



FY2021 Refugee Ceiling and Allocations

November 3, 2020

On October 28, 2020, President Donald Trump issued the [Presidential Determination](#) setting the FY2021 refugee ceiling at 15,000. The refugee ceiling is the maximum number of refugees that can be admitted to the United States in a given fiscal year. The Presidential Determination is typically issued before the start, or in the first week, of a new fiscal year. Refugees cannot be admitted to the United States until the Presidential Determination for that fiscal year has been issued. From October 1, 2020, until the issuance of the FY2021 Presidential Determination, no refugees could be admitted to the United States.

The FY2021 refugee ceiling is the lowest in the 40-year history of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). The Trump Administration has reduced the refugee ceiling each year, setting it at [45,000](#) for FY2018, [30,000](#) for FY2019, and [18,000](#) for FY2020. These ceilings are much lower than in previous years. [Actual refugee admissions](#) in FY2020, which were negatively impacted by the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, totaled 11,814.

The [refugee provisions](#) in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) allow for the admission of a refugee who is “of special humanitarian concern to the United States” and satisfies other criteria. The [INA defines a refugee](#), in main part, as “any person who is outside any country of such person’s nationality ... and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.” The Department of State’s (DOS’s) [Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration](#) (PRM) coordinates and manages USRAP. The Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS’s) [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services](#) (USCIS) adjudicates refugee cases.

The INA authorizes the President to set the annual refugee ceiling after “[appropriate consultation](#)” between Administration officials and members of the House Judiciary Committee and the Senate Judiciary Committee. As part of the annual consultation process, the INA requires the President to report to the committees on the “foreseeable number of refugees who will be in need of resettlement” and the “anticipated allocation of refugee admissions.” The Administration is further required to provide “a description of the number and allocation of refugees to be admitted,” among other specified information. DOS, DHS, and the Department of Health and Human Services jointly issue an annual report to fulfill these requirements.

The Administration’s report on [Proposed Refugee Admissions for FY2021](#) explains the decision to set the refugee ceiling at 15,000 by [referencing](#) the separate asylum system and the COVID-19 pandemic: “This

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proposed refugee admissions ceiling reflects the continuing backlog of over 1.1 million asylum-seekers who are awaiting adjudication of their claims inside the United States, and it accounts for the arrival of refugees whose resettlement in the United States was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Regarding the impact of the pandemic, the report [states](#)

Due to travel restrictions in and out of refugee processing sites worldwide, USRAP suspended refugee arrivals from March 19 to July 29, 2020 except for emergency cases. USRAP resumed general refugee arrivals July 30, 2020 with additional health measures specified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). However, reduced flight availability due to the general decrease in demand for international travel meant a slow pace of refugee resettlement in the United States through the rest of FY 2020.

Prior to FY2020, the annual Presidential Determination provided a worldwide refugee ceiling and regional allocations. For example, the [FY2019 Presidential Determination](#) set a worldwide refugee ceiling of 30,000 and the following regional allocations: Africa (11,000), East Asia (4,000), Europe and Central Asia (3,000), Latin America/Caribbean (3,000), and Near East/South Asia (9,000).

The [FY2021 Presidential Determination](#) sets a worldwide refugee ceiling (of 15,000). Like the [FY2020 Presidential Determination](#), it does not allocate the ceiling by region. Instead, it sets allocations by “population of special humanitarian concern” (see [Table 1](#)).

Table 1. Allocation of Refugee Admissions for FY2021

Population of Special Humanitarian Concern	Allocation
Refugees who have been persecuted or have a well-founded fear of persecution based on religion. This includes refugees eligible for U.S. resettlement under the Lautenberg and Specter Amendments, which apply to certain religious minorities who are or were nationals of an independent state of the former Soviet Union, one of the Baltic states, or Iran.	5,000
Iraqi refugees with certain U.S. ties.	4,000
Refugees who are nationals or habitual residents of El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras.	1,000
Other refugees in the following groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refugees who are referred to USRAP by a U.S. embassy in any location. Refugees who qualify for family reunification access to USRAP or who are beneficiaries of following-to-join petitions filed by refugee family members in the United States. Refugees in Australia, Nauru, or Papua New Guinea who are referred to USRAP under an arrangement between the United States and Australia. Refugees who are nationals or habitual residents of Hong Kong, Venezuela, or Cuba. Refugees who were approved for U.S. resettlement and ready to travel to the United States as of September 30, 2019. 	5,000
Total	15,000

Source: White House, *Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2021*.

The FY2021 allocation categories are similar to the [FY2020 categories](#). Both years include allocations for the first three categories in [Table 1](#) (i.e., cases involving religious persecution, Iraqis, and persons from Central America’s Northern Triangle). There are differences between the FY2020 and FY2021 Presidential Determinations in the “other refugees” category. For example, the FY2020 “other refugees”

category did not include refugees from Hong Kong, Venezuela, or Cuba. For FY2020, the “other refugees” category had both the [largest allocation](#) (7,500) and the greatest number of [actual admissions](#) (6,091).

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