

Fiscal Year 2020 Refugees and Asylees Annual Flow Report

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OFFICE OF IMMIGRATION STATISTICS

Ryan Baugh



Homeland Security

The United States provides protection to certain persons who have been persecuted or have a well-founded fear of persecution through two programs: a refugee program for persons outside the United States and their eligible relatives, and an asylum program for persons physically present or arriving in the United States and their eligible relatives.¹ The *2020 Refugee and Asylees Annual Flow Report*, authored by the Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), presents information on persons admitted to the United States as refugees, those who applied for asylum in the United States, and those granted asylum in the United States in Fiscal Year (FY) 2020.^{2,3}

Summary

A total of 11,840 persons were admitted to the United States as refugees during 2020, including 5,142 as principal refugees and 6,698 as derivative refugees.⁴ The leading countries of nationality for refugees admitted during this period were the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Congo), Burma, and Ukraine. The United States provided protection to an additional 31,429 individuals who were granted affirmative or defensive asylum during 2020,⁵ including 16,864 individuals who were granted asylum affirmatively by DHS,⁶ and 14,565 individuals who were granted asylum defensively by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). An additional 1,530 individuals received derivative asylum or refugee status while residing in the United States based on a relative's refugee or asylum grant,⁷ and 2,528 individuals who approved for derivative asylum abroad and were issued travel documents that allow their travel to the United States.⁸ The leading countries of nationality for persons granted either affirmative or defensive asylum were the People's Republic of China (China), Venezuela, and El Salvador.

¹ Additionally, U.S. law bars removing individuals to a country where their "life or freedom would be threatened ... because of the alien's race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion." INA § 241(b)(3)(A); 8 U.S.C. 1231(b)(3)(A). This is known as statutory withholding of removal. See 8 CFR § 208.16(a)-(b). Pursuant to the Convention Against Torture, the United States is obligated to provide protection to individuals where there are substantial grounds to believe they would be in danger of being subjected to torture. Individuals may seek withholding or deferral of removal under the regulations implementing the Convention Against Torture. See 8 CFR §§ 208.13(c)(1), 208.16, 208.17.

² In this report, a year refers to a fiscal year (October 1 to September 30).

³ The *2020 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* and other OIS reports contain additional context. Not all numbers reported are contained in this report's tables.

⁴ Refugee data in this report may differ slightly from numbers reported by the Department of State (DOS). DOS refugee numbers include Amerasians (children born in Cambodia, Korea, Laos, Thailand, or Vietnam after December 31, 1950, and before October 22, 1982, and fathered by a U.S. citizen), whereas DHS reports Amerasians as lawful permanent residents.

⁵ These asylum grants were based upon a principal asylum applicant's application, which may also include an accompanying spouse and unmarried children under 21 years of age. They do not include individuals who were approved for follow-to-join asylum status while residing in the United States or abroad.

⁶ Affirmative asylum data for fiscal year 2020 were retrieved by OIS in December 2020. Data in this report may differ slightly from fiscal year-end 2020 numbers retrieved and reported at different times by DHS's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Asylum Division.

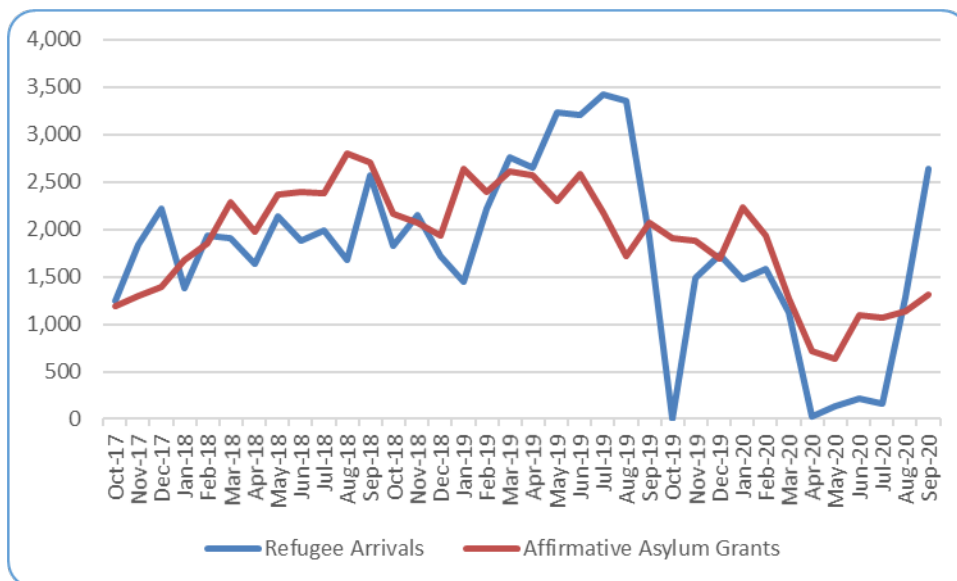
⁷ Of these, 1,490 were based on a relative's asylum grant, and 40 were based on a relative's refugee grant.

⁸ OIS does not currently collect data on how many of those issued travel documents reach the United States and actually receive asylum.

2020 Applications Processing and Admissions Disruptions

President Trump did not sign the Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions until November 2019, so no refugees at all could be admitted in October 2019, the first month of the new Fiscal Year. Refugee admissions and asylum applications and grants in 2020 were also affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and policy changes related to attempts to limit its spread, including travel restrictions and temporary closures of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) offices to in-person services to the public. USCIS field and asylum offices were closed to the public from March 18 through June 3, 2020 and reopened to the public in phases starting June 4, 2020 during which time asylum offices instituted in-office video conferencing interviews. Thus, refugee admissions dropped 98 percent between February and April 2020 and remained at historic lows through July before rebounding to levels similar to those observed in 2019 in the last two months of the fiscal year; and affirmative asylum grants fell 63 percent between February and April 2020 and then remained near historic lows through the end of the fiscal year (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Refugee Arrivals and Affirmative Asylum Grants by Month:
Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020



Source: OIS analysis of DOS and DOJ data.

DEFINING “REFUGEE” AND “ASYLUM” STATUS

To be eligible for refugee or asylum status, a principal applicant must meet the definition of a refugee set forth in section 101(a)(42) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), which states in part that a refugee is a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality 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.⁹ Applicants for refugee status are outside the United States, whereas applicants seeking asylum are either within the United States or arriving at a U.S. port of entry (POE).

The INA also generally requires that a person must be outside their country of nationality or country of last habitual residence to qualify as a refugee unless the person has no nationality or is considered “stateless”; but it grants the President authority to designate countries for “in-country processing,” allowing people to be processed for refugee status within their own countries. On November 1, 2019, President Trump re-designated eligible persons in Cuba, Eurasia, the Baltics, Iraq, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador for in-country processing. In-country processing is also authorized for extraordinary individual protection cases for which resettlement consideration is requested by a U.S. Ambassador in any location.

REFUGEES

History of U.S. Refugee Resettlement

The United States has a long history of refugee resettlement. The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 was passed to address the migration crisis in Europe resulting from World War II, wherein millions of people had been forcibly displaced from their home countries and could not return. By 1952, the United States had admitted over 400,000 displaced people under the Act. The United States extended its commitments to refugee resettlement through legislation including the Refugee Relief Act of 1953 and the Fair Share Refugee Act of 1960. The Attorney General has also exercised parole authority to bring large groups of persons into the country for humanitarian reasons, including over 38,000 Hungarian nationals beginning in 1956 and over a million people from the Indochinese Peninsula beginning in 1975.

Obligations of the United States under the 1967 United Nations Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (to which the United States acceded in 1968) generally prohibit the United States from returning a refugee to a country where their life or freedom would be threatened on account of a protected ground. The Refugee Act of 1980 amended the INA to bring U.S. law into greater accord with U.S. obligations under the Protocol, which broadened the scope of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees beyond protection just for refugees arising from events occurring in Europe before January 1, 1951. The Act also established formal refugee and asylum programs.

Refugee Admissions Ceiling

Under the INA, the President establishes an overall refugee admissions ceiling and has typically set regional allocations before the beginning of each fiscal year following “appropriate

⁹ Congress expanded this definition in the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, providing that persons who have been forced to abort a pregnancy or undergo involuntary sterilization or who have been persecuted for failure or refusal to undergo such a procedure or for other resistance to a coercive population control program shall be deemed to have been persecuted on account of political opinion.

consultation” with Congress.¹⁰ In 2020, the refugee ceiling was set at 18,000—its lowest level since the inception of the program in 1980. Additionally, the President did not sign the Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions until November 2019, so no refugees could be admitted in the first month of the new Fiscal Year.

Refugee admissions ceilings in 2020 were based on six admission categories rather than world geographic regional allotments as in previous years (Table 1). Admissions were available to those persecuted or with a well-founded fear of persecution on account of religion; certain religious minorities in the former Soviet Union and Iran; certain Iraqis associated with the United States; nationals or residents of El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras; those referred by a U.S. embassy; those seeking reunification with family members in the United States admitted as refugees or granted asylum status; and those located in Australia, Nauru, or Papua New Guinea granted admission pursuant to an arrangement between the United States and Australia.

Table 1.
Proposed and Actual Refugee Admissions by Regions: Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020

Region	2018		2019		2020	
	Ceiling	Admissions	Ceiling	Admissions	Ceiling	Admissions
Total	45,000	22,405	30,000	29,916	18,000	11,840
Africa	19,000	10,459	11,000	16,366	X	4,171
East Asia	5,000	3,582	4,000	4,946	X	2,131
Europe/Central Asia	2,000	3,612	3,000	4,994	X	2,578
Latin America/Caribbean	1,500	955	3,000	809	X	948
Near East/South Asia	17,500	3,797	9,000	2,801	X	2,012
Unallocated Reserve	-	-	-	-	X	-

- Represents zero.

X Not applicable.

Notes: Ceiling and admission numbers reflect revisions made each fiscal year. FY 2018 and 2019 data in this table are based on the nationality of the principal applicant. In FY 2020, Refugee Admissions ceilings were based on Admission Category and not by Region/Country of Chargeability. Based on the terms of a settlement in *Doe et al. v. Trump et al.*, No. 17-0178 (W.D. Wash), certain refugee applicants that arrive in FY 2020 and any future fiscal years are counted toward the FY 2018 refugee admissions ceiling. In 2020, the number of such applicants was 26.

Source: OIS analysis of DOS data.

Refugee Eligibility Requirements

To qualify for refugee status, a principal applicant must: (1) be of special humanitarian concern to the United States; (2) meet the refugee definition as set forth in section 101(a)(42) of the INA; (3) be admissible under the INA (or be granted a waiver of inadmissibility); (4) not be firmly resettled in any foreign country; and (5) merit a favorable exercise of discretion. Derivative refugees need not meet all these eligibility requirements, but they must be admissible to the United States and demonstrate a relationship as the spouse or child of a principal refugee

¹⁰ In many cases, an unallocated reserve is also designated which can be used in any region if the need arises and only after notification to Congress.

applicant or an admitted refugee. Any person who has ordered, incited, assisted, or otherwise participated in the persecution of another on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion is ineligible for refugee status, including as a derivative refugee.

Refugee Application Process

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) establishes processing priorities that identify individuals and groups who are of special humanitarian concern to the United States and who are eligible for refugee resettlement consideration. The priority categories are (P-1)—individuals referred by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), a U.S. Embassy, or certain non-governmental organizations (NGOs); (P-2)—groups of special humanitarian concern; and (P-3)—family reunification cases. In 2020, unusually, the United States only accepted referrals from UNHCR in the categories listed above. Once principal refugee applicants are referred or granted access to USRAP under any of these priorities, they still must meet all other eligibility criteria, including meriting a favorable exercise of discretion. Upon referral, a Resettlement Support Center, working under a cooperative agreement with Department of State (DOS), conducts pre-screening interviews with the applicants. A USCIS officer then interviews applicants and accompanying derivatives to determine eligibility for resettlement in the United States. Multiple security checks must be completed before an application for refugee classification is approved. Additionally, applicants must also undergo a medical exam.

Individuals who are approved for refugee classification are assigned to a resettlement agency (sponsor) that assists with housing, employment, and other services upon arrival. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) arranges the refugee's travel to the United States. After arrival, refugees are authorized to work and may request documentation to travel outside the United States.

The spouse and unmarried children under the age of 21 of a principal refugee may obtain refugee status as an accompanying or follow-to-join derivative.¹¹ Accompanying derivatives may enter the United States with the principal refugee or within 4 months after the principal refugee's admission.¹² A spouse or child who joins the principal refugee more than 4 months after admission to the United States is a follow-to-join derivative. Principal refugees may petition for follow-to-join benefits for their qualifying derivatives within 2 years of the refugee's admission to the United States; the principal and the derivative refugee relative's relationship must have existed at the time of the principal's admission into the United States, at the time of filing for accompanying or follow-to-join benefits, and at the time of the relative's subsequent admission.

¹¹ Children may include those age 21 or over who are covered by provisions in the Child Status Protection Act, Pub. L. No. 107-208 (Aug. 6, 2002). A derivative child must be unmarried prior to the refugee's admission to the United States, when the Form I-730 Refugee/Asylee Relative Petition is filed, and at the time of the child's subsequent admission.

¹² In practice, most accompanying derivative refugees enter the United States with the principal refugee.

Principal refugees must file Form I-730, *Refugee/Asylee Relative Petition*,¹³ for each qualifying follow-to-join derivative family member, who may be located abroad or in the United States. These beneficiaries are not required to demonstrate an independent refugee claim. Once a principal's I-730 has been approved for an individual located abroad, there are no time constraints placed upon that derivative relative's travel to the United States, provided that (1) the principal's status has not been revoked; (2) the relationship of the derivative to the principal is unchanged; and (3) in the case of a child, the child is unmarried at the time of admission.

DATA

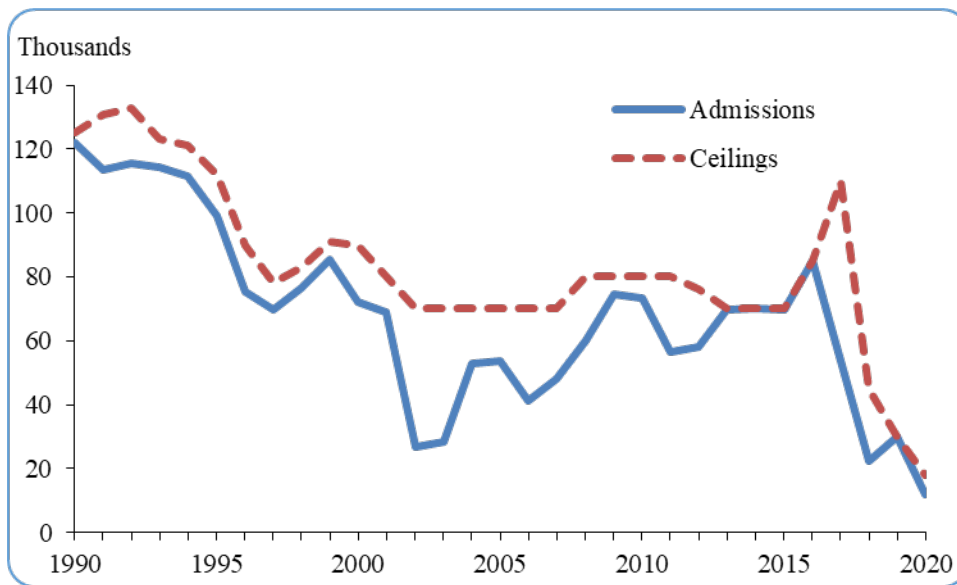
All refugee data presented in this report are from the Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS) of the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration of DOS.

TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF REFUGEES

Since the inception of the program in 1980, the United States has accepted more than 3.7 million refugees and asylees. In 2020, the United States admitted 11,840 refugees, a 60 percent decrease from the 29,916 refugees admitted in the previous year. At a high level, the trend in refugee admissions has gone through three periods since reaching its peak under the current legal framework at 122,066 in 1990 (Figure 2). Admissions generally declined during the 1990s, as the refugee program's focus shifted to more diverse populations across the world. Admissions reached a low point in 2002, due in part to security procedures and changes to admission requirements after September 11, 2001. Refugee admissions reached a post-2001 peak of 84,989 in 2016 under the Obama administration, the highest number in 17 years. More recently, the Trump administration reduced the refugee ceiling during each of its four years and implemented new refugee vetting and screening procedures, contributing to a decrease in admission since 2017.

¹³ The petition is used to file for relatives of refugees and asylees. The USRAP program handles only *refugee* follow-to-join petitions, which are counted within the annual refugee ceiling. Asylum follow-to-join petitions are processed by USCIS and are not counted in the annual admission ceilings.

Figure 2.
 Refugee Admissions and Proposed Ceilings to the United States:
 Fiscal Years 1990 to 2020



Source: OIS analysis of DOS data.

Category of Admission

In 2020, most refugees were admitted under P-1 processing (47 percent)—individuals referred by the UNHCR, a U.S. Embassy, or certain NGOs—and P-2 processing (49 percent)—groups of special humanitarian concern (Table 2). P-3 processing (family reunification cases) constituted 0.7 percent of refugees admitted and follow-to-join refugee beneficiaries made up 2.7 percent of refugees admitted. Principal refugees accounted for 5,142 (43 percent) of the 11,840 refugees admitted to the United States in 2020, while accompanying spouses and dependent children represented 12 and 44 percent, respectively.¹⁴

¹⁴ Numbers in the Principal Applicant category previously included siblings, parents, and other dependents, who are now reported as Dependents. In addition, a small number of follow-to-join children are listed as principal applicants rather than children in WRAPS, and are therefore counted as principal applicants in OIS data.

Table 2.

Refugee Arrivals by Relationship to Principal Applicant and Case Priority:
Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020

Category of admission and case priority	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
RELATIONSHIP TO PRINCIPAL APPLICANT						
Total	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0	11,840	100.0
Principal Applicant	8,863	39.6	12,291	41.1	5,142	43.4
Dependents	13,542	60.4	17,625	58.9	6,698	56.6
Spouse	2,842	12.7	3,262	10.9	1,455	12.3
Child	10,563	47.1	14,211	47.5	5,186	43.8
Siblings, parents, and other	137	0.6	152	0.5	57	0.5
CASE PRIORITY						
Total	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0	11,840	100.0
Priority 1	12,001	53.6	16,744	56.0	5,613	47.4
Priority 2	9,592	42.8	12,393	41.4	5,820	49.2
Priority 3	95	0.4	224	0.7	83	0.7
Follow-to-join beneficiaries	717	3.2	555	1.9	324	2.7

Note: Numbers in the Principal Applicant category previously included siblings, parents, and other dependents, who are now reported as Dependents.

Source: OIS analysis of DOS data.

Country of Nationality

In 2020, the leading countries of nationality for individuals admitted as refugees were Congo (24 percent), Burma (18 percent), Ukraine (16 percent), Afghanistan (5.1 percent), and Iraq (4.6 percent) (Table 3). These countries made up 68 percent of total refugee admissions in 2020, similar to their share in 2018 but down from 80 percent in 2019.

Since the inception of the refugee program, the nationalities of refugees admitted to the United States have changed as U.S. policies evolved and new conflicts around the world arose. Over the last ten years, the United States has admitted just over half a million refugees from around the world. Twenty-one percent have been from Burma, 17 percent from Iraq, 13 percent from the Congo, and 12 percent from Bhutan (Figure 3).

Table 3.

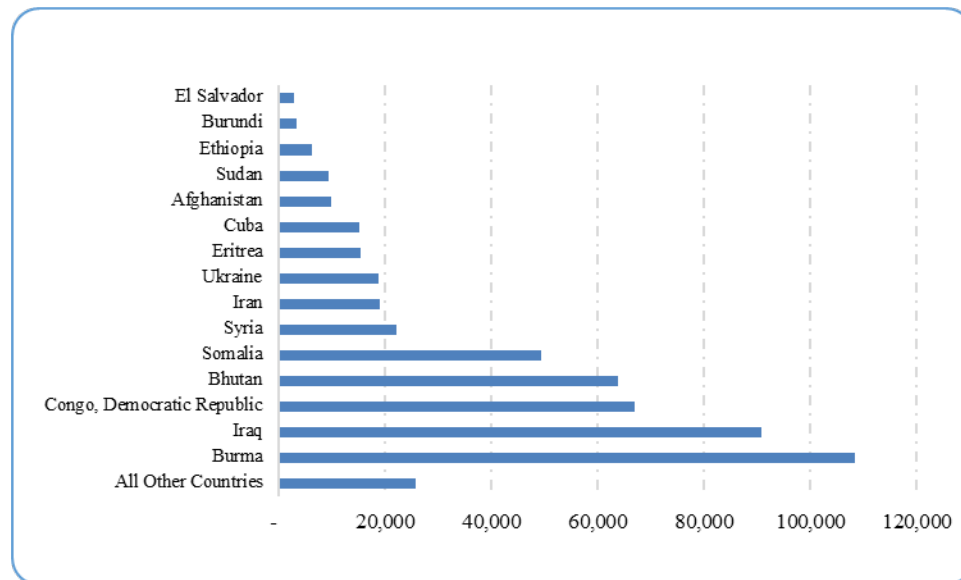
Refugee Arrivals by Country of Nationality: Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020
(Ranked by 2020 country of nationality)

Country of nationality	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0	11,840	100.0
Congo, Democratic Republic	7,841	35.0	12,875	43.0	2,863	24.2
Burma	3,525	15.7	4,928	16.5	2,112	17.8
Ukraine	2,637	11.8	4,432	14.8	1,935	16.3
Afghanistan	802	3.6	1,197	4.0	603	5.1
Iraq	140	0.6	462	1.5	541	4.6
Syria	62	0.3	560	1.9	486	4.1
Eritrea	1,260	5.6	1,750	5.8	475	4.0
El Salvador	724	3.2	311	1.0	362	3.1
Moldova	197	0.9	116	0.4	352	3.0
Sudan	74	0.3	376	1.3	258	2.2
All other countries, including unknown	5,143	23.0	2,909	9.7	1,853	15.7

Source: OIS analysis of DOS data.

Figure 3.

Refugee Arrivals by Top Country of Nationality: Fiscal Years 2011 to 2020



Source: OIS analysis of DOS data.

Age, Sex, and Marital Status

Three-quarters of refugees admitted to the United States in 2020 were under 35 years of age, and two out of five were children under 18 years old (Table 4). Refugees tend to be relatively younger than the native-born population, with a median age of 23 years for those arriving in

2020, compared to a median age of 36 years for the native-born population.¹⁵ Refugee median age varies widely by region and country of birth: refugees from Africa had the lowest median age of 20 years, while those from the Near East/South Asia and Europe had the highest median age of 26. Slightly more male than female refugees were admitted in 2020, and 50 percent of adults were married at arrival, compared to 47 percent in 2019.

Table 4.
Refugee Arrivals by Age, Sex, and Marital Status: Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020

Characteristic	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
AGE						
Total	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0	11,840	100.0
0 to 17 years	9,901	44.2	13,107	43.8	4,808	40.6
18 to 24 years	3,418	15.3	4,286	14.3	1,584	13.4
25 to 34 years	3,816	17.0	5,795	19.4	2,504	21.1
35 to 44 years	2,447	10.9	3,212	10.7	1,426	12.0
45 to 54 years	1,480	6.6	1,669	5.6	756	6.4
55 to 64 years	767	3.4	1,139	3.8	484	4.1
65 years and over	576	2.6	708	2.4	278	2.3
SEX						
Total	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0	11,840	100.0
Female	11,099	49.5	14,651	49.0	5,700	48.1
Male	11,306	50.5	15,265	51.0	6,140	51.9
MARITAL STATUS						
Total	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0	11,840	100.0
Married	6,891	30.8	7,770	26.0	3,493	29.5
Single ¹	14,405	64.3	20,828	69.6	7,873	66.5
Other ²	1,109	4.9	1,318	4.4	474	4.0

¹ Includes persons who were engaged and not yet married.

² Includes persons who were divorced, separated, widowed, or of unknown marital status.

Source: OIS analysis of DOS data.

State of Initial Resettlement

In 2020, more than half of admitted refugees (56 percent) were resettled in the top ten resettling states (Table 5). California, Washington, and Texas resettled the most refugees (10, 9.4, and 7.6 percent of admitted refugees, respectively), and Washington, Idaho, and Kentucky resettled the most refugees per capita, each resettling between 10 and 15 refugees per 100,000 population (Figure 4). Majorities of refugees resettling in Kentucky and Idaho were from Congo (68 and 52 percent, respectively), while the majority of those settling in Washington were from Ukraine (64 percent).

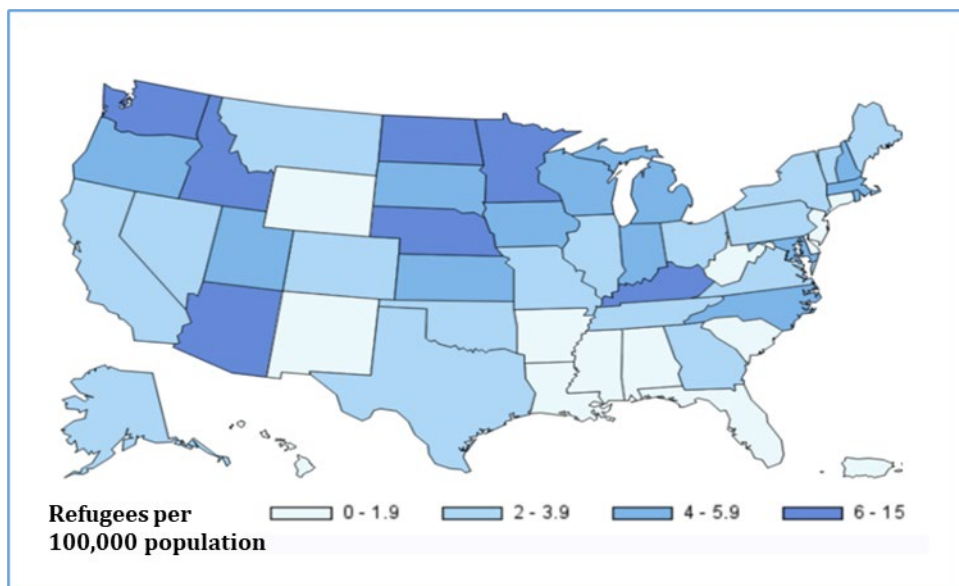
¹⁵ Calculated from the 2020 March Current Population Survey as downloaded from *IPUMS-CPS*, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org.

Table 5.
 Refugee Arrivals by State of Residence: Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020
 (Ranked by 2020 state of residence)

State of residence	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	22,405	100.0	29,916	100.0	11,840	100.0
California	1,362	6.1	1,841	6.2	1,192	10.1
Washington	1,537	6.9	1,945	6.5	1,116	9.4
Texas	1,669	7.4	2,433	8.1	905	7.6
New York	1,281	5.7	1,845	6.2	626	5.3
Michigan	651	2.9	1,146	3.8	493	4.2
Kentucky	896	4.0	1,421	4.7	476	4.0
North Carolina	934	4.2	1,255	4.2	469	4.0
Pennsylvania	906	4.0	1,088	3.6	448	3.8
Arizona	998	4.5	1,216	4.1	444	3.8
Ohio	1,408	6.3	1,426	4.8	427	3.6
Other	10,763	48.0	14,300	47.8	5,244	44.3

Source: OIS analysis of DOS data.

Figure 4.
 Per Capita Refugee Resettlement by State of Residence: Fiscal Year 2020



Source: OIS analysis of DOS and Census Bureau data.

Lawful Permanent Residence and Naturalization of Refugees

One year after being admitted to the United States, refugees are statutorily required to apply for lawful permanent resident (LPR) status. Of those arriving as refugees between 2000 and 2018, 97 percent gained LPR status by the end of 2020.¹⁶ Refugees granted LPR status may apply for naturalization 5 years after their admission as refugees. Refugees have some of the highest naturalization rates of all immigrants: of the approximately 640,000 adults who obtained LPR status from 2000 to 2014 based on prior admission as a refugee, 49 percent naturalized within 5 years and 58 percent did so within 6 years.^{17, 18}

ASYLEES

Filing of Claims

Generally, any foreign national physically present in the United States or arriving at a POE may seek asylum regardless of immigration status. Those seeking asylum must apply within 1 year from the date of last arrival or establish that an exception applies based on changed or extraordinary circumstances.¹⁹ Principal applicants obtain asylum in one of two ways: affirmatively through a USCIS asylum officer or defensively in removal proceedings before an immigration judge of DOJ's Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR). An individual applies for asylum by filing Form I-589, *Application for Asylum and for Withholding of Removal*.

Spouses and unmarried children under the age of 21 who are not included in the principal's grant of asylum may obtain derivative asylum status.²⁰ A principal asylee may petition for follow-to-join benefits for qualifying derivatives within 2 years after they were granted asylum, as long as the relationship between the principal and their spouse and/or child existed on the date the principal was granted asylum. In practice, the vast majority of derivative asylum status beneficiaries receive follow-to-join benefits.

The principal asylee must file an I-730 for each qualifying family member, who may be located abroad or in the United States. Once an I-730 is approved for an individual located abroad, there are no time constraints placed upon the derivative relative's travel to the United States, as long as (1) the principal's status has not been revoked; (2) the relationship of the derivative to the

¹⁶ Although the majority of refugees apply for LPR status 1 year after admission, due to operational and other factors, processing time can vary widely for those who apply.

¹⁷ In comparison, the 11.6 million non-refugee adult immigrants who obtained LPR status from 2000 to 2014 had 5- and 6-year naturalization rates of 12 and 28 percent, respectively. The data were restricted to immigrants who were 18 years of age and older when LPR status was obtained. More recent cohorts, with less time spent in LPR status, tend to have lower cumulative naturalization rates.

¹⁸ For more discussion of refugee naturalization see Mossaad N., Ferwerda J., Lawrence D., Weinstein J. M., Hainmueller J., Determinants of refugee naturalization in the United States. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences U.S.A. 115, 9175–9180 (2018).

¹⁹ Unaccompanied noncitizen children are not subject to the 1-year filing requirement. INA § 208(a) (2)(E); 8 U.S.C. 1158(a)(2)(E).

²⁰ See reference to Child Status Protection Act, n. 9, *supra*.

principal is unchanged; and (3) in the case of a child, the child is unmarried at the time of admission.

Adjudication of Claims

The USCIS Asylum Division adjudicates claims and may grant asylum directly through the affirmative asylum process. Asylum officers conduct interviews to determine asylum eligibility using an applicant's testimony, information on Form I-589, any accompanying evidence provided by the applicant, and material provided by DOS, other USCIS offices, or other credible sources. The asylum applicant must meet the definition of a refugee, be credible considering the totality of the circumstances and all relevant factors, and not be barred from obtaining asylum. If the officer finds that the applicant satisfies the eligibility requirements, then the officer determines whether the application warrants a grant of asylum as a matter of discretion. Individuals may be barred for previously committing certain crimes, posing a national security threat, engaging in the persecution of others, or firmly resettling in another country before coming to the United States.

If applicants with a valid immigration status (e.g., a foreign student) fail to establish eligibility for asylum, USCIS denies the application, and the applicant remains in his or her valid status. If applicants are not in a valid status and are found ineligible for asylum, USCIS places these applicants in removal proceedings before an EOIR immigration judge, where the application is considered anew.²¹

Individuals who have not previously filed for asylum may apply defensively after being placed in removal proceedings by immigration enforcement officials because they are unlawfully present, are in violation of their status, or were apprehended while attempting to enter the United States. Defensive applicants apply for asylum directly with EOIR. During the proceedings, an immigration judge may grant asylum or deny the asylum application and issue a removal order if the noncitizen does not qualify for any other forms of relief. Defensive and affirmative applicants may appeal an EOIR denial to the Board of Immigration Appeals and, if unsuccessful there, may seek further review by a U.S. Court of Appeals, and finally the U.S. Supreme Court.

Follow-to-join asylum beneficiaries are not required to demonstrate a persecution claim because their status is derived from the principal asylee. Beneficiaries in the United States at the time of application are granted derivative asylum immediately upon the approval of their I-730 petitions. Beneficiaries abroad at the time of application are granted derivative asylum when admitted into the United States at a POE.

Lawful Permanent Residence and Citizenship

One year after being granted asylum, asylees are eligible to apply for LPR status, as are their qualifying family members who meet the eligibility criteria. If LPR status is approved, the

²¹ OIS tallies all asylum grants from an immigration judge as defensive grants, regardless of whether they first applied affirmatively.

asylee's "resident since" date is rolled back to one year prior to the LPR approval date. Asylees who have become LPRs may apply for naturalization 5 years after their "residence since" date.²²

DATA

The affirmative asylee data presented in this report were obtained from Global, a cloud-based platform of USCIS that has replaced the Refugees, Asylum, and Parole System (RAPS) mainframe system for storing affirmative asylee data.²³

Defensive asylee data were obtained from EOIR. Follow-to-join asylum derivative data for people residing outside the United States at the time of their admission were obtained from the Case and Activity Management for International Operations (CAMINO) system of USCIS and the Consular Consolidated Database (CCD) of DOS. These data reflect travel documents issued, not admissions. Follow-to-join data for people residing within the United States at the time of the approval of their I-730 petition were obtained from the USCIS Computer-Linked Application Information Management System (CLAIMS).

TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF ASYLEES

Asylum Filings

Affirmative asylum filings with USCIS decreased by 4.1 percent from 97,192 applications in 2019 to 93,224 in 2020.²⁴ Venezuelan applications made up 24 percent of total applications in 2020, despite dropping 10 percent from 2019, and Chinese applications made up 10 percent of total applications in 2020. The next-highest numbers of affirmative applications in 2020 came from Guatemalan (9.0 percent), Honduran (6.4 percent), and El Salvadoran (5.8 percent) nationals (Table 6a). Unaccompanied children from Central America's Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) accounted for 91 percent of all unaccompanied child asylum applications in 2020 and made up the 37 percent of affirmative asylum applications from these three countries.²⁵

The total number of defensive asylum applications filed with EOIR decreased for the first time in several years, dropping 11 percent from a peak of 213,307 in 2019 to 189,838 in 2020.²⁶ Similar to the last couple of years, the largest numbers of applications lodged with the courts were from

²² In other words, asylees may count a maximum of 1 year of their time in asylum status toward the required 5 years of permanent residence for naturalization eligibility purposes.

²³ The migration from RAPS to Global caused slight changes in historical numbers.

²⁴ These include principal applicants only. There were an additional 48,523 dependents.

²⁵ Unaccompanied children, unlike other populations, can apply affirmatively before a USCIS asylum officer after being placed into removal proceedings. See INA § 208(b)(3)(C); 8 U.S.C. 1158(b)(3)(C).

²⁶ EOIR has recently changed its methodology in reporting affirmative asylum cases referred from USCIS. Instead of using the court application date as they do for defensive asylum cases, EOIR now reports on affirmative cases based on the date of the initial asylum application filing with USCIS. This change may result in a slight difference in historical numbers, and OIS has updated the data reported here and in the Yearbook of Immigration Statistics for 2015 – 2020.

citizens of the Northern Triangle countries (99,112) and Mexico (20,713) (Table 6b). These four countries made up 63 percent of defensive asylum applications filed with EOIR.

Table 6a.

Affirmative Asylum Cases Filed (USCIS) by Country of Nationality:

Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020

(Ranked by 2020 country of nationality)

Country	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	106,193	100.0	97,192	100.0	93,224	100.0
Venezuela	28,429	26.8	25,224	26.0	22,586	24.2
China, People's Republic	8,196	7.7	9,663	9.9	9,656	10.4
Guatemala	10,196	9.6	9,717	10.0	8,361	9.0
Honduras	6,143	5.8	5,622	5.8	6,008	6.4
El Salvador	9,145	8.6	5,970	6.1	5,404	5.8
Haiti	2,959	2.8	3,281	3.4	5,008	5.4
Mexico	6,620	6.2	4,600	4.7	4,005	4.3
Colombia	2,574	2.4	2,897	3.0	3,676	3.9
India	2,912	2.7	2,965	3.1	3,117	3.3
Nigeria	3,323	3.1	2,769	2.8	2,302	2.5
All Other Nations	25,696	24.2	24,484	25.2	23,101	24.8

Source: OIS analysis of DHS data.

Table 6b.

Defensive Asylum Cases Received (EOIR) by Country of Nationality:

Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020

(Ranked by 2020 country of nationality)

Country	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
TOTAL	164,062	100.0	213,307	100.0	189,838	100.0
Guatemala	27,139	16.5	42,035	19.7	40,508	21.3
Honduras	22,168	13.5	32,198	15.1	33,398	17.6
El Salvador	32,426	19.8	30,229	14.2	25,206	13.3
Mexico	24,826	15.1	30,598	14.3	20,713	10.9
Cuba	1,160	0.7	5,523	2.6	11,427	6.0
Venezuela	5,279	3.2	11,695	5.5	11,213	5.9
India	7,856	4.8	11,091	5.2	5,449	2.9
China, People's Republic	8,103	4.9	6,904	3.2	4,683	2.5
Ecuador	4,051	2.5	4,477	2.1	4,319	2.3
Nicaragua	735	0.4	3,908	1.8	4,178	2.2
unknown	30,319	18.5	34,649	16.2	28,744	15.1

Note: Case receipts include affirmative claims that arrive at EOIR after being placed in proceedings.

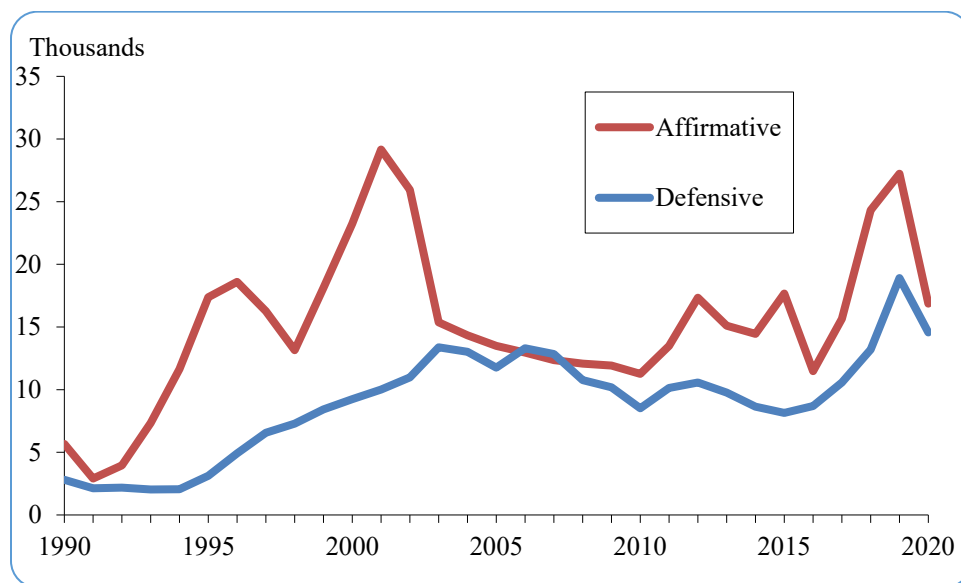
Source: Source: OIS analysis of DOJ data.

Asylum Grants

The total number of persons granted asylum in the United States decreased 32 percent from 46,130 in 2019 to 31,429 in 2020. USCIS granted asylum affirmatively to 16,864 people in 2020, a decrease of 38 percent from 2019; and EOIR immigration judges granted defensive asylum to 14,565 people in 2020, a decrease of 23 percent from 2019 but an increase of 10 percent from 2018 (Figure 5).

Figure 5.

Annual Grants of Affirmative and Defensive Asylum: 1990 to 2020



Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: OIS analysis of DHS and DOJ data.

Country of Nationality

The three leading countries of nationality of persons granted affirmative or defensive asylum in 2018, 2019, and 2020 were China (15 percent in 2020), Venezuela (13 percent), and El Salvador (6.4 percent) (Table 7). Nationals of these three countries accounted for 35 percent of all persons granted asylum, down from 38 percent in 2019 and 41 percent in 2018. Of the top ten countries of nationality, only Cuba increased between 2019 and 2020, rising 72 percent, while India experienced the greatest proportional decrease (41 percent), followed by El Salvador and Venezuela (37 percent each). Among the top ten countries of nationality, asylum grants for nationals of Central America’s Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) and India have increasingly come from defensive cases rather than affirmative cases in the last few years, while Venezuelan asylum grants have remained mostly affirmative, and grants to Chinese nationals have remained fairly evenly split between defensive and affirmative.

The leading countries of nationality for persons granted affirmative asylum were Venezuela (20 percent), China (17 percent), Turkey (9.3 percent), and Egypt (7.9 percent) (Table 8). Fifty-four percent of those granted asylum affirmatively in 2020 were nationals of these countries.

The leading countries of nationality for persons granted defensive asylum were China (13 percent), El Salvador (12 percent), Guatemala (10 percent), and Cuba (8.4 percent) (Table 9). Forty-three percent of those granted asylum defensively in 2020 were nationals of these countries.

The leading countries of nationality for follow-to-join asylees authorized for travel to the United States in 2020 were India (14 percent), China (13 percent), Eritrea (11 percent), and Turkey (6.8 percent) (Table 10). Nationals of these four countries accounted for 44 percent of all follow-to-join derivative relatives issued travel documents allowing their travel to the United States. Additionally, 1,530 individuals were approved for derivative asylum or refugee status while residing in the United States based on a relative’s refugee or asylum grant.²⁷

Table 7.

Individuals Granted Asylum Affirmatively or Defensively by Country of Nationality:
Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020
(Ranked by 2020 country of nationality)

Country	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	37,511	100.0	46,130	100.0	31,429	100.0
China, People's Republic	6,798	18.1	7,448	16.1	4,804	15.3
Venezuela	5,824	15.5	6,701	14.5	4,239	13.5
El Salvador	2,914	7.8	3,195	6.9	2,012	6.4
Guatemala	2,319	6.2	2,585	5.6	1,876	6.0
Turkey	501	1.3	1,774	3.8	1,622	5.2
Egypt	1,565	4.2	2,271	4.9	1,444	4.6
India	1,302	3.5	2,256	4.9	1,337	4.3
Honduras	1,996	5.3	1,815	3.9	1,269	4.0
Cuba	163	0.4	721	1.6	1,242	4.0
Mexico	1,346	3.6	1,585	3.4	1,207	3.8
All other countries, including unknown	12,783	34.1	15,779	34.2	10,377	33.0

Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: Source: OIS analysis of DHS and DOJ data.

²⁷ 1,490 derivative asylum grants were based on an asylee relative petition and 40 were based on a refugee family petition.

Table 8.

Individuals Granted Asylum Affirmatively by Country of Nationality: Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020
(Ranked by 2020 country of nationality)

Country	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	24,317	100.0	27,226	100.0	16,864	100.0
Venezuela	5,701	23.4	6,200	22.8	3,349	19.9
China, People's Republic	3,750	15.4	3,989	14.7	2,855	16.9
Turkey	475	2.0	1,714	6.3	1,568	9.3
Egypt	1,401	5.8	2,125	7.8	1,336	7.9
Russia	756	3.1	1,097	4.0	741	4.4
Mexico	715	2.9	783	2.9	490	2.9
Guatemala	1,303	5.4	1,041	3.8	441	2.6
Nigeria	452	1.9	764	2.8	411	2.4
El Salvador	1,141	4.7	875	3.2	291	1.7
Syria	545	2.2	501	1.8	286	1.7
All other countries, including unknown	8,078	33.2	8,137	29.9	5,096	30.2

Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: OIS analysis of DHS data.

Table 9.

Individuals Granted Asylum Defensively by Country of Nationality: Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020
(Ranked by 2020 country of nationality)

Country	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	13,194	100.0	18,904	100.0	14,565	100.0
China, People's Republic	3,048	23.1	3,459	18.3	1,949	13.4
El Salvador	1,773	13.4	2,320	12.3	1,721	11.8
Guatemala	1,016	7.7	1,544	8.2	1,435	9.9
Cuba	161	1.2	711	3.8	1,226	8.4
India	951	7.2	1,927	10.2	1,179	8.1
Honduras	1,181	9.0	1,291	6.8	1,013	7.0
Venezuela	123	0.9	501	2.7	890	6.1
Mexico	631	4.8	802	4.2	717	4.9
Cameroon	312	2.4	659	3.5	591	4.1
Nicaragua	35	0.3	357	1.9	364	2.5
All other countries, including unknown	3,963	30.0	5,333	28.2	3,480	23.9

Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: OIS analysis of DOJ data.

Table 10.

Follow-to-join Asylee Travel Documents Issued by Country of Nationality:
Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020
(Ranked by 2020 country of nationality)

Country	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	6,107	100.0	6,253	100.0	2,528	100.0
India	526	8.6	610	9.8	342	13.5
China, People's Republic	1,625	26.6	1,478	23.6	327	12.9
Eritrea	199	3.3	503	8.0	266	10.5
Turkey	15	0.2	126	2.0	171	6.8
Guatemala	371	6.1	334	5.3	127	5.0
Egypt	132	2.2	226	3.6	113	4.5
Ethiopia	287	4.7	190	3.0	98	3.9
El Salvador	335	5.5	169	2.7	84	3.3
Nepal	466	7.6	277	4.4	76	3.0
Syria	87	1.4	140	2.2	60	2.4
All other countries, including unknown	2,064	33.8	2,200	35.2	864	34.2

Source: OIS analysis of DHS and DOS data.

Age, Sex, and Marital Status

In 2020, 61 percent of persons granted affirmative asylum were between the ages of 18 and 44 (Table 11). The median age of asylees has increased in recent years from a low of 24 years old in 2017 to 32 years in 2020, closer to the median age of the native-born population (36 years). Fifty-one percent were male, and 58 percent of adults were married. Just over half (52 percent) of follow-to-join beneficiaries were under the age of 18. The median age of follow-to-join beneficiaries was 17 years (Table 12). Data on marital status are not available for this group.

State of Residence

In 2020, the leading states of residence for individuals granted asylum affirmatively were California (34 percent), New Jersey (9.5 percent), and Florida (9.3 percent) (Table 13). More than half (52 percent) of individuals granted affirmative asylum in 2020 resided in these three states. Per capita, the leading areas include New Jersey and California, with approximately 17 and 14 recipients per 100,000 residents, respectively.

State of residence data are not available for defensive or follow-to-join asylees.

Table 11.
 Individuals Granted Asylum Affirmatively by Age, Sex, and Marital Status:
 Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020

Characteristic	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
AGE						
Total	24,317	100.0	27,226	100.0	16,864	100.0
0 to 17 years	5,677	23.3	6,019	22.1	3,515	20.8
18 to 24 years	3,883	16.0	3,768	13.8	1,982	11.8
25 to 34 years	6,333	26.0	6,977	25.6	4,235	25.1
35 to 44 years	5,172	21.3	6,284	23.1	4,102	24.3
45 to 54 years	2,286	9.4	2,878	10.6	2,072	12.3
55 to 64 years	700	2.9	1,001	3.7	733	4.3
65 and over	266	1.1	299	1.1	225	1.3
Sex						
Total	24,317	100.0	27,226*	100.0	16,864	100.0
Female	11,925	49.0	13,340	49.0	8,241	48.9
Male	12,392	51.0	13,884	51.0	8,623	51.1
MARITAL STATUS						
Total	24,317	100.0	27,226	100.0	16,864	100.0
Married	9,684	39.8	11,617	42.7	7,738	45.9
Single	13,541	55.7	14,232	52.3	8,218	48.7
Other**	1,092	4.5	1,377	5.1	908	5.4

- Represents zero or rounds to zero.

* Includes 2 persons of unknown sex.

** Includes persons who were divorced, separated, widowed, or of unknown marital status.

Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: OIS analysis of DHS data.

Table 12.
Follow-to-join Asylee Travel Documents Issued by Age and Sex:
Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020

Characteristic	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
AGE						
Total	6,107	100.0	6,253	100.0	2,528	100.0
0 to 17 years	3,174	52.0	3,056	48.9	1,307	51.7
18 to 24 years	1,135	18.6	1,199	19.2	448	17.7
25 to 34 years	645	10.6	646	10.3	274	10.8
35 to 44 years	610	10.0	677	10.8	288	11.4
45 to 54 years	396	6.5	471	7.5	155	6.1
55 to 64 years	132	2.2	172	2.8	43	1.7
65 and over	15	0.2	32	0.5	13	0.5
SEX						
Total	6,107	100.0	6,253	100.0	2,528	100.0
Female	3,364	55.1	3,311	53.0	1,363	53.9
Male	2,737	44.8	2,910	46.5	1,135	44.9
Unknown	6	0.1	32	0.5	30	1.2

Source: OIS analysis of DHS and DOS data.

Table 13.
Individuals Granted Asylum Affirmatively by State of Residence: Fiscal Years 2018 to 2020
(Ranked by 2020 state of residence)

State of residence	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	24,317	100.0	27,226	100.0	16,864	100.0
California	8,092	33.3	9,205	33.8	5,656	33.5
New Jersey	1,340	5.5	2,544	9.3	1,609	9.5
Florida	3,069	12.6	2,469	9.1	1,563	9.3
Texas	1,583	6.5	1,798	6.6	916	5.4
Illinois	890	3.7	1,454	5.3	868	5.1
New York	2,021	8.3	2,125	7.8	841	5.0
Pennsylvania	567	2.3	773	2.8	451	2.7
Ohio	245	1.0	643	2.4	441	2.6
Indiana	287	1.2	650	2.4	418	2.5
Washington	394	1.6	484	1.8	334	2.0
Other	5,829	24.0	5,081	18.7	3,767	22.3

Note: Data exclude follow-to-join asylees.

Source: OIS analysis of DHS data.

Naturalization of Asylees

Eighty-three percent of those granted affirmative asylum from 2009 to 2018 gained LPR status by the end of 2020. Similar to refugees, asylees have some of the highest naturalization rates of

all immigrants. Of the almost 525,000 adults who obtained LPR status from 2000 to 2014 based on the prior grant of asylum (affirmative or defensive), 56 percent naturalized within 6 years.²⁸

FOR MORE INFORMATION Visit the Office of Immigration Statistics web page at <http://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics>.

Breakout text box:

DHS and DOJ published an interim final rule on July 16, 2019 to add a new bar to eligibility for asylum for a noncitizen who enters or attempts to enter the United States across the Southern Border, but who transited through a third country *en route* to the United States and did not apply for protection there. A court ordered the Departments to cease implementation of the interim final rule in June 2020. A total of 6,911 noncitizens were subject to the bar in Fiscal Year 2019,²⁹ and 18,247 were subject to the bar in Fiscal Year 2020. Of the 18,247 individuals subject to the bar in 2020, 344 were exempted from the bar because they were victims of severe trafficking or applied for protection in a third country. As of May 6, 2021, another 6,672 individuals subject to the asylum bar in 2020 had established eligibility to apply for statutory withholding of removal or protection under the Convention Against Torture.

In addition, the United States signed Asylum Cooperative Agreements (ACAs) in 2019 with Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. In general, these ACAs allowed DHS to transfer asylum claimants to one of these three countries (other than the country of the noncitizen's nationality) to seek protection there. The agreement with Guatemala was operational between November 21, 2019 and March 16, 2020 and resulted in 61 removal flights with a total of 948 individual removals to Guatemala. Agreements with El Salvador and Honduras were never implemented as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consistent with Executive Order 14010, "Creating a Comprehensive Regional Framework To Address the Causes of Migration, To Manage Migration Throughout North and Central America, and To Provide Safe and Orderly Processing of Asylum Seekers at the United States Border," issued on February 2, 2021, on February 6, 2021, the Secretary of State announced the suspension of all three ACAs. DOS terminated the U.S.-Guatemala ACA in early May 2021 and terminated the other two ACAs in early August 2021.

²⁸ The data were restricted to individuals who were at least 18 years old when LPR status was obtained. More recent cohorts, with less time spent in LPR status, tend to have lower cumulative naturalization rates.

²⁹ This updates previously published information. In 2019, 77 were exempted from the bar because they were victims of severe trafficking or applied for protection in a third country. As of January 29, 2021, another 4,049 individuals subject to the asylum bar in 2019 had established eligibility to apply for statutory withholding of removal or protection under the Convention Against Torture.