



Four decades of presidential leadership on refugee protection, until now

President's Day 2020

For four decades, U.S. presidents have strengthened America's humanitarian tradition of welcoming refugees. Today, that legacy is in jeopardy. At a time when public support for welcoming refugees is surging and global resettlement needs far surpass available slots, it is imperative that the U.S. return refugee resettlement to historic levels.

Presidents have long understood that resettlement not only saves lives; it is also good for America. For nearly half a century, the U.S. has offered safe haven to people fleeing persecution and violence around the world through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. At home, refugees revitalize cities and fill critical labor market gaps in rural communities.¹ Abroad, refugee resettlement offers concrete support to critical allies who are hosting the vast majority of the world's refugees.²

Today, American support for refugee resettlement has never been higher. Recent public opinion polling by Pew confirms the commitment to welcoming refugees we see in communities across the country: 73 percent of Americans believe taking in refugees escaping war and violence is an important goal, an increase from 61 percent in 2016.³ This shift was driven in large part by a surge in support among Republicans, the majority of whom—58 percent—support U.S. refugee resettlement, up 18 percent from 2016.

Despite the immense global need and resounding public support for refugee resettlement, the Trump administration is not only underutilizing this program—it is dismantling it. Measures like slashing the annual refugee admission ceiling to unprecedented lows and shutting the door on those facing the biggest threats are moving the resettlement program further and further from the system established by the bipartisan 1980 Refugee Act, which established a regular and predictable process for refugee admissions.

Strong bipartisan record on refugee admissions

HIGHEST ANNUAL ADMISSIONS CEILINGS BY ADMINISTRATION

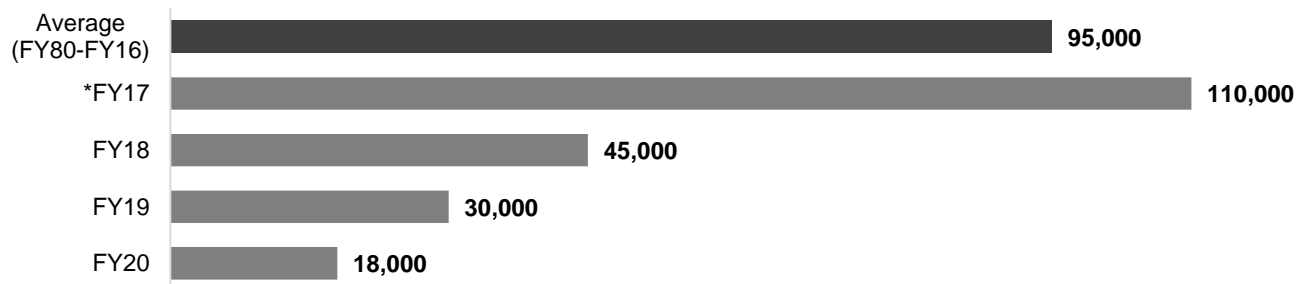
Jimmy Carter	231,700
Ronald Reagan	140,000
George H. W. Bush	142,000
Bill Clinton	121,000
George W. Bush	80,000
Barack Obama	110,000
Donald Trump	45,000

Current ceiling: 18,000

Congress must act. Cosponsor the GRACE Act today.

The Guaranteed Refugee Admissions Ceiling Enhancement Act—known as the GRACE Act—will ensure that the U.S. aims to welcome at least 95,000 refugees annually. Just as Congress established the refugee admissions program in 1980 to ensure that annual resettlement was in line with global needs and U.S. interests, Congress must once again step in to restore refugee admissions to historic levels. In doing so, the GRACE Act would preserve and strengthen our capacity to continue the bipartisan tradition of welcoming refugees.

Recent refugee admissions ceilings vs. historic average ceiling



* President Trump reduced the FY 2017 admissions ceiling from 110,00 to 50,000 upon taking office in January 2017.

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While the timeline below is not exhaustive, it illustrates the bipartisan commitment to welcoming refugees, and the critical decisions presidents on both sides of the aisle have made to respond to humanitarian crises and further U.S. interests. They have used all the tools at their disposal, including increasing the annual refugee admissions ceiling or adjusting the ceilings' regional allocations in response to needs. These decisions helped save lives.



Jimmy Carter (1977 – 1981)

Highest admissions ceiling: **231,700**

1980

After the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the U.S. resettles hundreds of thousands of displaced Vietnamese refugees.⁴ To standardize this largescale humanitarian initiative, President Carter signs the **Refugee Act of 1980** into law, with near unanimous bipartisan support, creating the refugee resettlement program we have today.⁵ With its enactment, the U.S. adopts the United Nation's official definition of a refugee and transitions resettlement to a needs-based system.



Ronald Reagan (1981 – 1989)

Highest admissions ceiling: **140,000**

1982

President Reagan sets the refugee admissions ceiling at 140,000 refugees and allocates **96,000 resettlement slots** within that ceiling for Indochinese refugees fleeing violence in Southeast Asia.⁶

1988

The Reagan administration raises the regional allocation for Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union from 15,000 to **30,000 refugees** to respond to an unexpected increase in refugees from Armenia.⁷



George H. W. Bush (1989 – 1993)

Highest admissions ceiling: **142,000**

1989

President Bush **raises the FY 1989 refugee admissions ceiling to 116,500** due to increased need for admissions from Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.⁸ **Nearly 40,000 refugees** from the region will arrive that fiscal year.⁹

1990

In FY 1990, the Bush administration increases the admissions ceiling to 125,000 refugees and admits **nearly 5,000 Cuban refugees**, the highest total in a decade. This continues the thirty-year legacy of providing humanitarian relief to Cuban exiles: from 1959 through 1990, **more than 800,000¹⁰ Cuban refugees** will be resettled to the U.S.¹¹

1992

In response to emerging needs from the Bosnian War, the Bush administration sets the FY 1992 and 1993 admissions ceilings at 131,000 and 142,000 respectively.¹² More than **100,000 Bosnian refugees** who fled ethnic cleansing will arrive to the U.S. over the next decade.¹³



Bill Clinton (1993 – 2001)

Highest admissions ceiling: **121,000**

1999

Just a few years after the Bosnian refugee crisis, the former Soviet Union experiences yet another largescale refugee crisis with 600,000 Kosovars fleeing their country and 400,000 more internally displaced during the Kosovo War. The Clinton administration makes **20,000 resettlement slots** available to this group as part of the FY 1999 admissions ceiling of 91,000 refugees.¹⁴

Also in 1999, the Clinton administration announces resettlement slots for **nearly 4,000 young Sudanese refugees** living in refugee camps in Kenya.¹⁵ Known as the "Lost Boys," these young adults and children were separated from their parents in the chaos of the South Sudanese Civil War and fled on foot to the safety of neighboring countries.¹⁶



George W. Bush (2001 – 2009)

Highest admissions ceiling: **80,000**

2001

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, President Bush initiates a security review of U.S. immigration programs, including the refugee resettlement program, while also setting a robust refugee admissions ceiling of **70,000 refugees in FY 2002** in demonstration of America's continued support for refugee welcome.¹⁷

2003

The Bush administration begins the resettlement of approximately **12,000 Bantu refugees**, a persecuted minority in Somalia that has spent most of the previous decade living in refugee camps along the Somali-Kenyan border.¹⁸



Barack Obama (2009 – 2017)

Highest admissions ceiling: **110,000**

2014

60,000 unaccompanied children from Central America cross the U.S.-Mexico border in the summer of 2014.¹⁹ In response, President Obama establishes the **Central American Minors program** allowing parents in the U.S. the opportunity to bring their children facing danger in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to America.²⁰

2015

When violence and ethnic cleansing in Myanmar forces **700,000 of the country's Rohingya ethnic minority** to flee, the Obama administration increases admissions of this group **from just under 700 in FY 2014 to nearly 5,000 over the following two fiscal years.**²¹

President Obama increases the FY 2017 refugee admissions ceiling to **110,000 refugees** from 85,000 in FY 2016 in response to the Syrian refugee crisis, which **displaced more than half of the Syrian population** in 2016.²²



Donald Trump (2017 – present)

Highest admissions ceiling: **45,000**

2017

President Trump **decreases the annual U.S. refugee admissions ceilings to unprecedented lows** year after year. In FY 2017, Trump decreases President Obama's FY 2017 ceiling from 110,000 to 50,000 via executive order, and continues to set historically low ceilings: 45,000 in FY 2018, 30,000 in FY 2019, and 18,000 in FY 2020.

As a result, refugee admissions fall by two thirds from FY 2016 to FY 2019 despite over 1.4 million refugees in need of resettlement. In the U.S., **over 100 resettlement offices close their doors**, impacting countless other protected populations, including Afghans and Iraqis who served alongside U.S. troops.²³

2019

Despite there being an estimated 600,000 Syrian refugees in need of resettlement in 2019—more than any other nationality—the Trump administration **cuts admissions of Syrian refugees by 96% since taking office**, from over 12,000 in FY 2016 to under 600 in FY 2019.²⁴

President Trump signs Executive Order 13888, allowing states and localities **to ban the resettlement of refugees** in their jurisdictions, despite the 1980 Refugee Act already requiring that federal agencies consult regularly with state and local stakeholders about the refugee placement process.²⁵ In a demonstration of the longstanding bipartisan support for the program across the country, **43 governors, including 19 Republicans, and over 100 localities issued consent** before the implementation of the Order was halted in the courts.²⁶

The Trump administration removes regional allocations for refugee admissions, **eliminating the needs-based component of the refugee program**, in favor of four new allocations based on groups of special interest to the United States.²⁷ These new priority categories, combined with the historically low refugee admissions ceiling, will result in thousands of the world's most vulnerable refugees left behind.

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