

REFUGEES LIVING IN TENNESSEE

This fact sheet offers a profile of likely refugees living in Tennessee and describes their integration and contributions to the state over time, relying on data from the US Census Bureau's 2017 1-Year American Community Survey (ACS).¹ All refugees covered by this fact sheet were admitted to the United States between 1987 and 2017.² By 2017, more than half were naturalized citizens and most of the remainder had adjusted to legal permanent resident status. Like all refugees in the United States, refugees in Tennessee arrived penniless but have integrated into their local communities over time.

- As of 2017, at least 23,300 refugees lived in Tennessee. Sixty-nine percent of these lived in the Nashville-Davidson-Murfreesboro-Franklin Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), 20 percent in the Memphis MSA, and 7 percent in the Knoxville MSA. The remaining 5 percent lived in the rest of the state.³
- The refugees' top five countries of origin are the Iraq (6,200), Somalia (5,400), Vietnam (2,400), Bosnia (1,600), and Burma (1,500). Some 48 percent are female, and 52 percent are male. About 87 percent are between 18 and 64 years of age, 9 percent are under 18 years old, and 4 percent are 65 years old or older.
- Tennessee has both recently-arrived and long-established refugee communities. About 26 percent of refugees in Tennessee have resided in the United States for less than 5 years, 18 percent for 5 to 9 years, 7 percent for 10 to 14 years, 38 percent for 15 to 24 years, and 11 percent for 25 years or more.

At least 23,300 refugees lived in Tennessee as of 2017, with most arriving from Iraq, Somalia, Vietnam, Bosnia, and Burma.

43% of refugees in Tennessee have become US citizens, and Tennessee-based refugees have 14,200 US-born citizen children.

- Many refugees have put down deep roots in Tennessee. Fifty-seven percent of refugees in Tennessee have become US citizens, and 43 percent are non-citizens. Thirty-six percent are married to US citizens. Refugees have 14,200 US-born citizen children. Twenty-seven percent live in mortgaged homes, and twenty-three percent lived in homes owned "free and clear."

¹ This factsheet is based on a sample of 1.7 million likely refugees of the 2.3 million refugees admitted to the United States between 1987 and 2017, as recorded by the Department of Homeland Security. CMS identified likely refugees using the 2017 1-year American Community Survey (ACS). This large sample permits CMS to estimate the size and characteristics of likely refugees in key states. To do so, it compiled DHS statistics on refugee arrivals by country of birth and year of entry. It then used arrival data by birth country and year to select refugees randomly from corresponding cells in the 2017 ACS data. For more information see Kerwin, Donald. 2018. "The US Refugee Resettlement Program—A Return to First Principles: How Refugees Help to Define, Strengthen, and Revitalize the United States." New York: Center for Migration Studies. <https://cmsny.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/CCUSA-CRS-USCCB-US-Refugee-Resettlement-Report.pdf>

² The term "refugee" used here refers to status at entry.

³ Percentages are rounded and might not sum to 100.

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- High rates of refugees have learned English: 44 percent of those age 5 and over speak English very well or only English, 31 percent speak English well, 18 percent speak a little English, and 7 percent speak no English.⁴
- Tennessee's refugees possess a variety of educational backgrounds: 17 percent of those aged 18 or older have a bachelor's degree or higher; 24 percent have attended college; 37 percent have a high school education or its equivalent; and 22 percent have less than a high school education.⁵ These education levels will rise over time since 19 percent of refugees aged 3 or over are enrolled in school.
- Refugees in Tennessee quickly become economically self-sufficient. They also experience substantial gains in income as they spend more time in the United States. In 2017, households with at least one refugee had median incomes of \$37,000, as compared to \$50,000 for the Tennessee population as a whole. However, households with refugees who have been in the United States for 10 years or more had a median income of \$39,600.
- The median personal income of refugees in Tennessee was \$20,000 in 2017, as compared to \$22,900 for the Tennessee population as a whole. However, the median personal income of refugees who have resided in the United States for 10 years or more *exceeds* the state median personal income at \$23,300.

The majority of Tennessee-based refugees have some English skills, including 44% over the age of 5 speaking English as their primary language or speaking English very well.

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- About 96 percent of refugees in the labor force are employed. Refugees living in Tennessee work in a variety of industries. They are vital to the state's transportation, retail, and health care industries. The top 10 industries employing refugees, and refugees' top 10 occupations, are listed below in Tables A and B, respectively. Some 21 percent of refugees also work in skilled occupations, including some 1,000 health care

practitioners and around 900 in science, mathematics, engineering, and computer careers. Some 13 percent of those in the labor force are self-employed and, thus, employ others.

⁴ Percentages are rounded and might not sum to 100.

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Table A. Top 10 Industries Employing Refugees	
Industry	Number
Truck transportation	1,600
Motor vehicles and motor vehicle equipment manufacturing	1,100
Hospitals	1,000
Taxi and limousine service	900
Clothing stores	700
Restaurants and other food services	700
Department stores and discount stores	700
Medical equipment and supplies manufacturing	600
Pharmacies and drug stores	600
Other retail	600

Table B. Top 10 Occupations of Refugees in Tennessee	
Occupation	Number
Driver/sales workers and truck drivers	1,400
First-line supervisors of sales workers	1,200
Shipping, receiving, and traffic clerks	900
Taxi drivers and chauffeurs	900
Packers and packagers	900
Assemblers and fabricators	800
Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers, hand	700
Health diagnosing and treating practitioner support technicians	600
Other production workers including semiconductor processors and cooling and freezing equipment operators	600
Retail salespersons	600

Source: Center for Migration Studies of New York 2019. Unpublished estimates based on 2017 1-Year American Community Survey data and Department of Homeland Security data on refugee admissions, 1987-2017.