

# Who is a Refugee, Asylum Seeker, or Humanitarian Parolee?



## Who is a Refugee?

**A refugee is someone who has fled from their home country and cannot return because they have a well-founded fear of persecution based on religion, race, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.**



*Race*



*Religion*



*Nationality*



*Political Opinion*



*Membership in a Social Group*

According to the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](https://www.unhcr.org/), the number of people forced to flee their homes worldwide by the end of 2021 due to conflicts, violence, fear of persecution, and human rights violations was 89.3 million. This is more than double the 42.7 million people who remained forcibly displaced a decade ago, and is the most since World War II.

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## Who is an Asylum Seeker?

An **asylum seeker** is a person seeking sanctuary but who is not yet legally recognized as a refugee. Systems are in place in the U.S. and elsewhere to determine who qualifies for international protection, and asylum seekers are those awaiting a decision on an asylum claim. However, during mass movements of people as a result of conflict or violence – as was the case with Afghanistan in 2021 and Ukraine and Venezuela in 2022 – it is not always possible or necessary to conduct individual interviews with every asylum seeker who crosses a border. These groups are often called *prima facie* refugees. In the U.S., [asylum status](#) is granted to people who:

- Meet the definition of refugee
- Are already in the U.S.
- Are seeking admission at a port of entry

## Who is a Humanitarian Parolee?

Until the mass exodus of Afghans from their country in mid-2021 and of Ukrainians from their country throughout 2022, **humanitarian parole** was granted sparingly to allow people generally inadmissible or otherwise ineligible to be formally admitted into the U.S. for a temporary period and usually for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit.

Determining who is authorized for parole is subject to discretionary factors. There is no statutory or regulatory definition of “urgent humanitarian reasons.” U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) look at many situational circumstances and consider factors such as:

- Whether or not the circumstances are pressing
- The effect of the circumstances on the individual’s welfare and well-being
- The degree of suffering that may result if parole is not authorized

Using these criteria, it is clear why Afghans and Ukrainians were welcomed to the U.S. throughout 2021 and 2022.

## Additional Resources

- Watch: [Who is a Refugee?](#) (UNHCR)
- Read: [‘Migrants’? ‘Refugees’? Terminology Is Contested, Powerful, and Evolving](#) (Migration Policy Institute)