

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

## Americans Fear Refugees Because We're Bad at Math

Spencer Critchley

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Add this to the list of disturbing reasons for America's panic over refugees: fewer and fewer of us can do the basic math of calculating the true risk.

But really, it's not that hard — and understanding it is crucial to avoiding being conned.

Here it is, made as easy as I know how.

1. Every year, as reported by the libertarian Cato Institute, Americans have about a one in 14,000 chance of being murdered.

2. Do you know the odds of being killed by a terrorist — who by the way is likely to be homegrown? One in 3.6 million. This alone should suggest to you that the threat of terrorism is being overplayed — you're three and a half times more likely to be struck by lightning.

3. But now let's look at the risk of being killed by a refugee. The odds are... one in 3.6 *billion*. *That means you are three and half thousand times more likely to be struck by lightning than to be killed by a refugee.* Contrary to what our demagogue in chief wants you to believe, refugees are already very carefully screened.

Do you still think abandoning our values, giving ISIS a recruiting bonanza, and demoralizing our Muslim military allies (all results of banning refugees) is worth it?

Then I assume you plan never, ever to leave your house again, for fear of the far greater risk you face of being struck by lightning.

Ah, some say, but *any* risk is too much. We should do whatever it takes to stop even one death (never mind that zero Americans have been killed by refugees since 1975).

OK, this makes no sense already, given what I just laid out. Plus, considering we're supposed to be the Home of the Brave, it seems awfully, well... non-brave.

But I hear it a lot, so on we go.

This argument is an example of negativity bias: we fear negative consequences so much that it clouds our judgment. This is why, even though seat belts greatly increase the odds of surviving an auto accident, some people still refuse to wear them. They can't stand the thought they might have been one of the tiny number of people who make it out alive because they *weren't* wearing a seatbelt.

There's no other way around it, though: these people are choosing a much lower chance of survival. It's impossible to know ahead of time whether this might have been that rare fluke accident. So the only smart choice is the one with (much) better odds.

It's the same with admitting refugees to the United States. Fear wants us to focus on the minuscule chance one of them will be a terrorist (and dumb enough to go through the long refugee screening process before coming here).

But adding refugees actually makes each of us safer: as we add more people who are less likely to be terrorists, each of us has lower odds of encountering a terrorist.

You can picture it like this. Let's say you have 100 marbles in a jar: 90 green ones and 10 red ones, mixed together. If you reach in, you have a 10 in 100 chance of getting a red marble, right? Now add another 100 marbles, but this time 99 green and one red. Your odds of getting a red marble are now lower: 11 in 200, which is about one in 18.

Even though you added a red marble, your odds of getting a red marble went down. It's the same with adding refugees to the US population, except that the odds are, year after year after year, none of them would be a red marble.

Now I expect some will still argue that if even one refugee ever kills one American, that's an American who otherwise wouldn't have died — ban all refugees! Well first, if we followed that absolutist logic, we'd have to prevent anyone at all from coming into the United States.

I'm OK with that, too, some will say.

Well, we'd also have to stop Americans from crossing state lines: anyone from Alabama, Alaska, Arizona — all the way to Wyoming — is far, far, far more likely to kill you than a refugee is. Come to think of it, by this logic maybe we should stop Americans from having babies, or just require that they be raised in captivity. After all, every addition to the population has a small chance of turning out to be a killer, and even one is too many, right?

But we don't need to resort to this *reductio ad absurdum*. One last time, let's just do the arithmetic.

In exchange for avoiding the extremely small risk from refugees, a ban helps ISIS recruit actual terrorists, while pushing away allies and weakening our ability to fight.

You add a tiny bit of safety, but take away a lot.

And note what's missing from this equation: our values. It assumes that preserving them is worth nothing at all.

A ban against refugees, in America?

Any way you look at it, it's the wrong answer.