



BACKGROUND

Humanitarian Protections

“The images of the biblical exodus and of migrants share several similarities. Like the people of Israel in the time of Moses, migrants often flee from oppression, abuse, insecurity, discrimination, and lack of opportunities for development. Similar to the Jews in the desert, migrants encounter many obstacles in their path: they are tried by thirst and hunger; they are exhausted by toil and disease; they are tempted by despair.”

—Pope Francis, *Message for the 110th World Day of Migrants and Refugees, 2024*

Legislative Ask

Preserve and support humanitarian protections for vulnerable families, including refugee resettlement.

Background

In many ways, the values of protecting and integrating those fleeing persecution and other life-threatening circumstances are currently enshrined in U.S. law. The strongly bipartisan Refugee Act of 1980 established formal processes for families and individuals fleeing life-threatening circumstances. Since 1968, the United States has been a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention through its ratification of the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. These and additional measures outline the United States’ commitment to the protection of refugees, asylum seekers, victims of human trafficking, and others in need. The Catholic Church teaches that people have the right to lead a dignified life and to provide for the needs of their families. When the opportunity for this does not exist in one’s homeland, the Church affirms the natural right to migrate. Catholic teaching also recognizes the right of countries to regulate their borders and enforce immigration laws, consistent with the common good; this must always be done humanely, respecting the sanctity of human life and the God-given dignity of every person.

Early on in his first term, President Ronald Reagan described refugee policy as “an important part of our past and fundamental to our national interest,” while also declaring that welcoming and resettling those fleeing oppression is a “responsibility” shared by the United States.¹ Those same sentiments remain true today.

USCCB Position

For decades, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has advocated for the creation, preservation, and strengthening of humanitarian protections. To continue our nation’s proud tradition and moral duty to offer protection for those in need, Congress should support access to the following:

- **Asylum:** For those who have experienced persecution, or fear of persecution, based on the protected grounds of race, nationality, political opinion, religion, or membership in a particular social group, asylum can be the difference between life and death. Regardless of how they entered the country, those inside of the United States (including people at a port of entry) who present a credible fear of persecution may pursue this form of relief and are entitled to the full consideration of their claim. Of particular concern is the potential for refoulement—returning an asylum seeker to a place where he or she may face persecution, torture, or another serious harm. U.S. asylum law was written with this possibility as a key concern, especially given the lessons of World War II.
- **Refugee resettlement:** Similar to asylum, refugee status is a form of protection available to those fleeing persecution. However, refugees have their cases adjudicated while they are located outside of

the United States and, if approved, following an extensive vetting process, are helped to resettle. The total number of people who can be resettled in a particular year is determined by the president after consultation with Congress. Since the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) was established, over 70,000 refugees have been resettled annually on average, under both Republican and Democratic presidents, with very few outliers. Third-country resettlement through USRAP is a secure and successful legal program for those who are unable to return to their country of origin.

- **Protections for unaccompanied children:** Noncitizen children who enter the United States without a parent or legal guardian are a particularly vulnerable population. These unaccompanied children are at a greater risk of exploitation, trafficking, and abuse. For more than two decades, U.S. law has provided a range of protections for this population. These measures ensure that children are properly screened, can be considered for permanent relief, and are cared for while their cases are adjudicated. Consistent with child welfare standards, the Unaccompanied Children Program emphasizes the placement of these children in the least-restrictive setting, prioritizing family unity when possible.
- **Temporary protections:** Temporary protected status and humanitarian parole are among the limited protections available for people to temporarily remain in or travel to the United States when conditions in their countries of origin or individual circumstances warrant it. Though these forms of relief do not offer permanent protection or status, they have consistently served as useful and flexible tools for safeguarding human life when other protections are unavailable or impractical.
- **Assistance for victims of human trafficking:** Human trafficking occurs when, through force, fraud, or coercion, a person is used as a commodity for the procurement of labor or commercial sex. The Catholic Church teaches that human trafficking is an affront to human dignity and a scourge upon society. The Trafficking Victims Prevention Act of 2000 (TVPA) was a landmark piece of legislation that standardized U.S. law in the area of anti-trafficking. It made foreign-born victims of trafficking in the United States eligible for federally-funded services and created legal protections such as the T and U nonimmigrant visas. The act also added new criminal provisions and increased penalties for traffickers. Subsequent reauthorizations of the TVPA over the years have bolstered these protections.

The USCCB believes changes to the U.S. immigration system that fundamentally weaken our country's decades-long commitment to humanitarian protection should be rejected by Congress. Instead, any changes to U.S. immigration law should maintain humanitarian protections as essential components of an immigration system that furthers the common good. Additionally, to provide for the fair and timely processing of humanitarian cases, as well as services that promote the integration and self-sufficiency of humanitarian populations, adequate funding is needed from Congress for relevant agencies and programs; these include U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), and the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).

Resources

- Catholic Elements of Immigration Reform, bit.ly/4gRgc1F
- Letter to Congress Regarding FY 2025 Migration-Related Funding Requests, bit.ly/40vS27p
- Letter to Congress Regarding Enhanced Protections for Noncitizen Children, bit.ly/4jgiD3U
- Statement from Archbishop Broglio, Bishop Seitz, and Bishop Soto, "We Stand in Firm Solidarity with Our Immigrant Brothers and Sisters", bit.ly/3WgjmUp

ⁱ President Ronald Reagan, *Statement on United States Immigration and Refugee Policy* (July 30, 1981), bit.ly/3C7AAMW.

