

# The Washington Post

## Americans see Afghan and Ukrainian refugees very differently. Why?

Claire Adida, Adeline Lo, Melina Platas, Lauren Prather and Scott Williamson

April 29, 2022

In the two months since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, more than 5 million people have left the country. Some Western news media and politicians have responded quite differently to these Ukrainian refugees than they have to recent Syrian and Afghan refugees.

International organizations like the African Union and Human Rights Watch and social media users have documented bias in journalists' language and in how Ukrainian and other nationals have been treated at the border by neighboring countries' immigration services. Major media outlets, including Al Jazeera and CBS News, have issued apologies for biased commentary, which at times described Ukraine as a "civilized" nation of "prosperous, middle-class people" who "are not obviously refugees ... [but] they look like any European family that you would live next door to." Even politicians have described Ukrainian refugees in starkly and explicitly different terms than non-European refugees.

Our research shows that such language influences and reflects ideas held by Americans at large, who favor refugees who share religion or ethnicity with the majority population. Here's what you need to know.

### Understanding public support for certain refugees

On April 4, 2022, we fielded a survey in the United States of 2,000 adults through the Lucid marketplace, an opt-in Internet survey platform, which describes its quotas as nationally representative. Before taking the survey, participants read the following. For half, randomly selected, it read Afghan refugees; for the other half, refugees from Ukraine.

According to the United Nations, more than 2 million people have fled the recent conflict in [Afghanistan/Ukraine]. Next we will ask you a few questions about these [Afghan/Ukrainian] refugees.

We then asked questions about their attitudes and policy beliefs about these refugees in particular, as well as beliefs about refugees in general.

We found striking differences in how Americans think about Ukrainian and Afghan refugees, including different concerns about the related security and economic effects. When respondents were first asked to think about a particular type of refugee — Afghan or Ukrainian — this also shaped how they felt about refugees in general.

First, we asked survey participants to rate how favorably they felt toward refugees on a scale from 0 to 100, with 0 being not favorable at all and 100 very favorable. They were much more favorable toward Ukrainian refugees than they were toward Afghan refugees, with an average difference of about 14 percentage points.

While nearly 30 percent of our survey participants reported the highest degree of favorability (100) toward Ukrainian refugees, only 12 percent of respondents did so toward Afghan refugees. Our survey participants were also less likely to support the U.S. resettlement of Afghan as compared with Ukrainian refugees, with 54 percent supporting the resettlement of Afghans and 67 percent supporting the resettlement of Ukrainians.

### **Why do Americans have such different opinions about Afghan and Ukrainian refugees?**

Our survey suggests that Americans see Ukrainians more positively than Afghans on several dimensions, including cultural similarity, security threat and economic impact. Respondents were more likely to report concerns that Afghan refugees “won’t adopt our customs and way of life,” that they would be a “burden because they will take our jobs and social benefits,” and that they “might engage in criminal activity.”

The survey participants who were asked to think about Afghan (and not Ukrainian) refugees were significantly more likely to agree with the statement that “refugees will increase the likelihood of terrorism in our country.” Americans generally tend to overestimate how likely refugees are to commit terrorist acts; according to a [Cato Institute analysis](#), between 1980 and 2016, refugees committed no fatal terrorist attacks in the United States.

### **Earlier research on Syrian refugees showed similar patterns**

Is this difference because of what social scientists call “[recency bias](#)” — the tendency to overweight the most recent information and events? Ukrainians are fleeing now, while far fewer Afghans are being resettled in recent months than during and soon after the August 2021 fall of Kabul.

That’s not likely. A [previous study](#) of ours found that during the height of the Syrian refugee crisis, Americans preferred Syrian refugees who were Christian to those who were Muslim.

Other research on Europe and the United States similarly finds that public support for admitting and hosting refugees varies according to how people believe those refugees will affect the host nation’s [cultural](#), [economic](#) and [security](#) climate. That’s not limited to Western countries. For instance, [research shows](#) that Jordanians prefer hosting Syrian refugees who are more culturally similar to them.

### **Public attitudes about refugees matter for community integration**

The U.S. government has committed to resettle tens of thousands of Afghan and Ukrainian refugees. At the end of March 2022, the Biden administration announced a commitment to resettle up to 100,000 people fleeing Ukraine. Similarly, after the 2021 U.S. military exit from Afghanistan, the State Department announced Operation Allies Welcome (OAW), which will resettle Afghan nationals who worked with the U.S. military in the country. OAW is expected to resettle at least 80,000 Afghans over the next two years.

Refugees are more likely to integrate well into their new communities when faced with a supportive local environment. So what can be done to increase public support for the tens of thousands of Afghan, Ukrainian and other refugees who will be resettled in the United States in the coming months and years?

Our team and others have found that it's important to encourage empathy toward refugees and emphasize the host community's commonalities with them. For example, encouraging people to reflect on what it would be like to flee from their country or prompting them to consider their own families' histories with migration can help host communities see immigrants and refugees more favorably. Messages like these may contribute to more support for refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine alike.