee resettlement, especially from Muslim-majority countries. In 2016, states like Texas and Maine officially withdrew from the USRAP, though refugees were still resettled in those states – especially Texas which has the largest share of refugee arrivals in the US (Kennedy, 2016). And following his election, the ascendance of Trump to the US presidency ushered in an era of uncertainty and anxiety for the USRAP.

Such fears, it seems, were not unfounded. In one of his first acts, President Trump instituted a ban on arrivals from several Muslim majority nations as well as an immediate suspension and review of the USRAP, all in the name of national security. While these so-called ‘travel bans’ were challenged successfully in court in the months to follow, the resettlement program in particular was deeply affected (Pierce and Meissner, 2017). Where the USRAP and the many government and non-profit agencies that comprise the program had planned on expanding in 2017, in practice what occurred was the opposite. The program ended up settling little more than 50,000 people – far less than half of what the Obama Administration had planned, and more in line with what the original travel ban had threatened. In fall 2017, when the USRAP approval numbers for F2018 were released, the total admissions had been slashed drastically, to a record low of 45,000 – by far the lowest since the inception of the program in 1980 (Presidential Determination 2018). This is at a time when refugee and forced migrants around the world are at an all-time high – more than at any point in the past century including World War II, with nearly 66 million persons forced to flee to a refugee camp in a neighboring country, housed in an internally displaced persons camp, seeking asylum, or granted refugee status in a third country (UNHCR, 2018).

It is also true that the threat of extremism has only grown in recent years. But are refugees or the USRAP to blame for any of this? There is no evidence that they are. Indeed, contrary to the assertions of some politicians that refugees are not properly ‘vetted’ or that we do not know who they are or what they believe, refugees are amongst the most heavily screened groups in the US. To be approved for resettlement in the US one must go through an average of 1000 days of screenings. Of the over three million refugees resettled since the program’s inception and nearly 900,000 since 9/11, only three have been convicted of terrorism-related charges, all of them for overseas activities (Newland, 2015). Additionally, the argument that refugee resettlement is a drain on other programs has little evidence backing it; most serious scholarly research would suggest on the contrary that there is a substantial net economic benefit to refugee resettlement in the US (Evans and Fitzgerald, 2017). Refugees have also been resettled in many places outside of the traditional metropolitan gateway cities of the US (Massey, 2008; Singer and Wilson, 2011). For many of these communities – often in the rustbelt or with declining or aging populations, refugees bring in much needed vitality, start new businesses, provide a more stable taxpayer base, and diversify schools and neighborhoods (Bose, 2016).

Images: Ariel Zambelich/NPR

Refugee Admissions Per 1,000 Residents in Host Country

(Newland, 2017)

While the US has played a historically significant role – especially in the past three decades – in global refugee resettlement, the trends set by the current administration move the country in the opposite direction. Where the US has at times accepted more than all other countries combined (though per capita the Scandinavian countries take more refugees), drastically cutting the program imperils the very delicate systems of protection that have emerged to help those in the greatest need. Moreover, by shrinking the USRAP and limiting the scope of its protections, the US undermines its own moral leadership in the area of human rights, as well as weakens its geopolitical importance with allies and neighbors.


