



**Statement for the Record  
of David Bier of the Cato Institute\*  
Submitted to  
Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security  
House Committee on the Judiciary  
Hearing on  
“Oversight of the United States Refugee Admissions Program”  
October 25, 2017**

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) expands the liberty of Americans to welcome people fleeing violence and persecution around the world. USRAP also stands as a repudiation of authoritarianism that has spread in recent years, vindicating the superiority of America’s system of free enterprise and individual liberty. Since its creation in 1980, USRAP has provided safety for 3.4 million refugees.<sup>1</sup> This experience has shown that refugees do assimilate into American society, master English, find gainful employment, and revitalize communities across the country.

USRAP is a more crucial opportunity for American philanthropy today than ever. At the start of this year, war, violence, and persecution had already displaced 67.8 million people, more than at any point since the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> This worldwide crisis grows worse each day. More than 600,000 people have fled violence in Burma into Bangladesh since August 25 alone with another 400,000 on their way.<sup>3</sup> USRAP has historically provided the most important avenue to resettle refugees permanently outside of these zones of conflict and instability.

Yet as the crisis has grown, the share of displaced persons that USRAP has accepted has shrunk. In 2017, USRAP accepted the lowest share of global displaced persons in its *entire* history. The average historical share of worldwide displaced persons accepted by USRAP is more than six times higher than the share that the administration plans to admit in 2018. Americans are greater in number and possess far more resources today than in 1980 when the program launched, and with authoritarianism spreading in many parts of the world, the United States has more reason than ever to hold its beacon high and keep its doors open to the persecuted.

The facts simply cannot support arbitrary cuts to USRAP. Refugees do not impose significant fiscal costs in the long term, and Congress and the administration have means to reduce the short-term burdens. Moreover, despite the concern that terrorists will use fraud to access the refugee program in Syria, this has not happened. In fact, vetting failures of refugees in general are very rare. Only two refugees who entered since 9/11 have planned attacks targeting people in the United States, and no refugee has killed anyone in any such attack in USRAP’s entire history.

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\* The Cato Institute is a libertarian 501(c)(3) nonprofit think tank founded in 1977 and located in Washington D.C. It is dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets and peace.

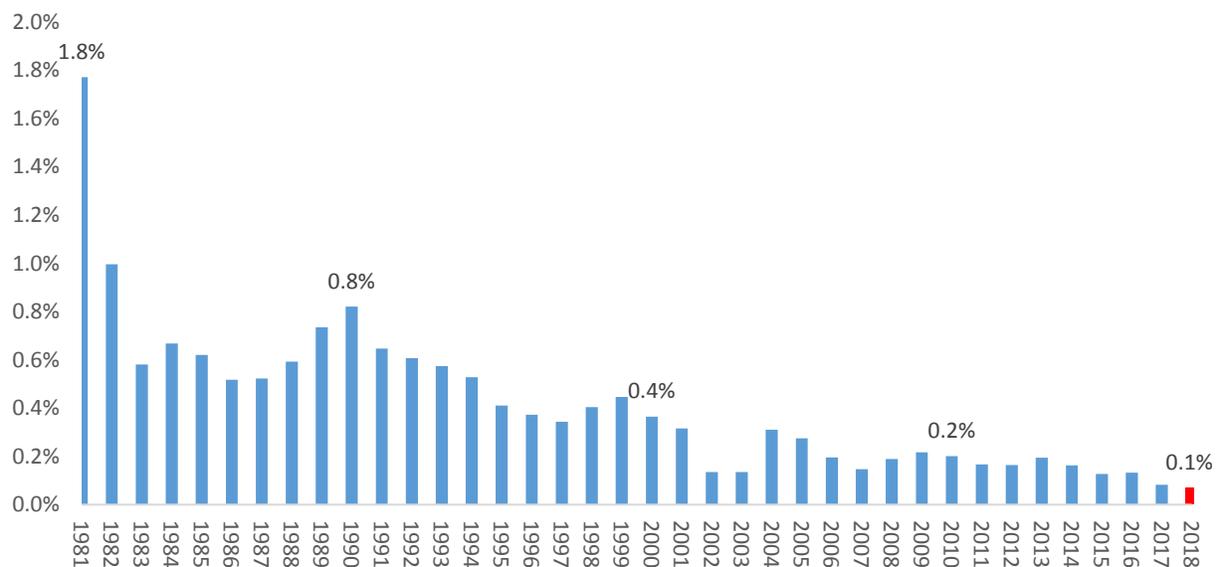
## USRAP should be greatly expanded

In absolute terms, this refugee crisis is the largest since World War II.<sup>4</sup> The raw numbers fail to capture fully the horrors that underlie them. The United Nations, the U.S. Department of State, and Congress have all found that the Islamic State carried out a “genocide” against Christians, Shia Muslims, and other religious groups in the region.<sup>5</sup> Ethnic cleansing has driven more than a half a million Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar.<sup>6</sup> More than 7,000 refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean alone in 2015 and 2016.<sup>7</sup> In total, more than 10,000 displaced people around the world died in flight in 2016, the most on record.<sup>8</sup> Doctors Without Borders has found “catastrophic malnutrition” in refugee camps.<sup>9</sup>

Since its creation, the primary purpose of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) has been—as the Refugee Act of 1980 put it—“to provide a permanent and systematic procedure for the admission to this country of refugees of special humanitarian concern.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the need for resettlement should factor highly into the administration’s determination of the refugee limit.

As the Figure above highlights, the U.S. government has allowed Americans to accept a rapidly decreasing share of displaced persons under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee’s mandate since the early 1990s.<sup>11</sup> The new administration’s refugee limit of 45,000 would worsen this trend, rejecting the highest share of displaced persons worldwide in the history of the modern U.S. refugee program.<sup>12</sup> The cap would constitute a share of internationally displaced persons one-sixth of the historical average from 1981 to 2016 and a mere 4 percent of the historic high in 1981.

**Figure**  
**Share of U.N. High Commissioner for Refugee Population of Concern Resettled in the United States, FY 1981 to 2018**



Sources: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; U.S. Department of State

The new refugee limit would also be abnormal relative to the capacity of the United States and represent a major departure from its historic refugee intake. It would allow a per-capita admission rate almost half the average from 1980 to 2017, and the average rate under the Reagan and H.W. Bush administrations was more than two and a half times higher than the rate for 2018.<sup>13</sup>

Refugee inflows already add only a tiny amount to U.S. population growth. Had the new administration allowed all 110,000 refugees that the Obama administration proposed to allow to enter in 2017, it would have amounted to only a 0.03 percent increase in the U.S. population. Even in absolute numbers, 45,000 is 45 percent below the historic average of 80,000 from 1980 to 2017. Given that America is more populous and wealthier than ever, it is clear that the cap is not based on America's capacity to accept refugees.

In most other immigration programs, the federal government determines the capacity and desire of Americans to accept immigrants *indirectly*. The Department of State, for example, does not attempt to calculate how many foreign spouses to admit directly. Instead, it admits those spouses whom Americans have chosen to sponsor and petitioned for their admission. But under USRAP's current design, the State Department, in consultation with Congress, sets the annual limit. If the administration is concerned that it cannot accurately estimate the capacity and demands of the public, it should allow U.S. residents and U.S. humanitarian organizations to petition for refugees and sponsor them on their own.

Canada has successfully operated a private refugee sponsorship program since 1978, resettling more than 220,000 refugees with private sponsors during that time.<sup>14</sup> One Canadian government report found that privately sponsored refugees had better economic outcomes than government sponsored refugees.<sup>15</sup> In 2016, sponsors, including churches, nonprofits, and groups of five Canadian citizens, have helped resettle 18,000 Syrian refugees with private money—more than the entire United States government during the same period.<sup>16</sup> In recent years, other countries have also adopted this model.<sup>17</sup>

### **USRAP has not increased the threat of terrorism**

USRAP is not a threat to Americans. Refugees not only have posed an infinitesimally small risk of terrorism in absolute terms—they have posed a much lower risk of terrorism to Americans than all other legal immigrants and foreign travelers as well as U.S. citizens themselves.

From 1975 to 2016, the chance of an American being murdered by a refugee terrorist in the United States was 1 in 3.8 *billion* per year. This risk is 100 times less than the risk of death from all U.S.-born terrorists, 1,000 times less than all other foreign terrorists, and 255,000 times less than the risk of death from a regular homicide in the United States (see the Table below). By no measure can the data support the conclusion that refugees are a major threat to the lives of Americans.

Nor is there any reason to believe that this risk will change significantly in the future. Refugee terrorists committed all three of their murders in the 1970s—that is, before the creation of USRAP—and more than half of the 21 refugees who have even plotted or attempted an attack of

any kind—include non-deadly ones—did so before 1990. Refugees have not involved themselves in any kind of plots or attacks of any scale that would have altered these estimates in any important way. At the same time, the U.S. immigration system has substantially upgraded its vetting procedures since 9/11, making the likelihood of a major terrorist infiltration even more remote today than in the past.

### Table

**Annual Chance of Being Killed in an Attack on U.S. Soil by Original Visa of Terrorist, 1975-2016**

Category	Deaths	Annual Chance of Being Killed
All Murderers	767,717	1 in 14.6 thousand
Tourist	2,834	1 in 4.0 million
U.S.-Born	429	1 in 26.2 million
Student Visa	159	1 in 70.7 million
Fiancé Visa	14	1 in 802.6 million
Permanent Resident	8	1 in 1.4 billion
Asylee	4	1 in 2.8 billion
Refugee	3	1 in 3.8 billion
USRAP (Since 1980)	0	Zero

Sources: Alex Nowrasteh, "Terrorism and Immigration: A Risk Analysis," *Cato Institute: Policy Analysis No. 798*, September 13, 2016; David Bier, *International Refugee Assistance Project v. Trump*, *Cato Institute*, September 19, 2017, p. 27.

The risk of terrorists committing fraud to access the refugee program is also incredibly small. Only two refugees admitted since 9/11—Uzbek national Fazliddin Kurbanov and Somali national Abdul Artan—have plotted or carried out a terrorist attack in the United States.<sup>18</sup> Neither killed anyone. While it is possible that they committed fraud to obtain refugee status, the government never presented any evidence that they did.<sup>†</sup> It is impossible to view these numbers and consider refugee fraud a major threat to Americans.

### USRAP positively impacts the U.S. economy

The administration has reduced the refugee limit to 45,000 for fiscal year 2018. The limit was 85,000 in FY 2016 and 110,000 in FY 2017, though the administration only permitted 53,000 to enter. Limitations on the entry of refugees are essentially a type of labor market regulation. Refugees, like all other immigrants, contribute to the economy through entrepreneurship, employment, and consumption—all of which benefit U.S. residents. Studies on refugees in the United States and other countries have found that refugees can create wage gains for native workers through their consumption or through skill complementarities.<sup>19</sup> They can also lower prices overall by decreasing the cost of production and creating a new pool of consumers without brand loyalties for which businesses must compete.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>†</sup> Even if we expand our view to refugees convicted of supporting terrorist groups abroad, we find just four other refugees admitted since 9/11 who radicalized prior to entry.

The Cato Institute has used a conservative estimate of immigrants' positive economic contributions to project that each refugee increases the wages of all native-born Americans collectively by \$477.<sup>21</sup> Over the next decade, that would equal at least \$326 million in economic costs directly to U.S.-born citizens specifically, assuming that the cap had continued to average 110,000, President Obama's proposed refugee limit for 2017.

The National Academy of Sciences 2016 report on the fiscal and economic effects of immigration found that immigrants on average have a fiscally positive effect.<sup>22</sup> One recent study found that despite higher than average upfront costs, refugees "pay \$21,000 more in taxes than they receive in benefits over their first 20 years in the U.S."<sup>23</sup> A draft report on the cost of resettlement from 2005 to 2014 sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services found that "the net fiscal impact of refugees was positive over the 10-year period, at \$63 billion."<sup>24</sup> The administration declined to publish the report due its positive findings.<sup>25</sup>

The appropriate response to the short-term fiscal costs of resettlement is to find ways to reduce them by promoting economic integration and finding ways to cost-share with the private sector. Canada's successful private refugee sponsorship system allows private parties, churches, and nonprofits to sponsor refugees with private money, removing some of the fiscal burden from the government.<sup>26</sup> Several nonprofit organizations already partner with the U.S. government to resettle and integrate refugees in the United States. The committee should consider ways to leverage these relationships further to increase resettlement at a lower fiscal cost.

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<sup>1</sup> United States Department of State, "Admissions and Arrivals," Refugee Processing Center, <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Population Statistics Database," 2017, [http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/overview#\\_ga=2.114193607.1310969598.1508960236-1864847568.1508960236](http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/overview#_ga=2.114193607.1310969598.1508960236-1864847568.1508960236).

<sup>3</sup> International Organization for Migration, "ISCG Situation Update: Rohingya Refugee Crisis, Cox's Bazar," October 24, 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/iscg-situation-update-rohingya-refugee-crisis-cox-s-bazar-24-oct-2017>.

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<sup>4</sup> Euan McKirdy, "UNHCR report: More displaced now than after WWII," CNN, June 20, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/20/world/unhcr-displaced-peoples-report/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Nahal Toosi, "House unanimously condemns ISIL for genocide," Politico, March 14, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/03/congress-genocide-220736>.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew Pennington, "U.S. declaration of 'ethnic cleansing' in Myanmar on way," Associated Press, October 24, 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-ethnic-cleansing-myanmar-20171024-story.html>.

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR Staff, "Mediterranean death toll soars, 2016 is deadliest year yet," October 25, 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/afr/news/latest/2016/10/580f3e684/mediterranean-death-toll-soars-2016-deadliest-year.html>.

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- <sup>10</sup> 8 U.S. Code § 1521, note. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/8/1521>
- <sup>11</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "The Global Appeal and Supplementary Appeals," <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/the-global-appeal-and-supplementary-appeals.html>.  
United States Department of State, "Admissions and Arrivals," Refugee Processing Center, <http://www.wrapsnet.org/admissions-and-arrivals/>.
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