

**Competing Resettlement Preferences: Which Refugees do
the UNHCR and the United States Prioritize?**

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ABSTRACT

The UNHCR identifies resettlement as a key solution for refugees, yet it remains underutilized, with only about one percent of refugees under its mandate being resettled annually. As global displacement increases, the need for international solidarity and leadership in refugee resettlement grows. The wide disparity between resettlement needs and opportunities obligates the UNHCR and resettling states to establish preferences for which refugees will be prioritized for resettlement. This paper critically examines the resettlement preferences expressed by the United States, which typically resettles more refugees than any other country, against those expressed by the UNHCR. Utilizing analysis of UNHCR publications and U.S. presidential reports, this paper investigates the commonalities and differences in resettlement preferences. UNHCR's preferences reflect both an emphasis on individual-level vulnerabilities and group referrals as a means for maximizing the total benefits of resettlement. The United States' resettlement preferences manifest differently from one administration to another, and can be expressed in a number of ways. By evaluating these preferences and their practical outcomes, this research aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of U.S. refugee resettlement policies.

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List of Abbreviations

CWS	Church World Service
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
E.O.	Executive Order
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
KRM	Kentucky Refugee Ministries
ORR	Office of Refugee Resettlement
P-2	Priority-2
P-3	Priority-3
PRM	Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration
RCC	Resettlement Country Chapter
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USCIS	United States Citizenship and Immigration Services
USRAP	United States Refugee Admissions Program

INTRODUCTION

“The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) lists resettlement as one of the durable solutions for refugees, but it hardly is. The UNHCR estimates that there are currently more than 110 million forcibly displaced people around the world, 30.5 million of whom are refugees under the UNHCR’s mandate living in a country other than their own (UNHCR 2023a, 6). Of these 30.5 million refugees, approximately one percent will be resettled each year (UNHCR 2023a, 2). As the number of people who are forced to flee their home countries due to violence and persecution has continued to increase over recent years, the immense need for global solidarity and leadership in providing refuge and safety for these displaced populations also grows (American Immigration Council 2022).

Through the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP), the U.S. has offered permanent resettlement to more refugees than any other country, both in terms of annual refugee admissions and total resettlement (Ward and Batalova 2023; American Immigration Council 2022; UNHCR 2022b, 1).¹ The USRAP, described by some as the “world’s largest and most important refugee resettlement program”, is not immune to political and ideological influence over the functions of the resettlement program as well as the number and characteristics of the refugees admitted, which has never been more apparent than during the Trump Administration (Beers 2020, 2).

It is therefore necessary to critically evaluate how the United States establishes its preferences for which refugees will be prioritized for permanent resettlement, and which will not. Many researchers have analyzed the numbers and characteristics of refugees admitted to the U.S. as they relate to both domestic and foreign policy ambitions, but this paper aims to

¹ It is important to distinguish between permanent resettlement of refugees, of which the United States has traditionally led, versus the states which host the largest number of refugees. The states hosting large refugee populations are often neighbors to the refugees’ country or countries of origin. Currently, Iran and Türkiye each host approximately 3.4 million refugees (UNHCR 2023, 2).

offer an original contribution by situating these numbers and characteristics within the broader context of how the U.S. expresses its refugee resettlement preferences and comparing against the resettlement preferences of the UNHCR. In other words, this paper seeks to address the following questions: how do the United States and UNHCR express their preferences for which refugees deserve to be prioritized for resettlement, and to what extent can actual refugee admissions reflect these preferences?

This research will be limited to the resettlement preferences and refugee admissions during the fiscal years² (FY) 2017 through 2023 and the first half of FY 2024,³ as this scope will allow for analysis of the preferences set by the Trump and Biden presidential administrations. Given that, upon the outcome of November's election, either of these administrations has the potential to oversee U.S. refugee admissions for the next four years, it is particularly important to evaluate how either president has shaped the USRAP and expressed his refugee preferences thus far, as this analysis will indicate what direction U.S. refugee admissions may take. Moreover, American voters consistently rank immigration as a top priority voting issue (Pengelly 2024; Phares 2024), yet refugees remain a critically understudied immigrant category within the U.S. (Sana 2021, 575). This paper aims to address the need for comprehensive analysis and prioritization of the refugee resettlement preferences within the broader U.S. immigration policy framework.

I will examine UNHCR's preferences for global solidarity, individual-level vulnerabilities, and group referrals, using discourse analysis of UNHCR publications. As refugee admissions are primarily shaped by the president rather than Congress (Miller et al. 2020), I will analyze the preferences of the U.S. by scrutinizing primary documents which

² The U.S. fiscal year runs from October 1 through September 30. For example, FY 2017 begins on October 1, 2016, and ends on September 30, 2017.

³ For FY 2024, data is generally available for the first two quarters (October 1, 2023 through March 31, 2024); in some cases, there is data available through April 30, 2024. This distinction will always be made clear.

may be assumed to reflect U.S. governmental positions, namely the president's annual Reports to Congress, which propose the refugee admissions for the following fiscal year and reflect on current refugee trends and data. These reports, in addition to other documents produced by the Executive Branch, will be subjected to discourse analysis in order to identify shifts within and across presidential administrations. Intensive desk research will bring a secondary analysis of empirical research on resettlement in order to compare stated goals and practice in the field and to identify factors that may derail intentions. This thesis will then evaluate the extent to which the two resettlement preferences manifest within the actual refugee admissions during the corresponding fiscal years. Finally, I will present a case study which compares refugee admissions in Kentucky against national trends.

CHAPTER 1: FACTUAL FRAMEWORK, HISTORY, AND LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Resettlement Framework and Statistics

UNHCR works closely with a number of U.S. federal government agencies involved with the USRAP, serving as the primary referring agency for refugee resettlement applications and providing guidance and recommendations on group referrals (State Department et al. 2016-2023; UNHCR 2022c). Each year, UNHCR publishes its report on Global Trends in Forced Displacement, which will serve as the factual framework for the forced displacement and refugee statistics between 2016 and 2024. In 2016, UNHCR estimated that there were 65.6 million forcibly displaced persons around the world, 17.2 million of whom were refugees under UNHCR's mandate (2017, 2). UNHCR reported that, of the 189,300 refugees resettled in this year, more than half (96,900) resettled into the United States alone (2017, 2).

By 2020, the number of forcibly displaced persons rose to 82.4 million, and the number of refugees under the UNHCR's mandate to 21.3 million (UNHCR 2021, 2). Despite growing resettlement needs, the number of spaces for resettlement sharply declined as a result of Covid-19 border closings and national movement restrictions (UNHCR 2021, 6). Consequently, UNHCR only submitted 39,500 resettlement applications, though this figure began to recover by the next year (UNHCR 2021, 6; 2022, 3).

The most recent mid-year trends report, published in June 2023, explains that there are currently more forcibly displaced people than at any other time on record (UNHCR 2023). Just three countries—Syria, Ukraine, and Afghanistan—account for 52% of today's refugees (UNHCR 2023, 2). Other major sources of forced displacement⁴ include, but are not

⁴ This includes major producers of refugees, asylum-seekers, and IDPs; for detailed discussions of the sources of forced displacement, refer to the UNHCR's annual Global Trends reports.

limited to, Burma, Burundi, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Iraq, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Venezuela, and Yemen (UNHCR 2016-2023).

As the number of refugees continues to grow, including refugees in protracted situations,⁵ so does the need for comprehensive solutions to address these vulnerable populations. In the Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR describes four durable solutions for refugee situations: voluntary repatriation, local integration, resettlement, and complementary pathways for admission to third countries (2018a, 34). The preferred solution “in the majority of refugee situations” is voluntary repatriation, in which the refugee voluntarily returns to their country of origin or habitual residence in conditions of safety and dignity (UNHCR 2018a, 34). Local integration occurs for refugees in host countries, and resettlement involves relocation offered by a third country (UNHCR 2018a, 36, 38-39). The first three durable solutions are more deeply established, whereas the fourth, complementary pathways for admission to third countries, is a more recent initiative by UNHCR. Complementary pathways entail “regular migration” opportunities for refugees to relocate to third countries; examples of these complementary pathways include student visas, labor mobility opportunities for refugees, or sponsorship by resettled refugee diasporas (UNHCR 2018a, 38).

Resettlement is the durable solution which the United States offers, and is described by UNHCR as a “tangible mechanism for responsibility-sharing” and “demonstration of solidarity” (UNHCR 2018a, 36). By offering placements for resettlement, the resettling country alleviates the burden for countries of asylum and demonstrates global solidarity. Global solidarity can therefore be demonstrated by offering a large number of resettlement

⁵ “Protracted refugee situations are those in which at least 25,000 refugees from the same country have been living in exile for more than five consecutive years,” (UNHCR 2020b).

placements, and simultaneously politicized as resettlement states do not offer this generosity equally towards all refugees or first asylum states. That is to say, a state's resettlement preferences can be expressed in terms of which first asylum state and refugees the resettling state is solidaristic with.

In recent years, the U.S. has offered varying resettlement opportunities, ranging from 15,000 placements for FY 2021 (later revised to 62,500) and 125,000 since FY 2022 (State Department et al. 2020, 2021). In the following chapter, I will discuss the history of U.S. refugee resettlement and review literature analyzing the history and nature of U.S. refugee policies.⁶

1.2 History of Refugee Resettlement to the United States

While the United States began formally resettling refugees in the aftermath of the Second World War, the refugee resettlement process did not become standardized until Congress passed the 1980 Refugee Act, prompted by the overwhelming levels of forced displacement caused by the Vietnam War (Beers 2020, 3; Chernov 2021, 1035).⁷ This legislation provided a regulated approach for “identifying, vetting, and resettling prospective refugees” (Klobucista, McBride, and Roy 2024), and established government agencies responsible for handling applications and resettlement logistics (U.S. Congress 1980, §301(a), §411(a); Beers 2020, 3). The 1980 Refugee Act amended the Immigration and

⁶ It is necessary to clarify that this paper focuses on refugees, not asylum seekers. Refugees must demonstrate that they are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin (or nationality/ habitual residence) due to persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution, where asylum seekers must demonstrate that they are in need of international protection (Ward and Batalova 2023). In the U.S. context, the key difference between these groups is their physical location at the time of their application for recognition, protection, and resettlement (Ward and Batalova 2023). Asylum-seekers apply either within the United States, or at a U.S. border or port of entry, whereas refugees apply outside the U.S. and do not enter the country until they have been recognized as refugees and approved for resettlement (Ward and Batalova 2023).

⁷ This is a much-simplified narrative of the history of U.S. refugee admissions, and a deeper analysis of refugee policies prior to and after the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act goes well beyond the scope and aims of this paper. For a thorough overview of U.S. refugee policies before 1980, refer to Laufman 1986, 500; or Anker and Posner 1981.

Nationality Act by incorporating into U.S. law the definition of a refugee as established by the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol:

A ‘refugee’ as any person who is: (1) outside his country of nationality (or in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which he last habitually resided), and who is unable or unwilling to return to such country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. (U.S. Congress 1980, §201(a); United Nations 1951).

The U.S.’ new legal definition of a refugee eliminated prior limitations in which refugees could only come “from communist-dominated countries and the Middle East,” (Laufman 1986, 514; Anker 2021, 304). Some scholars even claim that the U.S. sought to incorporate laws implying a “fair and non-discriminatory refugee policy” as part of its competition with the Soviet Union for global influence and to gain the favor and sympathies of newly emerging states (Anker 2021, 304).

The Refugee Act obliges the president to consult with Congress on the annual refugee ceiling, which the law originally set at 50,000 with the potential to be raised or lowered by the President “in response to fluctuations in global displacement trends or needs” (Beers 2020, 3) or in response to “humanitarian concerns... or national interest,” (U.S. Congress 1980, §201(a)(1); Laufman 1986, 516-517). Indeed, the 1980 Refugee Act requires that the President engages in “appropriate consultation” with Congress “with respect to the admission of refugees and allocation of refugee admissions” (§207(3)(B)(e)). The 1980 Refugee Act enumerates seven points of information⁸ which the president, by way of Cabinet-level representatives, should provide to the Judiciary Committees of the House and Senate

⁸ (1) A description of the nature of the refugee situation; (2) a description of the number and allocation of the refugees to be admitted and an analysis of conditions within the countries from which they came; (3) A description of the plans for their movement and resettlement and the estimated cost of their movement and resettlement; (4) An analysis of the anticipated social, economic, and demographic impact of their admission to the United States; (5) A description of the extent to which other countries will admit and assist in the resettlement of such refugees; (6) An analysis of the impact of the participation of the United States in the resettlement of such refugees on the foreign policy interests of the United States; and (7) Such additional information as may be appropriate or requested by such members (U.S. Congress 1980, §207(e)).

(§207(3)(B)(e)(1-7)). The annual reports to Congress on the proposed refugee admissions compile this information and are submitted on behalf of the president by the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services (HHS).

The Refugee Act does not specify procedures in the event that either of the Congressional Judiciary Committees were to object to the president's refugee admissions or allocations. Therefore, in practice, the president's report to Congress is "no more than cosmetic" since Congress does not have the authority to make significant changes to the president's proposed numbers or allocations (Zucker and Zucker 1992, quoted in Miller et al. 2020, 152). The 1980 Refugee Act does not explicitly authorize Congress to determine either the number or characteristics of refugees, only that the President must consult with Congress on these matters; ultimately, both the number and allocations of refugee admissions are "as the President determines" (U.S. Congress 1980, §207(a)(1-2)). Generally, little to no changes are made between what the President submits in their report to Congress and what is later presented in the Presidential Determination, a Memorandum authorizing the State Department to work according to the now-official refugee admissions and regional allocations. That is to say, the Presidential Determination makes official the number and allocation of refugee admissions as described in the report to Congress (Laufman 1986, 519).

In the years following the 1980 Refugee Act, the U.S. admitted far more than 50,000 refugees per year, many of whom fled from the former Soviet Union or from communist rule and wars within Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (Anker 2021, 305). In 1982, a State Department Bureau Director remarked, with respect to the prioritization of refugees from the communist regimes of Southeast Asia, "the State Department recognizes both our humanitarian concern for these people, as well as the intrinsic foreign policy importance of this program," (Avery 1983; quoted in Laufman 1986, 532). In the same way that refugee admissions in the years following the Refugee Act "reflect[ed] the government's preferences

for admitting refugees fleeing communism” (Laufman 1986, 532), the current administration’s resettlement preferences reflect the prioritization of certain refugee characteristics or groups over others.

During and after the Cold War, U.S. refugee policies were largely characterized by ideological tensions; however, in the aftermath of 9/11, national security became the paramount concern. The 9/11 terrorist attacks and subsequent creation of the Department of Homeland Security had a profound effect on U.S. refugee policies and admissions, as the government pursued “the virtual fusion of immigration into the national security apparatus,” (Chernov 2021, 1032). The Bush administration utilized “strict immigration enforcement as a counterterrorism tactic” and the interconnectedness of immigration and national security has remained unwavering (Chernov 2021, 1031), yet his administration remained committed to resettling high numbers of refugees even after 9/11, with a refugee ceiling of 70,000 per year (Beers 2020, 7). It would be a grave injustice to imply that Democratic administrations have not also utilized immigration and refugee policies as a tool of national security and counterterrorism, as seen, for instance, in the Obama Administration’s dramatic uptick in deportations on national security grounds (Chernov 2021, 1042). However, the association between immigration and national security escalated under Trump, as his administration addressed the surge in refugee and asylum-seeker applications with nationalistic and security-driven policies (Chernov 2021, 1032), even suspending all refugee admissions for 120 days based on concerns of terrorist-related fraud within the refugee system (Executive Office of the President 2017a, §5). Trump sought to “dismantle the USRAP”, notably by slashing the refugee ceiling and implementing “travel restrictions and enhanced screening requirements for several Muslim-majority countries,” (Beers 2020, 2, 7-8).

The Biden administration’s refugee policies can be characterized as attempting to rebuild and recover the USRAP from both the damage set upon it by the Trump

administration and the continuing legacies of the Covid-19 pandemic (White House 2021b, 2021c). This paper does not wish to imply that refugee admissions under the Biden Administration are without faults or immune from political considerations; for instance, despite campaign promises, the Biden Administration took months to reverse Trump's record-low 15,000 refugee ceiling for FY 2021 (Alvarez et al. 2021; White House 2021c). However, despite valid criticisms of the current administration's refugee policies, it is clear that Biden's administration seeks to rebuild USRAP and return U.S. refugee admissions to a state of normalcy (International Rescue Committee 2021). In sum, the deeply political nature of the refugee resettlement process goes beyond any single administration.

1.3 Literature Review

Numerous scholars have recognized that the refugee resettlement process is not an apolitical one: Daniel Tichenor, for example, wrote that "the struggle among modern policymakers has reflected differences over [which refugees] should benefit from generous refugee relief" (Tichenor 2002, 248, quoted in Miller et al. 2020, 154). Writing for the Georgetown Immigration Law Journal, David H. Laufman describes the goal of U.S. humanitarian programs, such as refugee policies, as "maximiz[ing] the fulfillment of foreign policy objectives," (Laufman 1986, 498). Laufman illustrates the three pathways the U.S. government can take in achieving foreign policy goals through its refugee admissions:

First, the government may place emphasis on granting refugee status to individuals fleeing regimes that the United States opposes. Second, it may exhibit reluctance to admit refugees from friendly nations in order to avoid offending the foreign government. Third, the United States may sometimes decline to admit refugees from hostile regimes, reasoning that "U.S. interests are better served by opposition forces who remain and fight rather than ... leave as refugees." (Laufman 1986, 498; Gallagher et al. 1985; quoted in Laufman 1986).

There is clear evidence that refuge in the United States has been historically equipped by the government as a foreign policy tool. In the aftermath of World War II, the U.S. prioritized

refugees fleeing Soviet or communist regimes as a method of undermining these geopolitical adversaries and “encourag[ing] anti-communists within the Soviet sphere,” (Anker and Posner 1981, 13; quoted in Laufman 1986, 500).

Nicholas R. Micinski argues that traditional analyses of refugee policy as foreign policy are insufficient to explain why the U.S. offers refugee relief to some groups instead of others, and proposes the politics of neighbors as a framework of analysis (2018, 254). He uses the vast disparities in U.S. resettlement of Iraqis (143,650) versus Afghans (29,688) between 2001 and 2016 as an illustrative example, citing, among several reasons, U.S. strategic considerations in Jordan and interests in undermining the Soviet and Taliban regimes as justifications for the disproportion in refugee resettlement considering the similarities of the displaced populations (Micinski 2018, 275). Micinski takes foreign policy tactics, such as those described by Laufman, and applies them to the neighboring states of refugees’ countries of origin, rather than the states of origin themselves, arguing that U.S. foreign policy interests in the neighboring state (the state of first asylum) are just as critical for understanding refugee admissions as the foreign policy interests in countries of origin (Micinski 2000). A further example of the politics of neighbors becoming realized in U.S. refugee admissions is that, in the mid-1980s, the United States accepted few refugees from the entire continent of Africa because nearly all of these refugees fled to Ethiopia, which was, at the time, a Soviet ally (Laufman 1986, 533). The U.S.’ desire to undermine the Soviet Union and its allies is reflected in its refugee policies at the time, a clear gauge of the politics of neighbors at work (Laufman 1986; Beers 2020).

This paper does not aim to apply the politics of neighbors framework to U.S. refugee admissions as a whole; instead, this framework connects well to the analysis of U.S. resettlement preferences as they relate to broader norms of global solidarity. Micinski’s analysis would indicate that U.S. resettlement politicizes global solidarity, because the

generosity of resettlement is not offered equally to all refugees, nor is relief given to each first country of asylum burdened with large refugee populations. The selectiveness of this generosity necessitates a critical examination of how the U.S. expresses its resettlement preferences.

In “The Preferences of Political Elites and Humanitarian Immigration to the United States,” Miller et al. evaluate the varying influences that the president and Congress have over the U.S.’ refugee resettlement preferences and policies (2020). When the 1980 Refugee Act was drafted and eventually passed into law, some policymakers at the time felt that the Act would constrain the leverage of the executive branch and promote both consultations with Congress and humanitarian-focused, non-strategic goals for the U.S. refugee resettlement system (Miller et al. 2020, 151-152; Laufman 1986, 511-513). This has not been the case. Since the 1980 Refugee Act gives more authority and discretion over refugee admissions to the president, who has influence over both the number and characteristics of refugees admitted, Congress has little influence (Miller et al. 2020, 151; U.S. Congress 1980, §207).

The president’s influence on refugee admissions is further apparent when comparing between administrations and political parties (Miller et al. 2020, 151). The authors argue that “conservative administrations will tend to use the [refugee resettlement] system to embarrass geopolitical opponents” and “liberal presidents might place more emphasis on humanitarian concerns” (Miller et al. 2020, 153). The authors make this argument by analyzing characteristics of the countries from which the resettled refugees originated: whether the country of origin is a U.S. military ally, the level of human rights repressions, and whether the country of origin is under economic sanctions by the U.S. (Miller et al. 2020, 155).

Where many scholars have examined the political nature of U.S. refugee policy and the demographics of admitted refugees, few have written on how the U.S. expresses its

preferences for which refugees deserve priority consideration for permanent resettlement. Moreover, there is no existing literature which explicitly compares the resettlement preferences of the United States with those of the UNHCR. Since UNHCR submits the majority of resettlement applications, and the United States typically resettles more refugees than any other country, it is imperative to understand how each entity constructs its resettlement preferences. In the following sections, this thesis will present an evaluation of UNHCR's resettlement preferences and compare them against those expressed by the United States.

CHAPTER 2: EVALUATING THE UNHCR'S RESETTLEMENT PREFERENCES

UNHCR broadly and consistently champions the ideals of global solidarity and responsibility-sharing in its advocacy for the continuation and expansion of resettlement as a durable solution for refugees (UNHCR 20218a). “Burden sharing and international cooperation are the pillars of the international refugee protection regime but...burdens and responsibilities are not always fairly distributed between States,” (Nirmal 2010, 199). There is a growing disparity between the ever-increasing number of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, and the stagnant or even decreasing number of resettlement opportunities for these refugees. In 2009, for instance, only one percent of refugees benefited from resettlement (Nirmal 2010, 209). The vast imbalance between resettlement needs and opportunities obligates UNHCR to prioritize certain refugees over others. This chapter will evaluate how UNHCR expresses preferences for which characteristics or groups should be prioritized for resettlement. I will first examine UNHCR's three priority levels for submitting and processing resettlement applications, followed by an analysis of submission categories and group referrals.

In its Resettlement Handbook, a reference tool covering resettlement practices and offering policy guidance, UNHCR establishes three priority levels for the processing and submission of applications for resettlement (UNHCR 2024b). These priority levels and submission categories focus on the characteristics of an individual (or family unit) which warrant consideration for resettlement as a durable solution for the given individual refugee or refugee family. These characteristics, which do not include factors like nationality or religion, instead reflect the individual's (or family's) vulnerabilities. The processing priority level for a resettlement case is assigned when the case is created, “based on the recommendation of...who referred the case,” and the submission priority level is assigned

when submitting the case to a resettlement country, “reflecting the expected timeframe for a decision and eventual departure,” (UNHCR 2024b).

There are three priority levels for processing and submitting resettlement cases: emergency, urgent, and normal priority:

Normal: The majority of UNHCR’s global submissions fall within this category. This priority level applies to cases where any security, medical or other concerns do not warrant expedited processing. Normal priority submissions should be prioritized according to resettlement needs. UNHCR expects decisions and departures within 12 months of submission.

Urgent: This priority level applies to cases in which a refugee faces serious protection risks given the specific context, and/or has acute medical needs that require expeditious resettlement.... Resettlement States should aim to process urgent priority cases within six weeks.

Emergency: This priority level applies to cases in which the immediacy of protection risks and/or medical condition [sic] necessitates removal from life-threatening conditions in the country or asylum within a few days... Resettlement States should aim to process emergency priority cases within seven days (UNHCR 2024b).

These priority levels represent three varying levels of necessity in the UNHCR’s submission of a resettlement application and the receiving state’s consideration of said application. The priority levels list the conditions necessary for an application to qualify for each level, as well as the expected timeframe for the processing and submitting of an application within each priority level.

It is important to clarify that these priority levels do not relate to an individual or family’s application to be recognized as a refugee; rather, once an individual or family has been recognized as a refugee, UNHCR first processes an application in order to determine that resettlement is the most appropriate durable solution. If resettlement is deemed appropriate, UNHCR then submits the application to a state offering placements for permanent resettlement (UNHCR 2024b; UNHCR 2011). These priority levels reflect the application for resettlement, not for recognition as a refugee.

UNHCR also designates seven categories for submitting applications for resettlement (UNHCR 2024a; UNHCR 2011, 243). These submission categories constitute the seven broad types of vulnerabilities which warrant consideration of a refugee’s application for resettlement as the most appropriate durable solution—in other words, these submission categories reflect UNHCR’s preferences for resettlement. The seven submission categories are as follows:

1. **Legal and/or Physical Protection Needs** of the refugee in the country of asylum, including the threat of refoulement;⁹
2. **Women and Girls at Risk**, who are survivors, or are at risk, of gender-based violence;
3. **Children and Adolescents at Risk**, where resettlement has been assessed or determined to be in their best interests;
4. **Survivors of Violence and/or Torture**, where return or the conditions of asylum could result in further traumatization and/or heightened risk, and/or where appropriate treatment is not available;
5. **Medical Needs**, in particular life-saving treatment that is unavailable in the country of asylum;
6. **Restoring Family Unity**, when resettlement is the only means to restore family unity of refugees who have been separated;
7. **Lack of Foreseeable Alternative Durable Solutions**, mainly relevant as a secondary submission category to highlight the lack of prospects for (i) return and (ii) legal and socioeconomic integration in the country of asylum (UNHCR 2024a; UNHCR 2011, 243).

UNHCR requires that all resettlement applications have **two** submission categories applied, which “demonstrates the justification for prioritizing a given individual or family for resettlement among a large number of other refugees with resettlement needs,” (UNHCR 2024a). These seven submission categories, in conjunction with the three priority levels, can be framed as individual-level (or sometimes family-level) *vulnerabilities*, in the sense that these are the characteristics which UNHCR has determined to warrant a refugee being

⁹ A threat of refoulement indicates a threat that the country of asylum will expel or return the refugee to the country where there is a risk of persecution or serious harm (UNHCR 2023b). In contrast, the principle of non-refoulement broadly prescribes that no refugee should be returned to any country where they are likely to face persecution, other ill-treatment, or torture (United Nations 1951, Article 33). The 1980 Refugee Act amended the Immigration and Nationality Act to incorporate the principle of nonrefoulement into U.S. law (U.S. Congress 1980, §203(e)).

considered for resettlement. These submission categories therefore reflect UNHCR's preferences for which refugees should be prioritized for resettlement. Of the seven enumerated submission categories, only two are explicitly listed as reasons to prioritize an application for resettlement as **urgent** or **emergency** rather than normal, thus expediting the application's submission and consideration timelines: protection risks (point 1) and medical needs (point 5) (UNHCR 2024b). It can therefore be understood that protection and medical needs rank highest among UNHCR's preferences for resettlement, as these are the only two vulnerabilities which can qualify for accelerated consideration (UNHCR 2024b).

These submission categories describe vulnerabilities which apply to refugees at an individual level, rather than hard sociological or demographic indicators such as a refugee's nationality/region of origin or religion. It is worth highlighting that these individual-level vulnerabilities are unique to UNHCR's preferences and are not present or reflected in the U.S.' resettlement preferences, with the exception of family reunification cases. During the fiscal years examined, the U.S. only describes a refugee's religion, country of origin, or region of origin, as characteristics to consider when proposing resettlement priorities and allocation numbers.

Undoubtedly, many of the refugees who are admitted to the U.S. each year for resettlement live with the vulnerabilities described by UNHCR's seven submission categories (e.g., surely there are refugees admitted who are survivors of gender-based violence, who have acute medical conditions, etc.), however these vulnerabilities are not described by the U.S. as reasons to prioritize a case for resettlement or mentioned as a defining characteristic for which to allocate a specific number of resettlement placements. For instance, an administration may allocate 20,000 resettlement spots for refugees from Africa or Latin America, but there are not 20,000 resettlement spots explicitly allocated for survivors of violence or torture, or for unaccompanied children. This distinction is crucial to make

because this demonstrates an aspect of UNHCR's and U.S.' preferences for which there is no overlap: UNHCR explicitly names individual-level vulnerabilities in its preferences for which refugees deserve to be prioritized for resettlement, and the United States predominantly does not.

Having examined the priority levels and submission categories as expressions of UNHCR's resettlement preferences, it is now appropriate to evaluate a second component of UNHCR's resettlement preferences: its call for a "greater focus on the resettlement of groups of persons" in order to strategically maximize resettlement as a durable solution for both refugees and the international community (UNHCR 2011, 57). UNHCR increasingly advocates for group resettlement as an expanding durable solution for refugees, particularly in the context of protracted refugee situations (UNHCR 2011; UNHCR 2024c).

UNHCR defines these groups as "a specific refugee population whose members have a sufficiently common flight history, circumstances, fear of return, and need for resettlement that can be credibly articulated and proposed for resettlement," (2011, 57). Group resettlement indicates that UNHCR and resettlement states coordinate simplified large-scale processing for resettlement for specified groups who meet the above definition (UNHCR 2024c). This thesis only aims to describe this process in the simplest possible terms, and would refer to the online Resettlement Handbook for a thorough explanation of the group designation process. First, a local UNHCR office identifies a group in need of resettlement and then proposes this group for resettlement consideration, followed by an evaluation and analysis with four possible outcomes:

1. **The concerned refugee population should be pursued as a "group"** (positive outcome),
2. **Specified additional information is required** about the proposed group before its feasibility can be determined,
3. **The concerned refugee population is not appropriate** to be processed under group methodology, but the refugee population should be processed for resettlement **on an individual basis**, and

4. **The concerned refugee population is not appropriate** for further action and resettlement of the proposed population should not be pursued (UNHCR 2024c).

Evaluating the appropriate outcome for the refugee population involves factors like population size and the commonality of refugee claims (UNHCR 2024c). If the relevant UNHCR offices accept the group proposal, they then approach a resettlement country with the appropriate documentation (UNHCR 2024c). If the UNHCR accepts a group proposal, they will present it to a resettlement country. If interested, the country works with UNHCR to develop a Group Resettlement Plan and determine specific submission procedures (UNHCR 2024c). Politicians often cite this process as justification for increased government security concerns as group referrals can enable many refugees to bypass individual status determination.

The UNHCR Resettlement Handbook lacks a complete list of refugee populations prioritized for group resettlement. However, the latest Resettlement Country Chapter (RCC) outlines the U.S.'s recent resettlement practices and lists priority refugee groups based on UNHCR recommendations (UNHCR 2022b, 5).

Group referrals are classified as Priority-2 by the U.S., a category detailed in the next chapter. In the most recent RCC, UNHCR lists “certain Burmese in Thailand, certain minorities from Burma in Malaysia, certain Congolese in the Great Lakes, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi, and Eritreans in Ethiopia,” in addition to “certain Afghan nationals and their eligible family members” as predefined refugee groups with Priority-2 access (UNHCR 2022b, 5).¹⁰ The group designation model allows UNHCR to refer groups of refugees with similar persecution claims, streamlining and expediting the process by avoiding labor-intensive individual referrals (UNHCR 2022b, 5).

¹⁰ The UNHCR’s U.S. RCC also lists refugee populations eligible for In-Country Priority-2 processing, but these resettlement applications are generally not referred to the USRAP by the UNHCR, and thus will not be covered in this analysis. To review the most recent list of In-Country Priority-2 programs, refer to the RCC, beginning on page six (UNHCR 2022b, 6).

The seven types of vulnerabilities which constitute UNHCR's resettlement submission categories demonstrate why a particular refugee should be considered for resettlement over another with a less demonstrative claim or need for resettlement (UNHCR 2024a; UNHCR 2024b). These vulnerabilities reflect one core component of how UNHCR expresses its preferences for which refugees deserve to be prioritized for resettlement. The group referrals constitute the second component of these preferences, as the UNHCR can maximize the benefits of resettlement by allowing for accelerated processing of qualifying refugee populations (UNHCR 2011). Group referrals allow UNHCR to more efficiently submit several applications for resettlement to the U.S. (or another resettlement country), based on jointly determined group designation criteria, with the goal of more quickly resettling as many refugees as possible. Thus, UNHCR expresses a preference for the groups named by the US.' Priority-2 designation, because they have greater chances of positive resettlement decisions, and thus all actors involved can maximize the benefits of resettlement (UNHCR 2011, 57, 234).

UNHCR's resettlement preferences highlight individual-level vulnerabilities as the features which justify resettlement, and promote group processing as a mechanism for saving resources and maximizing the total benefits of resettlement opportunities. Having examined the preferences expressed by UNHCR, this thesis will next evaluate how such preferences compare to those expressed by the United States, a leading resettlement country.

CHAPTER 3: EVALUATING THE U.S.' RESETTLEMENT PREFERENCES

Anker states: “[the U.S.’ refugee policies] reflect a deep tension...wavering between cosmopolitan ideals and its own brand of populism or nativism,” (2021, 303). This approach may serve as the framework guiding the analysis of the United States’ preferences for refugee admissions: On one end of the hypothetical spectrum, there are refugee policies which show no preference based on foreign policy considerations, and do not differentiate between refugees based on qualities such as religion or nationality, instead only examining a refugee’s actual situation or vulnerabilities. This end of the spectrum more closely aligns with the ideals established by the UNHCR’s own preferences for resettlement cases, which prioritize individual vulnerabilities rather than nationality or religion. Some scholars assert that one of the primary intentions behind the enactment of the 1980 Refugee Act was to align U.S. refugee policy with the recommendations and practices of UNHCR. In the 1987 Supreme Court case *INS v. Cardoza-Fonseca*, the Court wrote:

If one thing is clear from the legislative history of the new definition of ‘refugee,’ and indeed the entire 1980 Act, it is that one of Congress’ primary purposes was to bring United States refugee law into conformance with the [UN Protocol]...with the understanding that [the new statutory definition of ‘refugee’] is based directly upon the language of the Protocol, and it is intended that the provision be construed consistent with the Protocol (U.S. Supreme Court 1987; also quoted in Laufman 1986, 498).

Laufman analyzes this Supreme Court opinion as Congress’ intent and obligation to separate U.S. geopolitical decisions and considerations from its implementation of refugee admissions (1986, 498); Micinski concurs that incorporating the international legal definition of a refugee into U.S. law was “aimed to make refugee policy less ideological,” (2018, 261). The definition of a refugee as expressed in the 1967 Protocol and 1980 Refugee Act were politically neutral: “refugee status was to be determined on the basis of persecution, not national origin or political ideology,” (Laufman 1986, 506). Through the passage of the 1980 Refugee Act, Congress intended for refugee admission decisions to prioritize humanitarian

concerns over ideological or foreign policy considerations (Laufman 1986, 531). However, as previously discussed, U.S. refugee policy remains significantly influenced by political considerations, falling short of this neutrality.

Where one end of the hypothetical spectrum represents refugee policies that exhibit no favoritism based on nationality or religion, the opposite end holds refugee policies which clearly differentiate between resettlement applicants based on these hard sociological or demographic indicators. Several scholars assert that the United States tends to pursue the latter end of the spectrum, employing refugee admissions as a tool within its broader foreign policy ambitions, which indicates that these larger political interests change depending on the person and administration in power (Miller et al. 2020, 151).

Based on the conclusion that the president holds more influence over the number and characteristics of refugees admitted than does Congress, this thesis limits its examination of U.S. resettlement preferences to documents produced by the executive branch, namely the president's annual report to Congress.¹¹ My analysis of the U.S.' resettlement preferences will be divided into two thematic sections, followed by a third analyzing the different resettlement preferences expressed by the Trump and Biden Administrations. First, I will examine six mechanisms expressed in each annual report which explicitly express resettlement preferences. Second, I will utilize discourse analysis to show the ways each Administration expresses its preferences in a broader, more encompassing manner.

3.1 U.S. Resettlement Preferences: Six Key Methods of Expression

¹¹ To prevent confusion, I wish to clarify the dates and authors of the relevant reports: the reports are submitted in the fall, around the beginning of the new fiscal year. The FY 2017 report was submitted by the Obama Administration in 2016, although most of FY 2017 is under the authority of the Trump Administration beginning in January 2021. Trump's Administration submitted the FY 2018-2021 reports, although the Biden Administration took over in January 2021. The FY 2022-2024 reports were submitted by Biden's Administration.

Within the annual reports to Congress, there are at least six means by which an administration can explicitly express its refugee resettlement preferences:

1. **Priority levels,**
2. **Groups qualifying for Priority-2 referrals**
3. **Nationalities eligible for Priority-3 referrals,**
4. **Proposed allocations,**
5. **Countries of Particular Concern and Special Watch, and**
6. **Mentions of Executive Orders.**

These methods can be objectively compared across years and presidents, illuminating clear expressions of an administration's refugee resettlement preferences.

Priority Levels

There are three consistent resettlement priority levels expressed within the reports to Congress for 2017 through 2024:

Priority 1: Individual cases referred by designated entities to the program by virtue of their circumstances and apparent need for resettlement;

Priority 2: Groups of special concern designated by the Department of State as having access to the program by virtue of their circumstances and apparent need for resettlement; and

Priority 3: Individual cases granted access for purposes of reunification with family members already in the United States. (State Department et al. 2016-2023).

A fourth priority was established by the Biden Administration in the report for 2022:

Priority 4: Individual cases from all nationalities who have been referred by private sponsors in the United States and who receive post-arrival support and services from those sponsors.

While referred to as “processing priorities”, the priority numbers do not express a hierarchy or order in which cases will be processed, nor do they indicate the likelihood of a successful outcome. “Once cases are established as eligible for access under one of the processing priorities, they all undergo the same processing steps,” (State Department et al., 2021).

Priority 3, family reunification referrals, corresponds with UNHCR’s similar submission category, prioritizing resettlement applications for refugees reuniting with family. Priority 4, private sponsorship, demonstrates a commitment to UNHCR’s fourth durable solution, complementary pathways for migration. Both Priority 3 and Priority 4 reflect different facets of global solidarity: Priority 3 underscores a fundamental humanitarian principle—family unity—while Priority 4 highlights community involvement in addressing refugee needs.

Groups qualifying for Priority-2 (P-2) referrals

“P-2 designations reflect the determination that a group is of special humanitarian concern to the United States and that individual members of the group will likely qualify for admission as refugees under U.S. law,” (State Department et al., 2022, 12-13). Priority-2 designations represent a major way that the President can leverage foreign policy goals through refugee policy (Micinski 2018, 262). This designation means that the refugee group is prioritized for admission to the United States, and increased funding is allocated towards processing these admissions (Micinski 2018, 262). The 1980 Refugee Act does not specify parameters or conditions for which a refugee group could be labeled as being “of special humanitarian concern” to the U.S., meaning that the president and State Department have nearly unilateral control over which refugee groups enjoy this priority designation (Micinski 2018, 2; U.S. Congress 1980, §207(a)(3)). This point emphasizes the selective nature of USRAP’s generosity and how the ideal of global solidarity can and is often politicized, as this priority designation can be given based on geopolitical interests rather than based on established criteria.

There are two models through which groups can gain P-2 access to the USRAP. State Department and Homeland Security agencies coordinate the first model, **predefined group access**, by establishing the access eligibility criteria for the group (usually based on

recommendations from UNHCR). The referring entity, usually UNHCR, then provides data on refugee applicants who meet the criteria.

Certain groups received predefined group access from FY 2017-2019, and again from FY 2022-2024: certain Congolese in Rwanda and Tanzania, and certain ethnic minorities from Burma in Thailand and Malaysia (State Department et al. 2016-2024).¹²

Other groups receive predefined group access for one or more of the fiscal years examined: certain Bhutanese in Nepal; certain Afghan nationals; Congolese in the Great Lakes and Burundi; Eritreans in Ethiopia; Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh; Refugees “twice displaced” in Ethiopia; and certain Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans in Mexico (State Department et al. 2016-2024).¹³

The second P-2 model is **direct access**, usually taking the form of an in-country program.

Historical examples of the direct access model include in-country programs for refugees in Cuba and Vietnam. This thesis will not differentiate between direct access programs which are established either in or outside the refugee’s home country; although the Geneva

Convention requires that a refugee be outside his/her country of origin, U.S. law also allows a refugee to be “within the country of such person’s nationality or habitual residence” based on the president’s discretion (U.S. Congress 1980, §201(a)).

The following groups have maintained a direct access P-2 designation for all eight fiscal years examined: certain religious minorities in Eurasia and the Baltics (qualifying under the annually-reauthorized Lautenberg Program¹⁴), certain Iraqis associated with the United States, and certain religious minorities in Iran¹⁵ (State Department et al. 2016-2024).

¹² The Trump Administration did not refer to any predefined P-2 groups in the FY 2020-2021 reports.

¹³ Refer to the reports to Congress for greater details on qualifying group characteristics. One example: “*Ethnic Minorities from Burma in Malaysia*: Under this P-2 designation, members of ethnic minorities from Burma who were recognized by UNHCR as refugees in Malaysia, registered by August 17, 2010, and identified as needing resettlement, are eligible for resettlement process,” (State Department et al. 2022, 16).

¹⁴ Often referred to as the Lautenberg Amendment, this program allows citizens of former Soviet Union countries who are members of a religious minority group (Jews, Evangelical Christians, Ukrainian Catholics, and members of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and Greek Orthodox Church) to join their family living in the United States (U.S. Congress 1990, §599D(a-e)).

¹⁵ Religious minorities in Iran are sometimes referred to as a separate P-2 designation, and sometimes referred to within the same P-2 designation as the Lautenberg Amendment religious minorities. The latter is supported by the Specter Amendment to the Foreign Operations, Export Financing, and Related Programs Appropriations Act of 1990 which expanded the Lautenberg Amendment to include certain religious minority groups within Iran (U.S. Congress 2004, §213(1)(c)(iii)).

Other groups have had a direct access P-2 designation for one or more of the fiscal years examined: certain persons in Cuba (FY 2017-2018, the designation continued from FY 2022-2024 although the program was also suspended during these fiscal years); designated Central American Minors in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (FY 2017-2018, FY 2022-2024); certain persons in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (FY 2022 and 2023); and certain approved Syrian family-reunification beneficiaries (FY 2017-2019, FY 2022-2024) (State Department et al. 2016-2024).

This paper does not aim to differentiate between the two access models of P-2 designations, as the intended outcome—referral access to the USRAP—remains the same. P-2 designations can indicate both support for and politicization of global solidarity norms. By allocating greater resources towards resettling particularly vulnerable refugee populations, the resettling state offers relief both to the refugees themselves and to certain countries of first asylum. However, the selectiveness of P-2 designations underscores the political nature of refugee admissions, as decisions regarding which refugee populations receive priority status can be influenced by various geopolitical and domestic interests.

The nuances of this designation become more complex in light of the Biden Administration naming additional groups for priority consideration, although not going so far as to designate access to P-2 referrals.¹⁶ Listing these refugee populations demonstrates a degree of global solidarity by acknowledging the resettlement needs of these groups, but the lack of an official designation might indicate the Administration's inability or unwillingness to fully prioritize these groups for resettlement.

Nationalities eligible for Priority-3 (P-3) referrals

¹⁶ These groups included Turkic Muslim refugees from China, refugees who are political activists or dissidents from the Hong Kong Special Administration Region, Rohingya Muslim refugees from Burma, religious or ethnic minority refugees from Iraq and Syria, and refugees persecuted on the basis of LGBTQ characteristics (State Department et al. 2021, 17-18). In the FY 2023 report, the Biden Administration added at-risk Uyghur refugees from China and at-risk individuals in Northern Central America (State Department et al. 2022, 18). There were no such groups listed in the FY 2024 report.

“The Priority 3 (P-3) level affords USRAP access to members of designated nationalities who have immediate family members in the United States who initially entered as refugees or were granted asylum. At the beginning of each fiscal year, PRM, in consultation with DHS/USCIS, establishes the list of nationalities eligible for processing under this priority,” (State Department et al. 2016, 16). The lists of qualifying nationalities are only enumerated in the Reports to Congress for the 2017 through 2021 fiscal years, as the Biden Administration made this priority level open to any nationality beginning in FY 2022.

The following fifteen nationalities have received eligibility for P-3 referrals from FY 2017 through 2021: Afghanistan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Cuba, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Mali, North Korea, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Syria (State Department et al. 2016-2024).

Three nationalities were eligible for P-3 referrals for FY 2017 and 2021: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (State Department et al. 2016, 2020).

Four additional nationalities were eligible for P-3 referrals for FY 2017: Bhutan, Colombia, Haiti, and Uzbekistan (State Department et al. 2016).

When only certain nationalities are eligible for Priority 3 referrals in particular years, it can suggest a more targeted approach to family reunification, potentially driven by geopolitical considerations, diplomatic relationships, or strategic interests. This selectiveness may limit the expression of global solidarity, as it prioritizes certain refugee populations over others based on factors other than humanitarian need alone. As mentioned, the Biden Administration established that qualifying family members of any and all nationalities, including stateless individuals, were eligible for P-3 referrals. This policy change indicates a greater commitment to global solidarity, as the generosity of potential family reunification was no longer restricted based on a refugee’s nationality.

Proposed allocations of refugee admissions

Figure 1: Proposed Refugee allocations across global regions, Fiscal Years 2017-2024.

PROPOSED REGIONAL ALLOCATIONS FOR FY 2017 - 2024										
Region/Year	2017a	2017b	2018	2019	2020	2021a	2021b	2022	2023	2024
Africa	35,000	35,000	19,000	11,000	0	0	22,000	40,000	40,000	30,000-50,000
East Asia	12,000	12,000	5,000	4,000	0	0	6,000	15,000	15,000	10,000-20,000
Europe and Central Asia	4,000	4,000	2,000	3,000	0	0	4,000	10,000	15,000	2,000-3,000
Latin America and Caribbean	5,000	5,000	1,500	3,000	0	0	5,000	15,000	15,000	35,000-50,000
Near East and South Asia	40,000	40,000	17,500	9,000	0	0	13,000	35,000	35,000	30,000-45,000
Unallocated Reserve	14,000	14,000	0	0	0	0	12,500	10,000	5,000	0
Total	110,000	110,000	45,000	30,000	18,000	15,000	62,500	125,000	125,000	125,000

Source: Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration 2024; State Department et al. 2016-2023.

Figure 2: Proposed Resettlement Allocations for Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021a.

PROPOSED RESETTLEMENT ALLOCATIONS FOR FY 2020 - 2021a			
FY 2020 Allocation Categories	FY 2020 Allocations	FY 2021a Allocation Categories	FY 2021a Allocations
Refugees who have been persecuted or have a well-founded fear of persecution on account of religion; or who are within a category of aliens established under subsection (b) of Section 599D of Title V, P. L. 101-167, as amended (the Lautenberg and Specter Amendments).	5,000	Refugees who have been persecuted or have a well-founded fear of persecution on account of religion; or who are within a category of aliens established under subsection (b) of Section 599D of Title V, P. L. 101-167, as amended (the Lautenberg and Specter Amendments).	5,000
Refugees who are within a category of aliens listed in Section 1243(a) of the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act of 2007, Title XII, Div. A, P. L. 110-181, as amended.	4,000	Refugees who are within a category of aliens listed in Section 1243(a) of the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act of 2007, Title XII, Div. A, P. L. 110-181, as amended.	4,000
Refugees who are nationals or habitual residents of El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras.	1,500	Refugees who are nationals or habitual residents of El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras.	1,000
Other refugees not covered by the foregoing categories, including: Those referred to the USRAP by a U.S. embassy in any location; Those who gain access to the USRAP for family reunification through the Priority 3 process or through a Form I-730 following-to-join petition; Those currently located in Australia, Nauru, or Papua New Guinea who gain access to USRAP pursuant to an arrangement between the United States and Australia.	7,500	Other refugees in the following groups: Those referred to the USRAP by a U.S. embassy in any location; Those who will be admitted through a Form I-730 following-to-join petition or who gain access to the USRAP for family reunification through the P-3 process; Those currently located in Australia, Nauru, or Papua New Guinea who gain access to USRAP pursuant to an arrangement between the United States and Australia; Those who are nationals or habitual residents of Hong Kong, Venezuela, or Cuba; Those in the USRAP who were in "Ready for Departure" status as of September 30, 2019.	5,000
FY 2020 Total	18,000	FY 2021a Total	15,000

Source: State Department et al. 2019 and 2020.

In order to differentiate between the refugee ceiling and proposed allocations during years of administration changes, I refer to the original ceiling and allocations made by the Obama Administration as 2017A, and the revised ceiling made by the Trump Administration

as 2017B.¹⁷ Similarly, I refer to the original ceiling and allocations made by the Trump Administration as 2021A, and the revised ceiling and allocations made by the Biden Administration as 2021B.¹⁸

In the annual reports to Congress, the Administrations provide explanations to justify the varying regional allocations, including summaries of the major sources of forced displacement across each global region and the efforts the Administration plans to take to address resettlement needs. For example, in the “Regional Refugee Admissions - Africa” subsection of the FY 2024 Report, the Biden Administration cites new or intensified conflicts in Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Mali, and DRC, in addition to the lack of voluntary repatriation or local integration opportunities for refugees in Africa, as factors driving the need for increased focus on resettlement as a durable solution for refugees throughout Africa (State Department et al. 2023, 35). The Biden Administration provides this information in order to explain the large number of resettlement spots allocated for refugees in Africa for FY 2024.

The level of detail provided to justify regional allocations varies greatly within the eight FY examined: the FY 2017 report devotes 37 pages to describing the policies and plans for the USRAP across each global region (State Department et al. 2016, 24-60), the FY 2018 report (the first submitted by the Trump Administration) similarly dedicates 32 pages, but by FY 2021 there are only two pages provided to describe the global refugee situation (State Department et al. 2017, 21-52; 2020, 13-14). The Biden Administration describes regional refugee admissions across six pages for the 2022 Report, which has grown to 14 pages for the 2024 Report (State Department et al. 2021, 28-33; 2023, 47-60). The number of pages dedicated to describing the global refugee situation as justification for proposed refugee

¹⁷ The Trump Administration did not provide modified regional allocations to coincide with the lower ceiling.

¹⁸ The Biden Administration’s revised 2021 allocations can be found in the 2022 Report, as the Biden Administration did not provide the Report to Congress for 2021 (State Department et al. 2021).

admissions do not perfectly correlate with increases or decreases in the refugee ceiling, however, the length of this section can provide insight into an administration's dedication to global solidarity and understanding of the geopolitical factors driving forced displacement.

Much more could be written on the significance of the Trump Administration's departure from typical resettlement allocation norms, but this paper will briefly discuss a few divergences. First, the fact that two of the Trump Administration's allocation categories were based on religious persecution (the first two allocation categories listed in the FY 2020-2021a table). Other administrations have, of course, also prioritized refugees fleeing on the basis of religious persecution, but did not allocate resettlement placements on this basis. Since 1998, the U.S. has prioritized resettlement for refugees fleeing former Soviet Union states on the basis of religious persecution, and the same can be said of religious minorities fleeing from Iran since the 2004 Specter Amendment.¹⁹ Yet the Trump Administration is unique in explicitly allocating resettlement placements for these groups, rather than allocating resettlement placements for the broader regions from which these refugees originate.

Additionally, while certain Iraqi refugees have consistently received USRAP access through a P-2 designation, Trump's proposed allocation were based on the Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act of 2007 (a bill which never actually passed into law). This is a significant difference: the corresponding P-2 designation only prioritizes USRAP access for certain Iraqis associated with the U.S., such as employees of the U.S. government or U.S. media/NGOs. Trump's allocation expanded USRAP access to also include certain Iraqi religious and ethnic minorities with family in the U.S. (U.S. Congress 2007). In this example, it could be argued that the Trump Administration's expansion of USRAP access for refugees from Iraq was a sign of global solidarity, as it demonstrated a willingness to address broader humanitarian and resettlement needs beyond those of Iraqis with American affiliations. This shift

¹⁹ Refer to previous notes 15-16.

simultaneously underscores the selective generosity of the entire USRAP, as this increased access to the USRAP for certain Iraqis coincides with both a drastic decrease in total refugee admissions under the Trump Administration, and a lack of similar access opportunities for refugee situations in other countries.

Second, the ‘others’ category for 2021a, which prioritizes refugees from countries whose governments the Trump Administration antagonized, is in-line with historical weaponization of refugee policy against geopolitical adversaries. The Trump Administration prioritized resettlement specifically for refugees fleeing from three states in which the U.S. was not on friendly terms (China, Cuba, and Venezuela). The Trump Administration’s distinct resettlement allocations reiterated its departure from traditional U.S. refugee policy, and excluded significant refugee groups within proposed resettlement allocations.

Countries of Particular Concern and Special Watch

The reports to Congress also list “countries of particular concern” (CPC) for violations of religious freedoms, as required by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (§402), and identify measures the U.S. is taking to provide USRAP access for individuals fleeing the listed countries due to religious persecution (State Department et al. 2016, 2). Generally, the reports to Congress explain that refugees who are victims of religious intolerance or persecution in the CPC can receive access to the USRAP through either P-1 or P-3 referrals, if there are qualifying family members already in the United States (State Department et al. 2016, 38). Further, some refugees fleeing CPC overlap with direct access P-2 designations (for example, the Lautenberg Agreement P-2 designation allows considerations for certain religious minorities from Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan [State Department et al. 2020, 20]). In some reports, the Administrations also listed Special Watch List governments which “have engaged in or tolerated severe violations

of religious freedom” but which did not meet all of the criteria for a CPC (U.S. Congress 2016, §302); these Special Watch List designations entailed similar USRAP referral opportunities as did CPC designations (State Department et al. 2018-2020, 2023).

The following states were designated as CPC during all eight fiscal years examined: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Turkmenistan (State Department et al. 2016-2024).

Table 1, below, details which countries were designated as CPC or Special Watch during one or more of the fiscal years examined:

Figure 3: Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) and Special Watch List Designations, Fiscal Years 2017-2024.

State	Designation	Years Designated
Algeria	Special Watch	2024
Central African Republic	Special Watch	2024
Comoros	Special Watch	2020-2021, 2024
Cuba	Special Watch	2021
Cuba	CPC	2024
Nicaragua	Special Watch	2021
Nicaragua	CPC	2024
Nigeria	Special Watch	2021
Nigeria	CPC	2022
Pakistan	Special Watch	2019
Pakistan	CPC	2020-2024
Russia	Special Watch	2020-2021
Russia	CPC	2024
Sudan	CPC	2017-2020
Sudan	Special Watch	2021
Tajikistan	CPC	2020-2024
Uzbekistan	CPC	2017
Uzbekistan	Special Watch	2020-2021
Vietnam	Special Watch	2024

Source: State Department et al. 2018-2020, 2024.

By providing P-1 and P-3 referral opportunities for certain refugees on the basis of religious persecution, the U.S. is able to demonstrate a commitment to the principles of religious freedom and human rights.

Executive Orders

There are two notable Executive Orders (E.O.) mentioned in the reports examined: E.O. 13780 (“Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States”) and E.O. 14013 (“on Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs to Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration”).

Reports submitted by Trump’s Administration refer to E.O. 13780 (often infamously referred to as Trump’s “Muslim” or “travel bans”), which was the second in a series of E.O.s and Presidential Proclamations banning or restricting entry to the U.S. for nationals from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, among others (Executive Office of the President, 2017). These E.O.s, despite facing legal challenges, had legitimate impacts on the admission of refugees from the targeted countries, many of which were high-need areas. Widely perceived as discriminatory, Trump’s E.O.s and Presidential Proclamations undermined the U.S.’ commitment to global solidarity, as domestic security and targeted exclusions won out over humanitarian concerns.

Beginning in the FY 2022 report, the Biden Administration cites E.O. 14013, which introduced a series of USRAP reforms and initiatives, as part of the broader priority of rebuilding U.S. refugee admissions in the wake of Trump’s destabilizing policies (White House 2021a; State Department et al. 2021). This E.O. included increased funding for rebuilding USRAP, additional staffing, and raising the refugee ceiling in order to support greater refugee admissions for the future (State Department et al. 2021, 9; White House 2021a). E.O. 14013 represents a significant policy shift for the U.S. refugee program,

reflecting broader trends of recommitting to global solidarity and prioritizing humanitarian concerns within refugee admissions.

The annual reports to Congress include several ways in which an administration expresses its refugee resettlement preferences, including priority levels, priority groups, nationalities eligible for family reunification, proposed allocations, countries of particular concern and special watch, and mentions of Executive Orders. These expressions reflect an administration's support for norms of global solidarity (or lack thereof) as well as which refugee characteristics or groups the administration prioritizes for resettlement consideration.

3.2 Evaluating U.S. Resettlement Preferences through Discourse

Beyond an empirical analysis of the annual reports to Congress, this paper will briefly analyze the rhetoric used within these reports as an additional manner of expressing refugee resettlement preferences. First, the reports to Congress contain language which either demonstrates support for the UNHCR and solidarity with the norms of responsibility-sharing and global solidarity, or which challenges these norms. For example, each report touches on the idea that the U.S. typically resettles more refugees than any other country, but there are two opposing ways of discussing this point. In the FY 2017 report, the Obama Administration highlights the U.S.' leadership in providing humanitarian aid and accepting more refugees than any other country, and encourages other countries to model their refugee admissions programs after the USRAP (State Department et al. 2016, 2-6). In contrast, the Trump Administration cites these same points as reasons that the U.S. has taken in enough refugees and now "expects other governments to share in the burden" (State Department et al. 2019, 31). The differing language in these reports highlights how refugee resettlement policies can be framed to either support or challenge international norms. The Obama Administration's

language aligns reinforces the U.S.’ commitment to global solidarity, whereas the Trump Administration’s discourse suggests a more insular approach, focusing on limiting the U.S. role and urging other states to take more responsibility.

Second, the reports contain widely varying rhetoric in their descriptions of the refugees themselves. Certain language humanizes the refugees and focuses on the persecution they faced, their contributions to American society, and the broader goal of the U.S. to provide protection and new opportunities for them. Other reports contain language which treats the refugees with hostility, focusing on the small minority of individuals who abuse the system or seek to harm American national security. Such contrasting descriptions of refugees reflects deeper ideological divides regarding immigration and national identity:

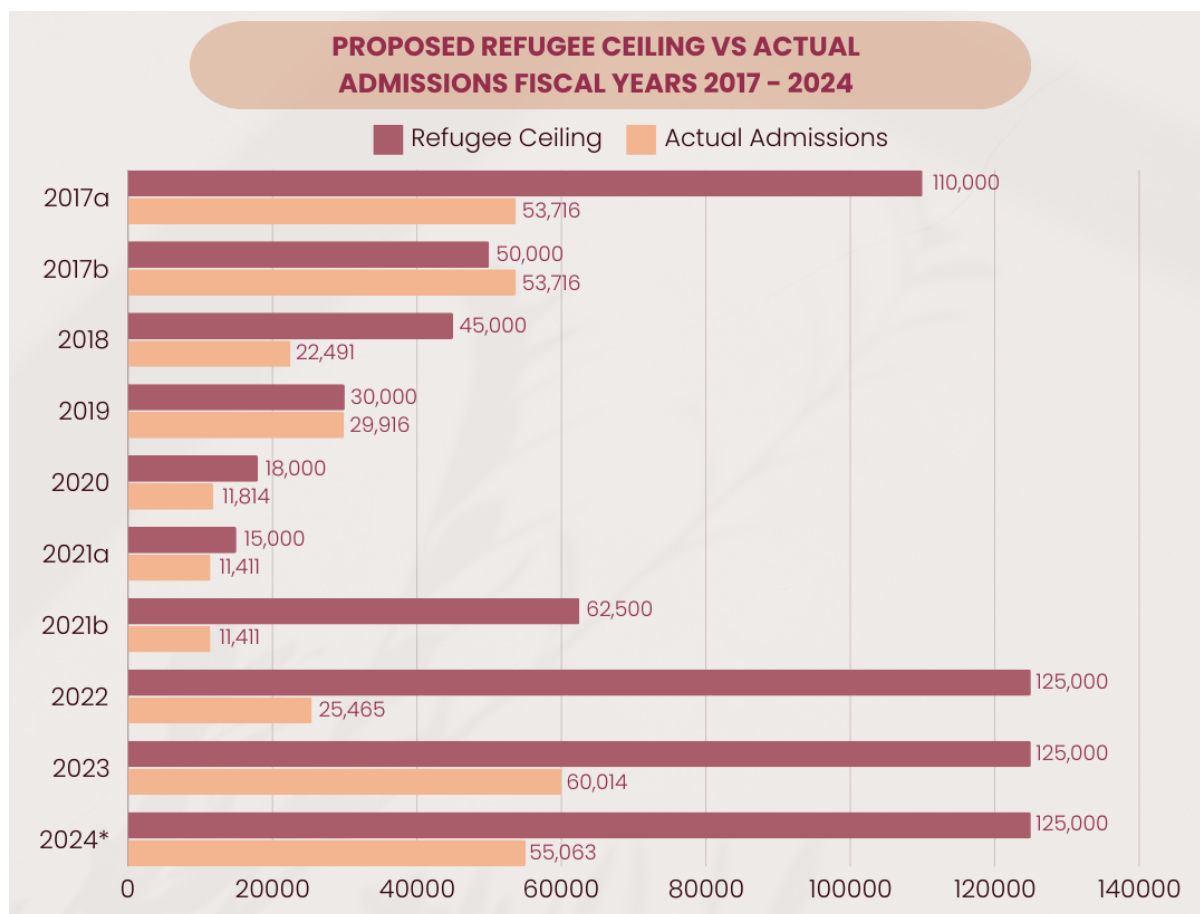
administrations that view refugee resettlement as a moral imperative and international obligation are likely to use language which underscores the positive aspects of welcoming refugees. In contrast, administrations with a more restrictive immigration stance focus on the potential downsides, reinforcing policies aimed at limiting refugee intake and challenging the role of the United States in upholding global solidarity.

There are also distinctions as minor as the different definitions of a refugee: the FY 2022 report writes “a refugee is a person who...” whereas the FY 2021 report writes “a refugee is an alien who...” (State Department et al. 2021, 9; 2020, 4). This choice of words reflects broader attitudes about refugees and whether or not an administration prioritizes refugee resettlement. The first definition emphasizes the humanity of refugees and reflects a more compassionate attitude, whereas the second definition chooses a term that connotes foreignness and reflects a general feeling of suspicion or apprehension about refugees. These linguistic differences are more than mere semantics; they reveal the underlying resettlement preferences and priorities of the respective administrations.

In evaluating U.S. resettlement preferences, it is evident that the Trump Administration more often challenges norms of global solidarity and responsibility-sharing, and the Biden Administration more often aligns with these norms. However, the inherent limitations of resettlement opportunities—in which only a small fraction of refugees ever receive the generosity of permanent resettlement—necessitates a highly selective process. Despite support for norms of global solidarity and the broader efforts of the UNHCR, the Biden Administration is also constrained by fact that resettlement needs far outpace resettlement opportunities, thus necessitating the continuation of resettlement preferences which prioritize certain groups or characteristics over others.

CHAPTER 4: RESETTLEMENT PREFERENCES IN PRACTICE

Figure 4: Proposed Refugee Ceiling versus Actual Refugee Admissions, Fiscal Years 2017-2024



Source: Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration 2024.

Figure 5: Top Five Countries of Origin for Refugees Admitted to the U.S., Fiscal Years 2017-2024.

Top Five Refugee Countries of Origin								
	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
Total Refugee Admissions	53,716	22,491	53,716	11,814	11,411	25,465	60,014	55,063
Top Country of Origin	DRC	DRC	DRC	DRC	DRC	DRC	DRC	DRC
Percent of U.S. Total	17.46%	35.03%	43.19%	24.28%	42.86%	30.67%	30.23%	24.19%
Second Country of Origin	Iraq	Burma	Burma	Burma	Syria	Syria	Syria	Syria
Percent of U.S. Total	12.82%	15.81%	16.44%	17.00%	10.92%	17.89%	17.96%	14.13%
Third Country of Origin	Syria	Ukraine	Ukraine	Ukraine	Afghanistan	Burma	Afghanistan	Afghanistan
Percent of U.S. Total	12.21%	11.72%	14.84%	16.31%	7.64%	8.47%	10.99%	14.11%
Fourth Country of Origin	Somalia	Bhutan	Eritrea	Afghanistan	Ukraine	Sudan	Burma	Burma
Percent of U.S. Total	11.41%	9.91%	5.86%	5.11%	7.04%	6.55%	10.31%	7.75%
Fifth Country of Origin	Burma	Eritrea	Afghanistan	Iraq	Burma	Afghanistan	Guatemala	Venezuela
Percent of U.S. Total	9.45%	5.64%	3.99%	4.55%	6.77%	6.35%	2.91%	6.39%
Cumulative % of U.S. Total	63.35%	78.11%	84.32%	67.25%	75.23%	69.93%	72.40%	66.57%

Source: Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration 2024.

4.1 Comparing UNHCR and U.S. Resettlement Preferences

The UNHCR's resettlement preferences emphasize the prioritization of individual-level vulnerabilities, where the U.S. tends to prioritize resettlement based on broader categories such as region/ country of origin or religion. Again, while many of the refugees admitted to the U.S. undoubtedly live with the vulnerabilities prioritized by UNHCR, these characteristics are not explicitly addressed as part of the U.S.' resettlement preferences. However, both the U.S. and UNHCR prioritize group resettlement as a refugee policy priority indicates a shared recognition of the efficiencies and practical benefits that group processing brings to the refugee resettlement process, as group resettlement strategies maximize the benefits of resettlement efforts and address the needs of large refugee populations.

The U.S. and UNHCR also share a focus on family reunification as a refugee policy priority, a preference which aligns with humanitarian principles and underscores the importance of normalcy and stability for successful resettlement and integration of refugees in new communities. Finally, UNHCR advocates for complementary pathways to legal migration as a fourth durable solution for refugees, and the Biden Administration introduced for FY 2022 a private sponsorship program which similarly reflects a commitment to diversifying and expanding resettlement opportunities. This policy aligns with the UNHCR's advocacy by acknowledging that governmental efforts alone are insufficient to meet the global need for refugee resettlement and that community involvement can significantly enhance resettlement capacity and outcomes.

To what extent do actual refugee admissions reflect the U.S. and/or the UNHCR's preferences? UNHCR's preferences are difficult to gauge within the actual admissions because there are no statistics describing the number of refugees with the vulnerabilities listed in UNHCR's submission categories. This is for obvious reasons, namely the refugee's privacy, but it creates barriers to evaluating UNHCR's preferences within actual admissions.

This makes it practically impossible to determine which vulnerabilities rank higher within actual admissions—that is, are there more admitted refugees with one vulnerability over the others.

The exceptions to this rule include refugees admitted for family reunification or based on P-2 designations, as some of the reports to Congress provide (i) cross-listed regional allocations and priority level breakdowns,²⁰ and (ii) data on the previous FY's admissions along priority level and regional allocation lines. When this data is provided in the report to Congress, it provides insight into the extent to which certain vulnerable populations, such as P-2 groups or those seeking reunification with family members, are being served by the USRAP. This information is one of the only means of gauging the extent to which UNHCR's resettlement preferences manifest in actual refugee admissions to the United States.

Although the refugee ceiling, as a numerical figure, cannot express an administration's preferences for resettling particular groups or characteristics over others, it does communicate either cooperation with or opposition against the UNHCR's broader goals of global solidarity and responsibility-sharing. By either expanding opportunities for resettlement for a greater number of refugees, or restricting resettlement to as few refugees as possible, an administration can align itself with or against these goals.

The rapid decrease in the refugee ceiling throughout the Trump Administration clearly demonstrates a distancing from global solidarity, as the United States, once a leader in offering resettlement, began to limit its support by offering this durable solution to as few refugees as possible (State Department et al. 2017-2020). This policy shift was typically justified by the administration's prioritization of processing the backlog of asylum-seeker applications: "In considering how to allocate its available resources for humanitarian work in

²⁰ For example, the Biden administration proposed 40,000 refugee admissions from Africa for FY 2022: 19,000 as P-1 Individual Referrals; 20,000 as P-2 Groups; and 1,000 as P-3 Family Reunification Referrals (State Department et al. 2021, 27).

FY 2018, DHS/USCIS is prioritizing adjudication of asylum cases to address the growing backlog, while still providing a portion of its resources to continue refugee processing activities,” (State Department et al. 2017, 9). In contrast, the Biden Administration discusses the 125,000 refugee ceiling (“the highest target in several decades”) as an achievement of the administration and indicator of America’s commitment to humanitarian efforts (State Department et al. 2023, 6).

Of course, the U.S.’ resettlement preferences will be evident throughout its refugee admissions, but there can also be varying levels of impact of an administration’s resettlement preferences on actual refugee admissions. For example, despite broad shifts in the resettlement preferences of the Trump Administration compared to Obama or Biden, the largest country of origin of U.S. refugees remained the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Alternatively, despite indicating considerable support for responsibility-sharing and accepting a large number of refugees for resettlement, logistical reasons prevented the number of refugee admissions during FY 2021-2022 from reflecting the Biden Administration’s goals and preferences.

4.2 Case Study: Refugee Admissions in Kentucky

Figure 6: Refugee Admissions to Kentucky as Percentage of National Admissions, and Top Five Countries of Origin for Refugees Admitted to Kentucky, Fiscal Years 2017-2024.

Refugee Admissions to Kentucky								
	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
Total Number of Refugees Admitted to United States	53,716	22,491	29,916	11,814	11,411	25,465	60,014	55,063
Total Number of Refugees Admitted to Kentucky	1,618	896	1,421	476	665	1,275	2,514	1,463
KY as % of US Total	3.01%	3.98%	4.75%	4.03%	5.83%	5.01%	4.19%	2.66%
Refugee Admissions to Kentucky								
	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	FY 2022	FY 2023	FY 2024
Top Country of Origin	DRC	DRC	DRC	DRC	DRC	DRC	DRC	DRC
Percent of KY Total	30.78%	61.50%	74.81%	66.60%	82.86%	72.08%	67.14%	69.24%
Second Country of Origin	Somalia	Burma	Burma	Burma	Syria	Syria	Syria	Syria
Percent of KY Total	23.55%	14.84%	14.99%	22.06%	4.21%	13.65%	10.06%	7.45%
Third Country of Origin	Syria	Bhutan	Ukraine	Syria	Burma	Burma	Burma	Somalia
Percent of KY Total	10.07%	10.49%	4.29%	2.73%	3.16%	4.24%	7.96%	4.24%
Cumulative % of KY Total	64.40%	86.83%	94.09%	91.39%	90.23%	89.96%	85.16%	80.93%

Source: Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration 2024.

For both practical and personal reasons, I have selected refugee admissions to Kentucky as a case study. As a native Kentuckian, I am eager to speak about the increasing relevance of Kentucky as a leading refugee-recipient state, as Kentucky has frequently ranked within the top ten for refugee arrivals across the country (even ranking at fourth in the nation for FY 2022 [State Department et al. 2024, 67]). This is a point for which I feel immense pride in my state. Having interned at Kentucky Refugee Ministries (KRM), the largest nonprofit refugee resettlement agency in the state, I am able to contextualize national resettlement policies and discuss how and where the U.S.’ and UNHCR’s resettlement preferences affect refugee admissions at a state and local level.

Once a refugee has been approved for resettlement into the U.S.—a process which takes an average of 18 to 24 months from referral to admission, including several background checks conducted by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), medical examinations, cultural orientations, and so on—the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) coordinates with domestic resettlement agencies to determine which state the refugee will be resettled to.²¹ Resettlement agencies seek to match the particular needs of each incoming refugee with the specific resources available in U.S. communities (State Department et al. 2019, 22). At this time of writing, there are currently ten domestic resettlement agencies who coordinate together and with the ORR to divide up approved resettlement referrals across the United States (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2023). Church World Service (CWS) is the domestic resettlement agency for whom KRM is a local affiliate.

KRM does not work directly with the UNHCR or decide which refugees it will assume responsibility for; rather, CWS assigns refugee arrival cases to KRM, and KRM affirms that it will be able to assure, or assume responsibility for, the arrival. These

²¹ This is obviously a much-simplified description of the resettlement process. There are numerous sources available describing this process in detail. This paper would refer readers to Klobucista et al. 2024, or to the USRAP flowchart available online at https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/charts/USRAP_FlowChart.pdf.

assignments are typically based on either family reunification or an established local community of refugees of the same national or ethnic origins. By assuring a case, KRM takes responsibility for the refugee arrival and agrees to provide essential services, including case management, English language classes, support in obtaining the forms of identification needed for employment, immigration legal services, family and youth services, and so forth (Kentucky Refugee Ministries 2023). KRM also provides resettlement services to other categories of immigrants, including asylees and parolees.²² KRM has helped to resettle more than 16,000 refugees into Kentucky since opening in 1990, and operates in three regions across the state: Louisville, where it first opened, as well as Lexington and Northern Kentucky (2023).

Similar to national refugee admissions during the years examined, the top country of origin for refugee admissions to Kentucky was DRC. When looking at the top three countries of origin, there was an overlap in at least two out of the three countries for refugee admissions to both Kentucky and the entire United States. Admissions from the top three countries of origin represent the majority of admissions to Kentucky, comprising between 64.4-91.4% of total admissions for the fiscal years examined. Unlike national resettlement numbers, there is not as distinct of a correlation between the number of refugees resettled to Kentucky and the presidential administration, i.e. the absolute number of refugees admitted to Kentucky did not always rise and fall in alignment with national admissions during FY 2017-2024.

The proportion of refugees admitted to Kentucky, relative to the national total, reflects several combined factors: the U.S. consistently resettled more refugees from the DRC each year than from any other country, the overall number of refugees decreased following the

²² This includes Ukrainian and Afghan parolees, who are resettled via private sponsorship, as well as a 2023 humanitarian parole sponsorship program for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (Kentucky Refugee Ministries 2024); though these immigrants do not arrive with refugee status, they are still eligible for KRM services.

Trump administration's reorganization of the USRAP, and Kentucky emerged as the top state for resettling DRC refugees. As the absolute number of refugee admissions has increased steadily over the course of the Biden administration, so too is the proportion of refugees arriving to Kentucky becoming more consistent with the expected national average (around 2%). Kentucky's refugee admissions also reflect the impact of the Trump administration's ban on Syrian refugees during parts of his tenure.

During my internship with KRM in 2023, I also saw firsthand the impact that Trump's dismantling and reorganizing of federal resources away from refugee admissions and resettlement had on KRM, particularly in the context of the Biden administration's efforts to rebuild the USRAP. The Biden administration has sought to overturn these setbacks to the USRAP by raising the refugee ceiling and working to process as many resettlement referrals as possible in order to reach the ceiling's targets (White House 2021). As many local resettlement agencies like KRM had to reduce budgets and staffing in response to Trump-era policies, this made it difficult to efficiently process the surge of refugee arrivals the following years.

In conversations with staff about who KRM serves, the vulnerabilities prioritized by the UNHCR are often described, including women and children, survivors of torture, the elderly, and refugees with special medical needs. Again, there is no data publicly available tracking the number of refugees living with one or more of these vulnerabilities, making it difficult to objectively evaluate the extent to which the UNHCR's preferences prevail within refugee admissions to the entire U.S. and at the state level. However, it is clear from conversations that these individual-level vulnerabilities do matter; in this way, the UNHCR's emphasis on prioritizing individual-level vulnerabilities is reflected in U.S. refugee admissions.

CONCLUSION

My time at Kentucky Refugee Ministries reinforced the idea that each refugee story is an individual one. When examining national refugee policies and admission numbers, it can be difficult to remember this, but it is important to always keep this truth at the forefront. Evaluating the resettlement preferences expressed by the UNHCR and the United States means understanding and reiterating the goals behind refugee resettlement programs. Resettlement is meant to offer both international protection and the opportunity to build a new life for the world's most vulnerable populations. There are numerous areas for scrutiny and critique within the U.S.' refugee admissions program, but this paper focuses on the need to better understand how the U.S. expresses its preferences for which refugees it will prioritize for resettlement.

The vast discrepancies between resettlement needs and opportunities obligate both the United States and the UNHCR to develop preferences for which refugees will receive priority consideration for the generosity of resettlement. UNHCR's preferences reflect both an emphasis on individual-level vulnerabilities and group referrals as a means for maximizing the total benefits of resettlement. The United States' resettlement preferences manifest differently from one administration to another, and can be expressed in a number of ways—through the language used to describe refugees, through regional allocations, and so forth. In presenting a thorough evaluation of these resettlement preferences, this paper aims to shed light on an important facet of U.S. immigration policy and underscore the need for continued leadership in offering resettlement to as many refugees as possible.

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