

Statistics and facts about Asylum seeker and Refugee issues



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Who is a refugee?

A refugee is a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country..."

Article 1, The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees¹

Who is an asylum-seeker?

An asylum-seeker is a person who has left their country of origin, has sought refugee status in another country, but has not yet been granted refugee status and is awaiting a decision on their application².

Why people choose to seek refuge in Australia?

For some of the world's refugee population it is either impractical or impossible to go first to a neighbouring country and then to seek resettlement from there. This could be because the neighbouring countries are not signatories to the international laws that would ensure their protection in these countries (few countries in this region, for instance, are signatories to the Refugee Convention). It could also be because they would not be safe in a neighbouring country, in particular if that country was sympathetic to the persecutory regime. In these cases, individuals may choose to try to go directly to a country, such as Australia, where they can seek protection.

What are the reasons for entering Australia with no documents?

Arriving without appropriate papers should not be interpreted as an attempt to defraud the system. By definition, refugees are people who are at risk of persecution. In most cases, the agent of persecution is their government. Applying for a passport and/or an exit visa can be far too dangerous for some refugees; so too can be an approach to an Australian Embassy for a visa. These actions can put their lives, and those of their families, at risk. In such cases refugees may have to travel on forged documents or bypass regular migration channels and arrive without papers.

What are the obligations for Australia towards a refugee and asylum seeker?

Australia is one of 146 signatory countries to the United Nations 1951 Convention and/or 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. Under Australia's Humanitarian Program people are granted permanent visas to resettle in Australia. Australia is committed to resettle 13,500 people for 2008-09 program and 13,750 people for 2009-10 program³.

¹ UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.org.au/faqs.shtml#faqs05>, accessed on 19 Oct 09

² UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.org.au/faqs.shtml#faqs05>, accessed on 19 Oct 09

³ Senator Chris Evans, Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, "Australia delivers on refugee commitments" dated 2 Sep 09

How many humanitarian entrants have entered Australia?

The Humanitarian Program has two components:

Onshore (asylum or protection) component - offers protection to people in Australia who meet the refugee definition in the United Nations Refugees Convention.

Offshore (resettlement) component - offers resettlement for people outside Australia who are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Humanitarian visa grants 2008-09

Offshore humanitarian program	Visa grants
Iraq	2,874
Burma	2,412
Afghanistan	847
Sudan	631
Bhutan	616
Ethiopia	478
Democratic Republic of Congo	463
Somalia	456
Liberia	387
Sierra Leone	363
Others	1,483
Total offshore humanitarian program	11,010
Onshore program*	2,497
Grand total	13,507

*Protection visas and onshore humanitarian visa grants⁴.

It is difficult to determine the number of asylum seekers arriving by boat. In 2009, more than 1500 asylum seekers arrived on 30 boats according to a media report⁵. The number of people in immigration detention who had arrived unlawfully by air or boat as at 18 September 2009 was 722⁶.

Is Australia more generous than other countries towards refugees and asylum seekers?

Based on statistics from UNHCR's 2008 Global Trends⁷ Australia granted 20,919 visas (around 13 000 visas under humanitarian program and the rest under other visa categories) to Refugees and people in refugee-like conditions. This places Australia in the 51st position globally with a share of 0.2%. See Table 1 for details.

⁴ Senator Chris Evans, Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, "Australia delivers on refugee commitments" dated 2 Sep 09

⁵ The West Australian, "Refugees mostly air people", page: 16, dated 5 Oct 09

⁶ Immigration detention statistics summary, <http://www.immi.gov.au/managing-australias-borders/detention/pdf/immigration-detention-statistics-20090918.pdf>, accessed on 19 Oct 09

⁷ UNHCR, 2008 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons Country Data Sheets, 16 June 2009m, <http://www.unhcr.org/4a375c426.html>, accessed on 19 Oct 09

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Host country	Total Number of refugees and people in refugee-like conditions
1 Pakistan	1,780,935
2 Syria	1,105,698
3 Iran	980,109
4 Germany	582,735
5 Jordan	500,413
6 Chad	330,510
7 Tanzania	321,909
8 Kenya	320,605
9 China	300,967
10 United Kingdom	292,097
11 Australia	20,919
Global total	10,478,621

Table 1: Host country Ranking for 2008

As of 31 December 2008 Australia had 2,159 cases pending and was ranked 44th globally, with a share of 0.3%. See Table 2.

Country of asylum	Total
1 South Africa	227,125
2 United States of America	69,228
3 Canada	54,202
4 Greece	38,061
5 Austria	36,693
6 Ecuador	33,919
7 France	33,703
8 Germany	33,295
9 Sweden	24,099
10 Switzerland	17,163
44 Australia	2,159
Global total	827,323

Table 2: Asylum seeker cases pending, 31 December 2008

At the beginning of 2009, UNHCR statistics indicated there were 10.5 million refugees⁸, down 8 percent from the previous year and 838,000 asylum-seekers⁹. According to a recent report by Edmund Rice Centre, 42 million people worldwide had been forcibly displaced from their homes¹⁰ by end of 2008.

- 5.7 million of these people had been in exile for five or more years in a given asylum country, with 25,000 or more people of the same nationality.
- During 2008, 88,800 refugees were resettled in various countries throughout the world including Australia, while a further 839,000 people applied for asylum.
- Only 4,750 of these claims were made in Australia: This is 0.57% of all asylum claims.
- In comparison, France received 35,400 claims, the United States received 49,600 and South Africa 207,000.

⁸ UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c1d.html>, accessed on 19 Oct 09

⁹ UNHCR, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c20.html>, accessed on 19 Oct 09

¹⁰ Edmund Rice Centre, "shifting the focus: from people smugglers to protection time for a change in Australia's asylum seeker policy", dated 19 Oct 09

Myths and Facts about Asylum Seekers and Refugees
October 2009 (Source Just Australia¹¹ and Refugee Council of Australia¹²)

Myth 1: *The recent increase in asylum seekers arriving by boat is a result of recent reforms to Australia's asylum policy*

Fact: The number of asylum seekers arriving by boat to Australia follows global trends. In 2001 and 2002, for example, Australia experienced a peak in the number of asylum seekers arriving by boat (more than 5,500 in 2001 and almost 3,000 in 2002) as did most of the rest of the world. Then from 2003, global asylum numbers dropped as the level of global conflict dropped. But over the last two years, global asylum seeker numbers have increased again. When comparing 2008 figures with 2007, for example, asylum seeker numbers rose by 122% in Italy, 121% in Norway, 89% in the Netherlands, 70% in Turkey, 53% in Switzerland, 30% in Canada and 20% in France, according to a 2009 UNHCR report. Yet in the same period, Australia saw only a 19% increase.

Australia's numbers are small in absolute terms as well. Australia may have received around 1,700 asylum seekers by boat so far this year, but this is tiny compared to other countries. Italy alone received 36,000 boat arrivals in 2008. Most asylum seekers prefer to go to the United States (who received 49,000 asylum seekers in 2008), Canada (36,900), France (35,200), and the United Kingdom 30,500).

The reason for large increases in the abovementioned countries in 2008 is not because they have all 'gone soft' on asylum seekers. It is largely because of the continuing or escalating violence in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and Sri Lanka, to name but a few. In other words, an increased number or intensity of worldwide 'push factors' have forced a larger number of refugees from their homes. And some of them have fled as far as Australia, because it is the first country they come to that can offer real protection (almost no countries between Afghanistan and Australia offer real protection or durable solutions for refugees. Most are not signatories to the Refugee Convention).

Myth 2: *Harsh policies will stop people smugglers and asylum seekers arriving by boat*

Fact: It is illogical and unfair to punish refugees and asylum seekers in the hope of deterring people smugglers. And numerous reports have shown that many asylum seekers are unaware of Australia's domestic asylum policies, so the use of punitive policies has zero deterrent effect. A clear example of the failure of punitive policies to deter asylum seekers is the policy of Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs). The number of asylum seekers arriving by boat to Australia continued to increase after the introduction of temporary protection visas in 1999 (48% more asylum seekers arrived by boat in 2001 than in 1999). Asylum seekers arriving by boat only started decreasing in 2003 when global asylum numbers started dropping. This evidence strongly suggests that temporary protection visas have no value as a deterrent to number of asylum seekers arriving by boat. The same rationale holds true for mandatory detention, introduced in 1992.

Refugees are often forced to flee horrendous situations such as genocide or torture. Desperate people will continue to take desperate measures to seek safety. The only way to stop asylum seekers arriving by boat into Australia is to cooperate regionally and internationally to resolve conflicts and to create durable solutions for refugees so that they do not have to undertake perilous journeys to find safety.

Myth 3: *Refugees who get to Indonesia should stay there and not come to Australia*

¹¹ Just Australia, Myths and Facts about Asylum Seekers, http://www.ajustaustralia.com/informationandresources_newsandanalysis.php?act=student_kits&id=29, dated 19 Oct 09
¹² RCOA, Myths about refugees, <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/arp/facts-02.html>, accessed on 19 Oct 09

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Fact: Very few countries between the Middle East and Australia have signed the Refugee Convention. There is no real or permanent protection in these countries, so many asylum seekers have to continue to Australia before they get their first reasonable opportunity to apply for protection.

Indonesia is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention and the Indonesian government does not offer real protection or durable solutions for refugees there. Firstly, asylum seekers are detained indefinitely in 'hugely overcrowded' detention centres in 'horrendous conditions', according to one Australian researcher. They are detained until their claim is finalised by the UNHCR office in Indonesia - a process which takes, on average, 10 years in Indonesia. Secondly, even when someone is registered by UNHCR as a refugee, they are not permitted to seek employment, send their children to school, apply for family reunion or apply for residency. Clearly, Indonesia is not yet at a stage where they can offer refugees their human rights.

Myth 4: *Asylum seekers arriving by boat are 'queue jumpers', stealing the places of 'genuine' refugees waiting patiently in camps for their turn at orderly processing by the UNHCR*

Fact: The myth of a 'queue' - where refugees from around the world have their names recorded in an organised database and 'wait their turn' - is completely untrue. Many asylum seekers come from countries where there is no UNHCR office and no Australian embassy (e.g. Iraq or Afghanistan). Even in a country with a UNHCR office, a refugee may not physically be able to get there to register, perhaps because of roadblocks, curfews and travel restrictions. Sometimes, going to a UNHCR office and/or expressing a desire to leave may literally put your life at risk or expose you to a greater degree of danger. Sometimes refugees are prevented from registering for political reasons. In one instance reported by an Australian Federal MP in 2008, UNHCR was not allowed to register refugees from a certain country, as government officials did not wish to acknowledge that there was turmoil in that country.

Many refugees will try to avoid taking refuge in a camp, as they don't believe doing so will increase their chances of escape, or even survival. Conditions in refugee camps have been frequently reported to be as dangerous as the situations from which people fled. And in many countries, Australian officials do not visit refugee camps to see if people have protection needs. Some people say that asylum seekers arriving by boat 'steal' the places of people who could come via the off-shore Humanitarian program. However, there is no logical basis for the concept of playing one type of refugee off against another, and no logical reason why these two separate pathways should be linked.

Myth 5: *Getting rid of Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) sent a 'green light' to people smugglers. We should bring back TPVs*

Fact: Hardliners within the Shadow Cabinet claim that the abolition of TPVs sent a 'green light' to people smugglers, but the statistics prove them wrong. The number of asylum seekers arriving by boat to Australia continued to increase after the introduction of temporary protection visas in 1999 (48% more asylum seekers arrived by boat in 2001 than in 1999). Boat arrivals only started decreasing in 2003 when global asylum numbers started dropping. This evidence strongly suggests that temporary protection visas have no value as a deterrent to asylum seekers arriving by boat.

Or consider this: in 2005, the Howard government changed TPV laws so that people could apply for permanent visas after 30 months of being on a TPV, essentially relaxing their own TPV policy - yet there was no increase in the number of asylum seekers arriving by boat. TPVs caused great hardship. Refugees who were granted TPVs were unable to apply for family reunion, get adequate settlement assistance or have the stability and security of permanent protection. TPVs even caused deaths. Many of the passengers of the SIEV X, for example, were the wives and children of TPV holders, attempting to reunite their families.

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Former Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock repeatedly claimed that letting children out of detention centres would send a 'green light' to people smugglers. In 2005, in response to community concern, the Howard government let the children out – yet there was no increase in boat numbers.

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Myth 6: *Asylum seekers arriving by boat are not ‘genuine’ refugees because they pay people smugglers*

Fact: Asylum seekers who use people smugglers are mostly desperate people whose options have run out. They see this route as the only way that they will gain safety for themselves and their families. Extended families may sell everything they have, and live on tiny incomes for years, to send one person to safety. Many families end up with large debts to the smugglers. A study by the aid agency Medecins Sans Frontieres in refugee camps on the Iranian border, found that nearly all families were in debt, with members held hostage by smugglers until the debt was paid. One does not have to be poor or uneducated to be a refugee. In fact, many people have experienced increased persecution because of their educational, professional or political backgrounds. Sometime even refugees in camps have to pay large bribes to processing officials to have their refugee claims assessed.

Myth 7: *People seeking asylum arriving by boat are not ‘genuine’ refugees. They are illegal immigrants*

Fact: Asylum seekers are not criminals or illegal immigrants. Under Australian and international law, a person is permitted to enter Australia for the purpose of seeking asylum, whether by boat or by air. A refugee’s claim for asylum has nothing to do with how they arrive in a country, but everything to do with the persecution that they are escaping.

The idea of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ refugees has been promoted by some Australian politicians for their own political advantage. In order to justify ‘getting tough’ on asylum seekers arriving by boat, these politicians have inaccurately labelled asylum seekers as ‘illegal’ and ‘not genuine’. However, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship’s figures indicate that 84% of those who arrive by boat in Australia seeking asylum are found to be refugees.

There are people who can be classified as illegal immigrants. These are people who overstay their visas (at any one time there are about 50,000 over-stayers in the country. Many of these are from western countries, particularly the US or UK, and are not seeking asylum in Australia).

Myth 8: *If we abolish mandatory detention we will ‘open the floodgates’ and be ‘swamped’ by asylum seekers arriving by boat*

Fact: There is no evidence to suggest that mandatory detention is a deterrent to boat arrivals. Australia has had a mandatory detention policy since 1992, and since then there have been increases in asylum seeker arrivals, due to ‘push’ factors in source countries such as Afghanistan. The policy of mandatory detention of boat arrivals is inhumane and is in breach of international law as it is arbitrary, non-reviewable and discriminates against people for their mode of arrival regardless of the legitimacy of their claim.

While Australia has the right to protect its borders and its security, it also has the responsibility to uphold its human rights obligations. The way in which we choose to treat vulnerable populations of our society, such as refugees and asylum seekers, speaks volumes about our values.

Myth 9: *Without mandatory detention, boat arrivals are a health risk to the community*

Fact: Over 416,000 short-term visitors arrived in Australia in the month of August 2009 alone. An average of 1,180 people arrive in Australia every day (according to ABS¹³ figures measured between March 2007 and 2008). Most of these were tourists and were not required to have health checks, yet there is no evidence to suggest that asylum seekers and refugees are any less healthy than people travelling for tourism. In addition, the government does not detain asylum seekers who arrive by plane and allows them one to two months to get a health check, because the government knows that there is minimal risk to the community. There is no reason why asylum seekers who arrive by boat should be

¹³ Australian Bureau of Statistics

treated any differently, and DIAC¹⁴ has admitted that boat arrivals are no less healthy than other visitors to Australia.

Myth 10: *Refugee advocates want unrestricted entry of refugees, which will allow terrorists into Australia.*

Fact: No credible organisation who speaks on behalf of refugees advocates a policy of unrestricted entry. Australia does not allow, and has never allowed, unrestricted entry of any person. People who arrive without authorisation have their claims for asylum scrutinised at length. Most are found to be genuine refugees. There is zero evidence that any asylum seekers who have arrived in Australia by boat have connections to terrorism. In fact, in August 2002, the Director-General of ASIO¹⁵ told Parliament that of 5,986 boat arrivals, not one was found to be a security risk.

Myth 11: *Refugees have no right to come here and expect us to help them*

Fact: "Everyone has the right to seek and enjoy in other countries freedom from persecution" - Article 14, Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Australians are lucky in that we are born in a country where human rights are respected. Unfortunately, others are not so lucky. But they still have the same human rights as we do and they have the right to seek safety in a country that upholds human rights. This does not mean that Australia alone must take the full burden for protecting the persecuted. It does mean that we have to play a part in an international response that includes a wide spectrum of initiatives from addressing root causes to providing asylum to people whose human rights have been violated.

Myth 12: *Refugees are too "culturally different" to fit in with the Australian way of life*

Fact: That accusation has been levelled at just about every immigrant minority group since white settlement in Australia began, from the Irish and the Chinese, to Jewish refugees after World War II, Greeks, Italians and Vietnamese. All of those groups have settled successfully in Australia. The process has not always been smooth or easy, but compared with the strife and hatred elsewhere, Australian multiculturalism is a demonstrable success. In just one example, Afghanis have lived in Australia for over a century, and played an important role in the opening up of trade routes through some of the country's most inhospitable areas.

Myth 13: *Refugees take our jobs which is balanced by the contradictory myth: all refugees go on unemployment benefits*

Fact: It is true that newly arrived refugees have higher unemployment rates than the community average. This is not unexpected. Amongst the refugee arrivals are people who have been tortured and deeply traumatised. This can interfere with employment. There are also a significant number of entrants whose qualifications are not recognised in Australia and they need time to make adjustments. There is also the issue of learning English. Refugees are entitled to 510 hours of free English language instruction which must be taken in the first 2 years - and it is beneficial that the entrants do this as they are unlikely to do this later.

The fact that refugees "come from behind" in the employment stakes highlights the need for specifically targeted intervention programs that recognise issues such as their trauma, their unrecognised qualifications and their lack of English. Targeted programs that do this have shown that they are very successful at placing refugees in the workforce. If we are to bring refugees to Australia (and it is Australia's decision that we do so) it is important that we recognise their specific needs and address these. If we do this, we will reap the benefits. Most refugees want to work, both to restore their damaged sense of self esteem and to repay what they see as their debt of gratitude to Australia for providing them with protection.

¹⁴ Department of Immigration and Citizenship

¹⁵ Australian Security Intelligence Organisation

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Whether "refugees take our jobs" is the sort of question that has no easy answer. Refugees do compete for jobs but they are also consumers. Because they arrive with nothing they have to purchase household goods, clothing etc, all of which provides jobs for the people who make and sell these commodities.

Myth 14: *Refugees get all sorts of handouts from the government*

Fact: Refugees essentially have the same rights and entitlements as permanent residents. They are, however, exempt from the waiting period for Social Security benefits and they get 510 hours of free English language instruction and some get access to post-arrival assistance. These extra entitlements are in recognition of their particular needs.

Myth 15: *If we let one in, they will come in floods*

Fact: Australia is one of the most difficult countries in the world to get to. We have no common borders and there are universal visa requirements and carrier sanctions. Because of this it is highly unlikely that we will ever see the large numbers of asylum seekers other countries experience. There is also the erroneous perception in the public's mind that everyone in the world wants to come to Australia. We are little known in the total scheme of things and far less of an incentive than countries such as the United States. It is realistic to expect that asylum seekers will keep coming to Australia but unlikely that there will be "floods" of people.

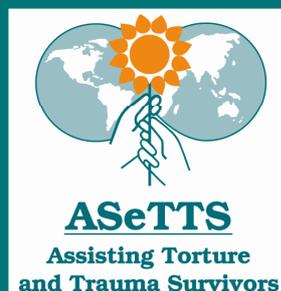
The best way for Australia to deal with asylum seekers is to process their claims expeditiously. This way those in need of protection receive it and those whose claims are without merit can be returned to their country of origin to "send a message" to others in similar circumstances that it is not so easy to get to Australia.

One of the things that is important to recognise in this debate is that any response a country makes must protect those in genuine need of protection i.e. there must be the presumption of a genuine claim until it is determined to be otherwise, not the presumption that the person is rorting the system.

Myth 16: *Refugees cannot possibly contribute anything to us*

Fact: It is a myth that all refugees are illiterate peasants. The majority that come to Australia are educated middle class people - whose education, profession or political opinions have drawn them to the attention of the authorities and resulted in their persecution.

By definition refugees are survivors. They have survived because they have the courage, ingenuity and creativity to have done so. These are qualities which we value in Australia. The challenge for Australia is to assist newly arrived refugees to process the experiences of their past and rebuild their lives in Australia. If we do this we will reap the benefits of the qualities and experiences they bring to Australia.



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