

DAILY NEWS

No, the U.S. is not the most generous country for refugees and asylees in the world — not by a long shot

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Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced Monday that the United States would lower its refugee ceiling to just 30,000 refugees — the lowest ceiling since the creation of the U.S. refugee program in 1980. In doing so, he proclaimed, “We are, and continue to be, the most generous nation in the world,” citing the 280,000 asylum claims that the government will process — though not grant — this year.

Yet even before this latest cut, the United States was not the most open country in the world when it came to accepting people — refugees and asylees — fleeing violence around the world. Controlling for population, other nations accept at much higher rates.

According to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 14 OECD countries received more permanent residents on humanitarian grounds than the United States in 2016, the most recent year available.

The average rate of acceptance for those 14 countries was 0.23% of their populations, while the U.S. rate was just 0.05% — nearly 80% lower. Sweden led the way with a rate of acceptance of 0.73% of its population — 15 times higher than the U.S. rate.

This was before the dramatic contraction in numbers overseen by the Trump administration.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees records the total populations of refugees inside a country. According to its most recent data from 2017, 0.1% of U.S. residents were refugees. This ranked 78th in the world. Lebanon led the way, with 17% of its population made up of refugees. Most European countries also had higher refugee shares of their populations than America — for example, Sweden’s share was 27 times greater than that of the United States.

Of course, it is true that Sweden is a much smaller country, and it receives fewer refugees in absolute terms. But controlling for population provides a much more accurate assessment of a country’s openness. After all, no one would conclude that the Chinese are 22 times wealthier

than the Swedes simply because China's total economy is that much larger. We control for population by looking at income *per person*.

The immigration situation is the same. The United States is a much larger country with more people and resources to integrate refugees, and so it is essential to control for population to assess its openness relative to other countries.

In any case, Pompeo adopts an entirely wrong frame for refugee resettlement. Simply standing back and allowing someone to flee a war or persecution is not "generosity" any more than not blocking the exits during a fire is charity. I don't believe that the U.S. government has a duty to put out fires around the world, but not closing the fire escapes is the minimum morality requires.

"Generous" implies that the United States and Americans are sacrificing by taking in refugees. Yet according to the Trump administration's own analysis — which the White House suppressed — the refugee program has been a fiscal benefit over the last decade, meaning that refugees are paying in more than they take out of the welfare state. The White House only wanted to look at the costs.

In a well-functioning system, the refugee program would respond to the needs around the world. The Trump administration has gone the opposite route. In 2018, the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program will resettle the smallest share of UNHCR's population of concern in its history. Prior to Trump, the United States accepted 0.43% per year. By 2016, it had already fallen to 0.13%, and now it is down to 0.03% — 93% below its average.

Ultimately, the problem is that a single person — the President — can determine U.S. refugee policy. Congress needs to check the President's authority. Perhaps the best way to do so would be to provide a way for individual Americans to sponsor refugees, in the same way that U.S. citizens can sponsor their family members for immigrant visas. That way, Americans, rather than the government, could control at least some portion of the program.

The United States is not the most open country in the world toward refugees, but it could be. All the government needs to do is get out of the way and let Americans take care of the rest.

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