

Refugee Students in U.S Higher Education
June 20, 2025

In 2023, there were approximately **122,085 resettled refugee students** enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions. Among refugees in the U.S. aged 15-25 who have graduated high school, only about half are attending college or university. These refugees arrived in the United States through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). The number of refugees admitted is set by the Presidential Determination each year.

Understanding the characteristics and enrollment trends of this population is a crucial step to increasing these students' access to and through higher education. This report was based on data from the 1-year sample of the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS), with the analysis provided by the American Immigration Council (AIC).

Under the first Trump administration, refugee arrivals hit an all time low in Fiscal Year 2021, with only 11,411 refugee arrivals. In contrast, the Biden administration rebuilt the program, reaching an historic high in Fiscal Year 2024 with 100,034 refugee arrivals. Since January 2025, the current Trump administration has suspended nearly all refugee admissions, including blocking refugees who were already vetted and approved, from entry to the U.S.

Who are the refugee students in US higher education?

Refugees students are 49.8% male and 50.2% female. Refugees enrolled in higher education were mostly those who arrived as adults, which also aligns with the fact that the majority of refugees arrive in the U.S. as adults. As shown in Table 1, those who arrived before the age of ten are more likely to enroll in higher education than those who arrive during adolescence (age 10-16).

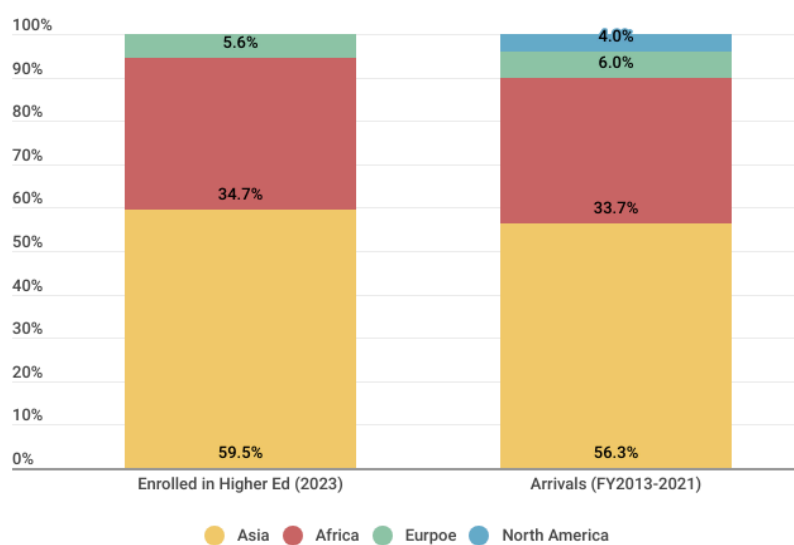
Table 1. Age of Arrival by Program Level

Age of Arrival	Share of Refugee Undergraduate Students	Share of Refugee Graduate Students	All Refugees (students & non-student arrivals)
Child (0-9)	34.8%	31.2%	21%
Adolescent (10-16)	24.5%	17.5%	14.8%
Adult (17+)	40.7%	51.20%	64.20%

PRESIDENTS' ALLIANCE | ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND IMMIGRATION

Refugee enrollment by region of origin mostly mirrored refugee arrivals by region of origin with 59.5% from Asia, 34.7% from Africa, and 5.6% from Europe. The top five countries of origin for refugees enrolled in higher education are Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Burma (Myanmar).

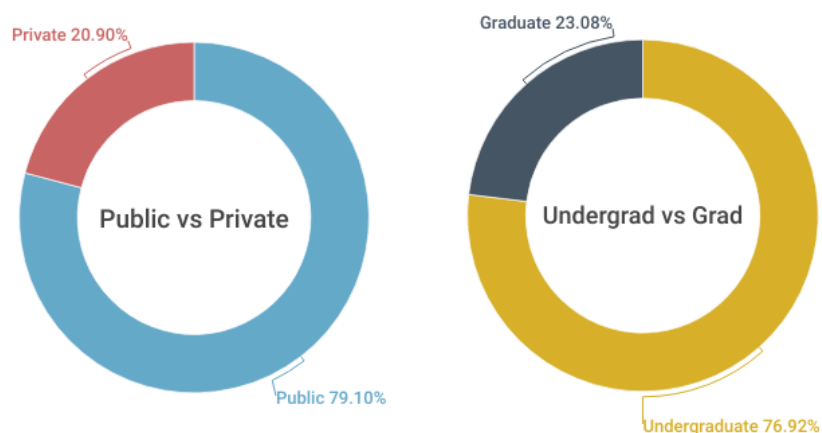
Refugee Arrivals & Enrollment by Region of Origin



Where and what they are studying?

Following national enrollment trends, refugees are predominantly studying at public institutions (79.1%), with only 20.9% studying at private institutions. 73.3% are undergraduate students, 26.7% are in graduate school.

Refugee Student Enrollment (2023)



PRESIDENTS' ALLIANCE | ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND IMMIGRATION

STEM and Healthcare Focus

Of refugee students pursuing graduate education, 31.9% hold an undergraduate degree in a STEM field and 23.4% hold an undergraduate degree in health. With their undergraduate and advanced degrees, these students are poised to fill critical positions in science, technology, and healthcare.

Authors:

Laura Wagner, Director of Refugee Student Initiatives, Presidents' Alliance

Miriam Feldblum, President & CEO, Presidents' Alliance

This report was based on data from the 1-year sample of the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS). The authors extend their deep thanks to Steven Hubbard at the American Immigration Council (AIC) who provided the data and conducted the analysis. The Council strives to strengthen the United States by shaping immigration policies and practices through innovative programs, cutting-edge research, and strategic legal and advocacy efforts grounded in evidence, compassion, justice and fairness.